STAGING FAT:
Dramaturgy, Female Bodies, and Contemporary American Culture

By
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Abstract

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This dissertation argues that fat as it is perceived today is a particular construction of American culture and that there are a myriad of meanings associated with the fat female body in representation. I assert that, in the context of realism, fat female bodies onstage and in various cultural texts speak semiotically without saying a word and are "read" by audiences regardless of the actual text. In the first chapter I trace the history of fat in the U.S. and the evolution of fat prejudice between the late nineteenth century and the present day as well as discuss the stereotypes and fears directed at fat women in our culture. In chapter two I examine a cross section of plays that call for fat actresses and analyze how playwrights use fat to develop a character and dramaturgically as a plot device. Chapter three explores plays that do not explicitly call for fat actresses but have been traditionally cast with fatter actresses because of the implied "fat behavior" of the character. In chapter four I demonstrate the interplay of fat, race, and sexuality in various cultural texts. Chapter five investigates fat performers who either deliberately use their bodies to interrogate stereotypes or to capitalize on cultural assumptions about fat women. Finally, I argue that Americans, partially as a result of reality TV programming

and the vast reach of mass media due to the internet, increasingly blur the line between representation and reality. American audiences have become so accustomed to homogenized representations of slender, white, feminine beauty onstage and in film, TV, and advertising that any performing female body that falls outside the hegemonic standard is read as “unrealistic” and therefore audiences will ascribe additional meanings to her character beyond the actual narrative.

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Chapter 1: The Body as Cultural Text

Introduction

This dissertation asks what fat means in representation in present day American culture, primarily in theatrical representation, but also in other cultural texts including television and advertising. By using the word "fat" as both a descriptor and a kind of lived identity, I wish to take the word out of the realm of the pejorative as well as to distinguish it from medical connotations associated with the word obesity, and thereby to reclaim "fat" in a more theoretical context. I hope to destabilize negative stereotypes and imbue the word with fresh socio-political implications similar to the way in which the word "queer" has evolved in the academy and lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender/transexual arenas. I see this new positioning of "fat" as fluid and inclusive of any woman's body that is considered excessive or somehow outside the standard of American society's perceptions of normal or neutral, whether it is considered "oversize," a little "chunky," or really big.

My research focuses on plays performed in the U.S. between 1975 and 2007, with additional examples drawn from plays as early as 1958. I seek to identify what playwrights are expressing when they specifically create fat female characters or somehow distinguish a character's personality and interaction through language and stereotypes associated with fatness. I will also address the question of fat in representation by asking what assumptions are made about a character from a casting perspective, as well as from the perspective of critical reception, when a performer's body somehow exceeds society's notion of a neutral body. I will ask why it is that when

we have a character with some excessive trait, very often casting turns to "big" body types? My study focuses exclusively on fat or unconventionally big female bodies, because adding fat men complicates the discussion in countless ways in terms of gender roles and assumptions. Most of my examples are drawn from theatre, which I see as a fruitful place to investigate these questions because of the live immediacy of a performer's body. Unlike film or television, spectators are in the presence of the performer's full body. There is no directing the spectator's gaze or disguising a performer's shape through camera angle or artful cropping of the frame.

Furthermore, I am limiting my analyses to plays and cultural texts rooted in the tradition of realism, which is the prevalent mode of theatrical performance style that reaches a wide middle-class audience. In Bourdieu's terms, realistic theatre as a style comprises a particular restricted field that includes not only producers but also the intended audience.[1] This dissertation looks at models of representation that fit within a broad field of cultural production encapsulated by theatrical realism and within various subsets, restricted fields which assume a primarily white, middle-class audience. I am focusing on this demographic of a middle-class audience not only as the primary consumers of commercial theatre (frequently rooted in realism), but also as the biggest consumers of mass-media entertainment and therefore the most susceptible to marketing trends in product consumerism as well as the proliferation of women's images associated with it. I believe the audience-spectator contract implicit to realism as a theatrical style stipulates that these fat performing bodies are "real" or authentic and influences critical reception of performers and the characters they are playing. As Elin Diamond points out:

[1] Here I am drawing from Pierre Bourdieu's *Field of Cultural Production* (Columbia University Press: New York, 1993) 38-58.

> [R]ealism celebrates positivist inquiry, thus buttressing its claims for 'truth to life.' [. . .]Realism is more than an interpretation of reality passing as reality; it *produces* 'reality' by positioning its spectator to recognize and verify its truths: […] Because it naturalizes the relation between character and actor, setting and world, realism operates in concert with ideology.[2]

When an audience watches a performer in the mode of realism, they assume an underpinning of psychological makeup for a character that is key to what I am exploring.[3] Although some of the plays I will discuss have non-realistic elements, they all call for an acting style that draws on the tradition of realism and Stanislavski-based character interpretation, which aims for psychological development of character and truthfulness of emotion.

This dissertation argues that fat women in dramatic and other mediatized representations are imbued by writers, directors, and spectators with a variety of stereotypes and psychological pathologies that are constructs of American cultural attitudes toward fat. The United States has a unique cultural perspective on fat, steeped in our founding traditions of freedom and morality, exacerbated by our material abundance and capitalist economy.

Following the introduction, the second section **Fat Texts,** consists of three chapters. They emphasize textual analyses of American plays primarily from the past

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[2] Elin Diamond, *Unmaking Mimesis* (Routledge: New York, 1997), 4.

[3] In other words, if spectators accept that the performing bodies are real and realistic and agree that performers and playwrights are attempting to present reality logically to an audience who is supposed to approach the play empirically, understanding actions and characters as indicative of their personal viewpoint, appreciation of that character differs from watching for example, the "normal sized" actress Gwyneth Paltrow wearing a fat suit in *Shallow Hal*. If she really were fat, the movie would not be a farce/comedy and audience interpretation of her character would differ. I suggest that most people have a visceral response to being in the presence of a real flesh and blood fat person (or to believing they are seeing a real fat person, or to witnessing the truth of a fat person's story). A different kind of example would be the performances of heavyset Lisa Mayo of Spiderwoman Theater (or any number of lesbian feminist artists) who perform in deconstructed, fragmented texts in non-realistic modes, often appearing in drag, or undressed, displaying fat bodies and "imperfect" breasts and so on. Because this kind of theatre makes no claim to be realism, critical reception to Mayo's performing body (race aside) is not comparable to critical reception should she play Amanda in *The Glass Menagerie*.

thirty years that specifically incorporate fat female characters or somehow use fat stereotypes as a metaphor to explain characters' behavior or psychology. These plays all fit loosely in the realism model; the issue of divergence from realism will be discussed when relevant. Furthermore, the selection criterion for the plays included in my analyses is that they must have had significant production history in the United States. Most plays I will mention ran on Broadway or Off-Broadway between 1958 and the present. Most were written by American playwrights. However, the few plays I include that were not written by Americans, such as *My Fat Friend* and *The Beauty Queen of Leenane*, enjoyed respectable Broadway runs.

I have separated the plays into three categories that are not entirely exclusive from one another. The first of these chapters, "Fat Chicks Onstage," treats those plays that directly call for a fat character or deal explicitly with the female body in the texts. The second, "Ravenous Women," explores those plays containing roles that are characterized by some type of "fat behavior," whether or not the role calls for or utilizes a fat performer; and the third, "Black Fat and Queer Fat," deals with representations that connect fat stereotypes with racial or sexual otherness.

Chapter two, "Fat Chicks Onstage," treats those plays in which a fat female body is directly addressed as part of the subject matter. In Bourdieu's terms, as dramatic texts intended for live performance, all the plays discussed in this chapter fall into a restricted field of cultural production whose audience demographic is primarily college educated, white, middle and upper middle class. Within that, these plays and productions are geared toward different subsets, more specialized, and nuanced, restricted fields. All of these

plays take the (fat) female body as the central part of their subject matter, and I will explore what this means in terms of character psychology and dramaturgy.

For example, Charles Laurence's *My Fat Friend* (1974) in 1974 showcased a newly slimmed down Lynn Redgrave in a fat suit. Likewise, Jim Brochu's *Fat Chance* (1993) featured Rue McLanahan in a padded muumuu. Both pieces rely exclusively on fat jokes for storyline and comedy. The content and fat narrative of these plays, written by men for a "Broadway audience," make an interesting contrast to Laura Cunningham's *Beautiful Bodies* (1987) and Madeleine George's *The Most Massive Woman Wins* (1994). The latter are arguably feminist plays and have enjoyed less mainstream popularity, initially playing in regional houses and becoming staples of blackbox college productions; they attempt to shed light on the complicated relationship between women and their bodies. The characters and their stories actively confront the pressures in American culture to be thin and beautiful. Written for and performed on Broadway, Eve Ensler's *The Good Body* (2004) is uniquely positioned between the aforementioned performance fields and aims to break down the symbolic violence directed toward women by a culture obsessed with weight and body size.

Very often the excess of a fat woman in representation is seen as a metaphor for sexual aggressiveness. Thus one role a fat actress is consigned to is that of the slut or prostitute. However, here I will explore the ways in which playwrights treat the problem of romantic love between a fat woman and a "normal-sized" man. The latter half of this chapter addresses Eugene O'Neill's *Moon for the Misbegotten* (1947), Edward J. Moore's *The Sea Horse* (1969), Terrence McNally's *Frankie and Johnny in the Clair de Lune* (1988) and Neil LaBute's *Fat Pig* (2004), which are all, in essence, love stories.

Despite the spread of years between these pieces, a through-line connects all the heroines in terms of their emotional make-up and the ways in which they interact as potentially romantic subjects. *Fat Pig* offers a counterpoint because it is the other characters who make assumptions about the heroine, as opposed to the heroine herself.[4]

Chapter three, entitled "Ravenous Women**,**" identifies a number of plays that construct female characters and shape their personalities through a myriad of negative stereotypes associated with fat women as voracious consumers who threaten equilibrium in the world of the play.[5] Frequently, powerful female characters or those who are seen as inappropriately aggressive are identified as fat either directly in the text or metaphorically, and characterization is subsequently reflected in the casting of an "oversize" actress. Big women are also characterized as sexual predators or masculine and thus emasculating to male protagonists. With these examples I suggest that playwrights use associations explicitly linked to fat/consuming women to create characters. One example of this convention is Martha in Edward Albee's *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* (1962), who is labeled as "large, boisterous, and ample" in the character description.[6] Martha is the ultimate "man-eater," and Albee exploits the stereotype of voracious woman through the booze swilling, "braying," promiscuous Martha. In the case of Tennessee Williams, several of his female protagonists who possess sexual agency and are not emotionally crushed by the end of the play (as Blanche or Alma are), but rather are sexually voracious, and/or consume the world around them, are characterized in the

[4] For example, both McNally and Moore wrote their plays with a particular fat actress in mind and both heroines exhibit similar pathological behavior expressed as fierce independence, deep self-loathing and inability to accept love, to name a few of the many assumptions society makes about big women.
[5] I use the word "consumer" throughout this dissertation both for its economic connotations and also for its other meanings, in order to refer to women who eat, devour, and destroy whatever is around them literally or emotionally.
[6] Edward Albee, *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf ?*(New York: Signet Books, 1963).

text using subtle fat tropes such as indulgent drinking and immoderate emotional behavior. Here I have in mind such characters as the obsessive Serafina in *The Rose Tattoo* (1951), Maxine Faulk in the *The Night of The Iguana* (1961), and Leona in *Small Craft Warnings* (1970).[7]

The second group of texts in chapter three is one in which female characters who exceed their boundaries either spatially in the world, by being overweight or having excessive proportions, or by eating too much (also associated with outspokenness), meet with violence. For example, I explore some of Paula Vogel's characters who attempt to negotiate and frequently violate American cultural boundaries of body size and consumption. By looking at a cross-section of Vogel's plays, such as *How I Learned to Drive* (1997), *Hot 'N' Throbbing* (1993), *Baltimore Waltz* (1990) and *The Oldest Profession* (1981), I demonstrate how women's bodies become a site of danger when they exceed culturally acceptable margins of body size. Furthermore, I examine the relationship between their appetite for food and sexual appetite.

As a counterpoint to exploring texts written by white playwrights about white women and geared toward a homogenous, white, heteronormative middle-class audience, chapter four called "Black Fat & Queer Fat," examines plays that feature women of color or lesbian characters.[8] I assert that in various modes of representation there is a connection between fat and racial or sexual otherness. In addition to asking how American audiences read a big black body versus a big white body in representation,

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[7] Although Maureen Stapleton (an honorary fat chick, so to speak) played the role of Serafina on Broadway, Williams wrote the part with his friend Anna Magnani in mind (she won an Academy for her portrayal in the movie version). He describes Serafina in the text as "a plump little Italian opera singer in the role of Madame Butterfly…a voluptuous figure…with plump dignity." Significantly, in creating a vehicle for the curvaceous Magnani, Williams created a character with obsessive attachments. Tennessee Williams, *The Rose Tattoo* in *Three by Tennessee* (New York: Signet Classic, 1976), 143-4.

[8] The plays are presumably intended for the same homogenous audience, and their content capitalizes on assumptions made by this audience about fat, race, and class.

chapter four theorizes about the link between fat and racial or sexual difference as depicted in cultural texts. Many feminists have critiqued medical discourse dating back to the seventeenth century as well as persistent cultural assumptions and representations in media that label black females as more primitive and therefore more sexualized than white females.[9] In many cases the accepted cultural aesthetic for a black woman's body allows for a fatter figure. Yet, a fat white woman in various cultural texts from stage and film to advertising is almost always an object of ridicule and shame. However, both big black women and fat white women are similarly sexualized in representation. Fat, like race, is something worn on the outside. It is immediately visible to the spectator. This chapter explores the interplay between fatness and racial or sexual otherness through plays including August Wilson's *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom* (1984), Suzan-Lori Parks's *Venus* (1995), the musical *Hairspray* (2002), and *The Killing of Sister George* (1965), which exploits the stereotype of the fat lesbian, as well as *The Secretaries* (1994) by the Five Lesbian Brothers.[10]

The second section of the dissertation, called **Fat Performances,** focuses on actual bodies in representation and the way in which performers use their bodies to reinforce or reject stereotypes of fatness. This section also considers the ways in which live bodies can influence critical understanding of a character.

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[9] See for example, bell hooks's "Selling Hot Pussy: Representations of Black Female Sexuality in the Cultural Market Place" in *Writing on the Body*, Conboy, Medina, Stanbury, Eds. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997); Sander L. Gilman's "Black Bodies, White Bodies: Toward an Iconography of Female Sexuality in Late Nineteenth Century Art, Medicine, and Literature," in *Race, Writing and Difference*, Henry Louis Gates Jr., Ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986). Also, Andrea Elizabeth Shaw's *The Embodiment of Disobedience: Fat Black Women's Unruly Political Bodies* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2006), deals extensively with the issue of fat black bodies as sites of anxiety-inducing social resistance, because they reject the hegemonic, white, American imperative of slenderness.

[10] *Hairspray* has been treated by several scholars interested in fat onstage, but to my knowledge, no one discusses the implications of Tracey (the fat girl) squarely aligning herself with the black community and forcing integration of the dance show. This is one example of the link between black bodies and fat white bodies in representation.

In the first part of chapter five, "Performing Bodies: Subverting Stereotypes vs. Retaining the Status Quo**,**" I examine specific performances and performing bodies to analyze ways in which they embrace or exploit cultural assumptions about fat. I address a variety of entertainment media including theatre, television, and stand-up comedy, and look at the ways some artists have deliberately used their unconventional body type overtly as a political weapon or, more subtly, to enhance a theme. For example, by examining Claudia Shear's performance in *Blown Sideways Through Life* (1995) through the lens of identity/gender study theorists including Judith Butler, I will show how Shear uses her "invisible-conspicuous" body to invert the hegemonic power matrix in which thin is equated with power and status.

There is also a strong tradition of stand-up comediennes who have crossed over into film or TV and who challenge cultural assumptions about body size through their routines and their actual performing bodies, such as Roseanne Barr, Janeane Garafalo, and Margaret Cho, each of whom also embodies other qualities commonly associated with fat. Roseanne has made her mark as the quintessential fat blue collar housewife. Garafalo's persona is tied up with her nerdy glasses, her intellectual viewpoints, and strong political opinions—she is the smart fat girl.[11] And Korean-American Cho not only embodies racial otherness, but has publicly struggled with her weight and openly indicts dieting culture in her comedy.[12]

[11] Garafalo, who in her earlier comic routines was an advocate for fat or "average" sized girls, recently lost a significant amount of weight to try and jump start her floundering career. In an interview she was questioned about her previous stance that actresses should not have to lose weight and she said, "They shouldn't have to, but I was heavier and it really gets you almost nowhere. So yeah, I fucking sold out. It's easier." She also underwent a breast reduction. Garafolo is now appearing on Broadway in Nora Ephron's *Love, Loss and What I Wore*. Interview with Jada Yuan in *New York Magazine* (February 22, 2010), 162.
[12] Cho's latest show, *The Sensuous Woman*, was in a burlesque format and was devoted entirely to deconstructing heteronormative assumptions about beauty.

On the other hand, in contrast to embracing body diversity or empowering big bodies through performance, Kirstie Alley's self-produced TV show *Fat Actress* (2005) exploits fat stereotypes and engages in such anti-woman, anti-fat, self-loathing comedy that it results in a kind of performance I call "fat-face minstrelsy."[13] Alley's performance and the "weightist" comedy of the program hark back to the racist humor of popular culture entertainments ranging from blackface minstrelsy and Jumpin' Jim Crow to *Amos -n- Andy*. Alley's "fat-face" performance preys on grotesque fat stereotypes, pandering to the lowest common denominator, and capitalizes on the national panic surrounding obesity. As demonstrated by Alley's strategic spinning of her fat body into national publicity and a lucrative commercial deal with Jenny Craig, one of the giants of the diet industry, what is the cultural appeal of this fat humor?

Finally, this chapter briefly discusses audience reception to body type as a by-product of performance. As Elizabeth Grosz says in *Space, Time, and Perversion,* "Bodies speak without necessarily talking because they have become coded with and as signs."[14] Bodies onstage are read and interpreted by the audience to have a particular meaning. Jill Dolan points out that when Kathy Bates performed *'night Mother* on Broadway, critics made assumptions about the character's motives based on Bates's chunky appearance. In the latter half of the twentieth century and early twenty-first century, the only neutral female body in performance is unobtrusively slim. Thus, the latter half of this chapter briefly looks at some of the roles fat actresses have played and

[13] Here I will engage with Eric Lott's *Love and Theft: Blackface Minstrelsy and the American Working Class* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995) and discuss the ways in which Alley's performance is a kind of "fat-face" minstrel show where the performer eventually gets to remove the mask and even capitalize on being the privileged "other."

[14] Elizabeth Grosz, *Space, Time, and Perversion: Essays on the Politics of Bodies* (New York: Routledge, 1995), 35.

explores their critical reception in an attempt to highlight how their fat bodies added a layer to critical interpretation of character, whether intentionally or not.

The last chapter, called "Reclaiming Fat," is influenced by *Agitated States: Performance in the American Theatre of Cruelty* by Anthony Kubiak (2002). He attempts to move beyond the materialist study of theatre (theatre as a cultural text) and aims to build on Butler's theory of performativity. He argues that "[T]heatre as a phenomenon represents a historically situated critical feedback loop that moves from play to culture, from culture to unconscious subject, and back again." Kubiak asserts that American culture has been unknowingly immersed in, and formulated through, cultural practices of seeing and being seen. He draws from Hillel Schwartz's study of doubling and mimesis, claiming that Americans have a "habit of relying upon reenactment and repetition to establish the truth of events and the authenticity of people." Thus, in our culture, the copy threatens to overtake the original in its claim to the authentic.[15] Jumping off from this idea, I argue that the theatrical style of realism is so invested in the cult of slenderness that any performing body that does not adhere to Hollywood standards of beauty may actually be understood as "unrealistic" by a contemporary audience.[16] In other words, contemporary audiences are so used to seeing the homogenous female form in leading roles in film, television, and on stage—this form being the extremely slender woman—that were a young Kathy Bates to be cast as a romantic lead in a play today, the

[15]Anthony Kubiak, *Agitated States: Performance in the American Theater of Cruelty* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2002), 22.

[16] A partial explanation as to why this cult of slenderness has now reached the stage can probably be attributed to the increasing crossover between stage and screen for performers. As the economy of "the business" has changed, not only are actors obliged to work both onstage and in serial television (can we look at an actors' bio in a playbill that doesn't contain the ubiquitous *Law & Order* credit?), but producers are pressured to use "a name," meaning a known film or T.V. personality, when mounting a theatrical production.

audience would find it unbelievable.[17] Her appearance would either distract from the storytelling or add a layer of meaning to the story regardless of the actual script.

In addition, this chapter will summarize my theoretical positioning of fat women in twenty-first century representations and briefly point to some emerging "fat practices" in theatre and popular entertainment. In recent years burlesque has made a comeback, and there are a number of notable fat burlesque performers and even some exclusively fat troupes, such as the *Fat Bottom Review* based in San Francisco. In response to Kubiak's model, I also offer some possibilities for fat activism or non-traditional body type casting within the theatre by rethinking the realistic body in performance.

Mythologies of the Female Body

In order to position my argument within a cultural context, I will offer a brief historical overview of the mythologies, iconography, and ancient narratives associated with women's bodies, followed by a trajectory of dieting culture in the United States. I am not the first to suggest that female bodies continue to serve as a lightening rod for cultural fears and prejudices. From the earliest philosophers, such as Aristotle, Plato, and Descartes, who linked the masculine to a "higher" plane of spirituality and reason in contrast to the feminine, which was linked to all that was earthly and flesh bound, to the discourse of modern psychology including Freud and Lacan, the female body has always

[17] Here again, I am assuming a play that fits within the broad definition of realism.

been viewed as problematic, mysterious, and sexually dangerous.[18] Simone de Beauvoir points out in *The Second Sex* that the philosophical categories of Self/Other have been superimposed on the binary oppositions in western culture of man/woman. The male Self has traditionally been associated with the mind as something transcendent, while the female Other is trapped in the body, associated with the biological processes of menses and childbirth and therefore is defined and evaluated by her bodily functions, shape, and size.[19] It follows logically that fat women are targeted by "weightism" more than men, because according to the aforementioned paradigm, which is at the base of Western philosophy, a woman *is* her body, her body *is* her identity, and her fatness points to a multitude of social and cultural transgressions. The fat female form is associated with a myriad of negative connotations as well as with racial and sexual otherness. Her fat body provokes ideological questions of morality, control, and self-discipline.

Beginning with the earliest fairytales heard in childhood and extending to the billboards we face everyday, a woman raised in the United States is barraged with stories and images that tell her that her body is *not* okay but potentially dangerous, a threat to the social order, and must be controlled and disciplined for fear she will consume or destroy mankind, or at the very least, The American Way. As Paul Campos states in *The Obesity Myth*, "[W]e live in a culture that tells the average American woman, dozens of times per

[18] Many feminists have critiqued or endeavored to demonstrate the phallocentricity of Freud's theories and the shortcomings of his work as it pertains to understanding and treating women including Luce Irigaray in *This Sex Which is Not One* (Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 1985) or Nancy Chodorow in *Feminism and Psychoanalytic Theory* (New Haven, Yale University Press 1991), and *Femininities, Masculinities, Sexualities: Freud and Beyond* (Lexington, University Kentucky Press, 1994).
[19] Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, trans. H.M. Parshley (New York, Vintage Books 1974).

day, that the shape of her body is the most important thing about her, and that she should be disgusted by it."[20]

Legends, fairytales, and religious parables from Western European culture are filled with stories of women as destroyers of men and monstrous consumers, whose vengeance and sexual power is linked to their voracious appetites. For example, the Bible holds many stories conflating female sexuality with appetite and danger. Adam and Eve were cast out of the Garden of Eden owing to Eve's defiance in eating the apple. Not only did her unruliness bring about this loss of innocence for mankind, but henceforth a woman's body was marked with original sin.[21] The vengeful Salomé (urged on by her adulterous mother) demanded that King Herod present her with John the Baptist's head on a plate as a reward for her sensual dance.[22] Traditional Western European fairytales and oral tradition are also filled with stepmothers, witches, and other evil women who eat their victims. For example, the predecessor to *Sleeping Beauty*, written in 1634 by Giambattista Basile and called *Sun, Moon, and Talia*, features an Ogress Stepmother who eats her children.[23] Who can forget the Witch in *Hansel and Gretel*, who lured innocent children with sweets in order to fatten them up and eat them herself? Snow White's wicked stepmother feeds her the poisoned apple and she "dies" with her first bite. Mother Goose's English nursery rhymes abound with fat, troublesome wives, such as Jack Sprat's wife who "could eat no lean," who are the object of mockery if not fear.

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[20] Paul Campos, *The Obesity Myth*, (New York, Gotham Books, 2004). Introduction. I will return later to Campos's argument, which elaborates on the ways in which the government and medical authorities have distorted available evidence on the relationship between weight and health and fostered fat as a pariah of society, resulting in significant economic benefits for the diet and pharmaceutical industries but no significant advances in the so-called obesity epidemic.

[21] Jane Gallop, *The Daughter's Seduction: Feminism and Psychoanalysis* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1982), Gen.3:1-24.

[22] Ibid., Mark. 6: 21-9.

[23] Giambattista Basile, *Pentamerone. English Stories from the Pentamerone*, trans. Batsy Bybell (Hard Press, 2006), 133-39.

Monstrous mermaids appear in many cultural mythologies. Their common feature is their threat to sailors and their habit of falling passionately in love and forgetfully dragging their sailor-objects below the sea, thus drowning them. In Great Britain the traditional mermaid was also a giantess up to one hundred and sixty feet tall who, while not always vengeful, would still kill a man with her "big love." [24] The notion of women as dangerous eaters continues to prevail in American cultural texts. For example, contemporary advertising frequently characterizes female consumers as out of control, encourages women to "be bad" and indulge in that ice cream or forbidden dessert.[25] The fat woman who accidently crushes a man or some other smaller creature is a staple joke in commercials and movies.[26]

In middle and upper class culture, fat white women are simultaneously invisible and conspicuous. They are generally viewed as second-class citizens, objects of shame, fear, and loathing.[27] Assumptions are made about women's moral character and intelligence based on this outward appearance. Fat prejudice has become the one socially acceptable bias based on outward appearance, which is akin to racial bias. If, as Mary Douglas asserts, "the body is a powerful symbolic form, a surface on which the central rules, hierarchies, and even metaphysical commitments of a culture are inscribed and reinforced through the concrete language of the body," then the increasing anxiety about

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[24] Katharine Briggs, *An Encylopedia of Fairies: Hobgoblins, Brownies, Bogies, and Other Supernatural Creatures* (New York: Pantheon, 1976), 287-91.

[25] For a detailed discussion of this see: "Hunger as Ideology" in Susan Bordo, *Unbearable Weight: Feminism, Western Culture, and the Body* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), 99-133.

[26] Just flipping channels on television 3/8/08 I encountered the new WaMu (a bank) commercial featuring a big black lady dancing with her smaller male partner; the fact that he is able to (shakily, barely) lift her heavy body is a metaphor for their banking freedom. Another primetime comedy movie *Dodgeball* (2004) featured a scene in which one of the male protagonists fails his cheerleading tryout because he is asked to lift a very fat girl whom he, of course, drops and she crushes him. He eventually rolls her off, gasping for air.

[27] This discussion is also informed by Susan Bordo's *Unbearable Weight: Feminism, Western Culture, and the Body* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), among other theorists.

fat bodies reflects deeper cultural meaning.[28] As Pierre Bourdieu and Michel Foucault have pointed out, the body is a direct conduit for social control, and in contemporary culture the discipline of the female body in particular is an enduring example of social, political, and gender oppression.[29] As I have discussed, in Western philosophy a woman's body is traditionally associated with the base and earthly, and indeed her body is her identity, whereas a man's identity is connected to his soul and intellect. Thus, in order for a woman to make the transition from nature to culture she must control her dangerous appetite for sex, power, and so on, with food as the outward metaphor, and shape her body into what Foucault calls a non-threatening "docile body."[30]

Foucault has argued that modern societies are no longer structured such that the monarch (an individual) wields authority over an anonymous body of subjects. Rather, authoritative power is created via a network of cultural practices, social institutions, and modern technologies.[31] The female body and societal constructs of femininity are at the center of this patriarchal structure in the United States, which continues to oppress women of all classes and races. In an age where women are seemingly more free in the public arena, the constraints of culturally prescribed femininity (including, at the top of the list, weight control) have intensified so that a modern, middle-class woman in

[28] Bordo, *Unbearable Weight: Feminism, Western Culture, and the Body*, 165. Bordo is summarizing Mary Douglas's argument in *Natural Symbols* (New York: Pantheon, 1982).
[29] Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality Volume I: An Introduction*, trans. Robert Hurley, 1990 ed. (New York: Vintage Books, 1978), Pierre Bourdieu, *Masculine Domination*, trans. Richard Nice (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2001).
[30] Nadia Medina, Kate Conboy, Sarah Stanbury, Eds., *Writing on The Female Body: Female Embodiment and Feminist Theory*, Gender and Culture Reader (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997), Introduction.
[31] Foucault, *The History of Sexuality Volume I: An Introduction*, 135-69.

particular spends an inordinate amount of time pursuing the ever-evolving, homogenous ideal of slender beauty.[32]

In *Discipline & Punish*, Foucault also points out that the "classical age discovered the body as an object and a target of power." [33] He traces the movement in Western European cultures in which punishment and discipline moved from public displays of corporeal and capital punishment to social hierarchies and punishments that seek to control and imprint societal rules upon the individual's conscious mind and soul. In modern society, political allegiance and appropriation of the labor of the body are no longer sufficient. Society must produce "docile bodies," wherein time, space, movement and gesture of the body must be regulated. Foucault's discussion of the Panopticon, Jeremy Bentham's model for a prison, in which each inmate is alone, shut off from communications with others but constantly visible from a central tower, is a useful in metaphor for understanding modern social control and the insidious psychic influence on women in contemporary America. The effect of the Panopticon is "to induce in the inmate a state of constant and permanent visibility."[34] In this age of technology, thanks to home computers and the internet, individuals are at once more isolated than ever in terms of daily human interaction with a community at the same time that these advances allow for instant, global communication. Women have so deeply assimilated the messages of

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[32] Current ideal feminine beauty is not only a disciplined slim, muscular body but also a relatively hairless body (everywhere but the head). This hairless aesthetic has evolved since the 1970s when legs and armpits were the primary target areas for hair removal. Today the Brazilian bikini wax (removal of all pubic hair) is becoming ubiquitous for any self-respecting woman on the sexual market. This needs to be maintained, just as hair on the head needs to be colored on a regular basis. As breast implants become more affordable, more women consider this surgery a necessity on par with maintaining one's teeth. Studies show many women prioritize implants over other seemingly more essential lifestyle expenses such as a car. The hours of time and money that go into these beautifying practices exemplify the way in which women are insidiously oppressed by cultural beauty standards.

[33] Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punishment: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. Alan Sheridan, 2nd ed. (New York: Vintage Books, 1995), 156.

[34] Ibid., 201.

mass media concerning beauty and slenderness that we operate under a version of Foucault's Panopticon. We police ourselves from within. Sandra Bartky points out:

> The woman who checks her make-up half a dozen times a day to see if her foundation has caked or her mascara run, who worries that the wind or rain may spoil her hairdo, [. . .] or who, feeling fat, monitors everything she eats, has become, just as surely as the inmate of Panopticon, a self-policing subject, a self committed to relentless self-surveillance. This self-surveillance is a form of obedience to patriarchy. It is also the reflection in woman's conscience that *she* is under surveillance […]. Since the standards of female bodily acceptability are impossible to fully realize, requiring as they do a virtual transcendence of nature, a woman may live her life with a pervasive feeling of bodily deficiency. Hence, a tighter control of the body has gained a new kind of hold over the mind. [35]

Indeed, if we take representations of women as seen in widely disseminated cultural texts such as television, film, and advertising as the contemporary beauty ideal, then the acceptable beauty standard is virtually impossible to achieve in nature: that of a tall, slim hipped, extremely thin woman with large breasts. Many of these images are altered by technology or portrayed by models/actresses who are surgically enhanced, yet they are still represented as the (possible) ideal. In fact, without the help of implants, it is very rare that a woman can maintain such a low percentage of body fat and still have breasts. Supermodel Linda Evangelista, who claims authenticity as far as her extreme appearance is concerned, has been quoted saying, "the whole thing about models, and I hate using this term, but we are genetic freaks."[36] Regardless, a large majority of middle and upper middle-class American women with varying levels of education and economic status continue to pursue of this model ideal or at least are highly conscious of it as a standard.

Thus, the female body is more than biological; rather it is an historical text that is shaped and understood in the context of the social and economic organization of our

[35] Sandra Lee Bartky, *Femininity and Domination: Studies in the Phenomenology of Oppression* (New York: Routledge, 1990), 81.
[36] Margo Maine, *Body Wars: Making Peace with Women's Bodies, an Activist's Guide* (Carlsbad, CA: Gűrze Books, 2000), 116.

society. The perfectly slender, toned female body understood as the health and beauty ideal is a construct evolved from many cultural influences and practices, the least compelling of which are the supposed health benefits of being skinny.

How did we get here? Fat History in America

In order to illuminate the cultural mechanisms through which the female body is constructed in present day society, here I will offer an historical overview of attitudes about fat and trends in dieting in the United States. To understand what fat means in representation or what a playwright is communicating when calling for a fat character, or how an American audience reads a so-called fat body onstage, it is necessary to see the roots of the cultural construction of fat beginning around the turn of the nineteenth century into the twentieth century. This is when excess weight became undesirable and repulsive, a sign of weak self-discipline and poor moral character. Dominant white middle-class culture has developed a unique perspective on fat and dieting that is inextricably linked with our forefathers' Puritan morality and Victorian work ethic as it came into conflict with the growth of American capitalism.

Both Hillel Schwartz in his book *Never Satisfied: A Cultural History of Diets, Fantasies, and Fat* (1986), and Peter N. Stearns, history professor at George Mason University, in his book *Fat History: Bodies and Beauty, in the Modern West* (2002), come to similar conclusions regarding the American cultural construction of fat. Stearns examines the evolution of dieting culture and anti-fat rhetoric in the United States and compares it to France's history.[37] Both agree that American obsession with a trim figure

[37] Peter N. Stearns, *Fat History: Bodies and Beauty in the Modern West* (New York: New York University Press, 2002).

and weight loss is not new. The beginnings of the weight loss movement can be traced back to the nineteenth century, where one finds advertisements for weight loss alongside recipes for cakes in *Ladies Home Journal*, *Godey's Lady's Book* and similar publications as early as the 1890s. However, during most of the nineteenth century plumpness in women was considered fashionable, a sign of health, and linked to successful motherhood and repeated pregnancies. Elizabeth Cady Stanton was admired for her rotund figure, as were American stage actresses such as Lillian Russell, who was the most photographed woman in America and weighed over two hundred pounds at the height of her popularity.[38] Clothing such as corsets and bustles were designed to emphasize roundness and add fullness rather than hide it. Men who were round or had a paunch were regarded as powerful and successful. A combination of factors began the anti-weight movement (and Stearns notes that men were equally as targeted by this anti-fat campaign until the period from 1920-1960, when women became the primary target).

Included in these "anti-fat factors" were changes in fashion. For example, by the 1890s the uncorseted body became increasingly stylish among the middle class and so more pressure was on women to maintain a slender figure without the help of this constricting undergarment.[39] As infant mortality rates declined and (contraband) birth control methods came into more frequent use, women were having fewer babies, and the emphasis on motherhood decreased alongside the permission to have a matronly body.

[38] On the other hand, in the mid-nineteenth century, Stanton was ahead of the fashion curve and was criticized, along with Amelia Bloomer, for wearing the "bloomer costume," which was similar to the pantaloons and skirts young American girls had been wearing since the 1820s. Although the outfit released women from the cultural burden of the corset, it was said that the look was not complimentary to the body of a mature woman. Stanton said later "We knew the Bloomer Costume could never be generally becoming, as it required perfection of form, limbs, and feet, such as few possess, and we who wore it knew that it was not artistic." (quoted in Schwartz 56) It seems abundant flesh in a woman was more fashionable if it was contained and sculpted by a corset.

[39] Stearns, *Fat History*, 13.

As print media such as *Godey's Ladies Book* (est. 1830) and *Ladies Home Journal* (est. 1883) increased their circulation in the nineteenth century, more women than ever were exposed to the recipes, advertising, fashion pictures, dress patterns, and homemaking advice disseminated by these periodicals. Images also became more widely distributed. Hence, between 1895 and 1914 Charles Davis Gibson's drawings of the ideal Gibson Girl became one of the most widely publicized female images in the U.S. Drawn entirely from the artist's imagination, the Gibson Girl represented the ideal woman, with ample bosom and visible hips but athletic looking, taller, and more slender than previous widespread images of women such as Lillian Russell. So at the same time popular print media became available to more women, images disseminated on those pages represented the "perfect American woman"—who was in fact, not real, although many assumed there was a specific live model for the plucky Gibson Girl.[40]

Of course, in many ways the industrial revolution impacted changing attitudes about body size. At the dawn of the twentieth century, the U.S. economy became less rooted in agriculture and manual labor. The middle class was expanding, thanks to modern technology and a blossoming economy. Machines became available to do many jobs previously accomplished only through manual labor, and more workers held desk jobs—or at least jobs less rigorously physical. Thus the middle class began to enjoy more relative leisure time than ever before in American history. Clothing became a manufactured commodity and generic sizes were established, whereas previously women made their own clothes to fit themselves and their families. By the twenties, many Americans were more able to literally measure themselves on personal bathroom scales

[40] Laura Fraser, *Losing It: America's Obsession with Weight and the Industry That Feeds on It* (New York: Penguin Books, 1997), 31.

(as opposed to public "penny scales" such as the Howe platform, which were prevalent in public spaces after 1890). Furthermore mirrors, the ultimate critical measuring tool of appearance, also became accessible, affordable, and a standard part of middle class bathrooms ands bedrooms.[41] Americans began to enjoy abundance as consumers of food and goods. As a middle class came into being, so did a more sedentary lifestyle for many, which resulted in weight gain for some.

With the aforementioned changes, the middle class demonstrated an increasing concern with their expanding waist lines.[42] By the early twentieth century physicians began promoting weight-loss, and fad diets had become part of American culture. The word "diet" was no longer associated strictly with nutrition, but with its present day connotation of prescriptive food intake for a desired result of weight-loss and increased "well-being." Medical practitioners shaped their discourse in concert with the growing middle-class ideology surrounding food consumption and consumer excess that associated weight gain with a host of anti-social, immoral behaviors. The middle class turned to doctors, whose credibility as professionals of medical science was also increasing at this time, to help them control their weight. Doctors extended fat prejudices further by linking heaviness in medical discourse with a variety of unrelated health concerns from dyspepsia to paralytic diseases and tuberculosis. Some of the first diet clinics and diet gurus began to spring up between 1880 and 1920. Horace Fletcher who, like many diet gurus past and present, had a personal dieting success story, developed a science of mastication that claimed to promote weight-loss. It was widely written about in

[41] Hillel Schwartz, *Never Satisfied: A Cultural History of Diets, Fantasies, and Fat* (New York: Doubleday, 1986), 168-71.
[42] This statement is based on the evidence that this era saw an increase in print media advertising weight loss products, an increase in the products themselves, and that publications from medical authorities on the topic of obesity and weight loss reflect a growing trend in culture.

women's popular magazines.[43] Thus, the term "Fletcherism" became part of the national dialogue, and Fletcher became one of the first Americans to make his fortune in the diet industry, promoting his ideas on the lecture circuit and publishing several books on the topic.[44]

The United States grew out of its infancy and experienced rapid economic and healthy population growth, setting the stage to become a world power. The cultural stage was also set for middle-class Americans in particular, to develop a very complex and contradictory relationship with food, eating, and material abundance. The demonizing of fat and the newfound emphasis on weight-loss may have been linked to the increasing religious diversity and freedom that represented the American Way. Stearns and Schwartz both note that, in the first part of the twentieth century, the growing middle class began to emphasize weight control as a sign of good character. Diet consciousness increased further after World War I along with other cultural constraints directed toward other perceived physical or emotional excesses including more rigorous injunctions against homosexual behavior. Restraint emerged as a cultural imperative to compensate for new areas of social and religious freedom in a growing consumer economy. [45] Disciplined eating became a moral tool in a society where increasing economic abundance and growing leisure time seemed to weaken the Victorian work ethic of the previous generation. Along with medical authorities, educators and psychologists promoted slenderness for preventing emotional, ethical and physical indolence.[46]

[43] Stearns, *Fat History*, 32.
[44] Schwartz, *Never Satisfied*, 124-28.
[45] Stearns, *Fat History*, 54.
[46] Ibid., 60.

In a culture that was becoming increasingly secular, Americans substituted dieting for morality and religious qualities of abstinence and deprivation that harked back to Christian and Puritan ethics of earlier generations. In advertising the battle of the bulge was frequently depicted with rhetorical terminology that echoed biblical struggles of fallen angels and so on. Controlling one's appetite or spiritual fasting has played a significant role in diverse religions throughout human history. However, as religious discipline declined for many middle-class Americans, fat became a "secular sin." Between 1880 and 1920 print media demonstrates a growing attitude toward fat as immoral and indicative of weak character, evoking disgust beyond fashion and health considerations. During WWI, influenced by wartime rationing, "healthy eating" and eating in moderation became associated with patriotic duty. In 1918, an article in *Nations* magazine stated: "Any healthy, normal individual who is now getting fat is unpatriotic."[47] Thus, being overweight became synonymous with lacking moral character, having a poor work ethic, and even being anti-American!

Stearns also asserts that between 1920 and 1960 the anti-fat crusade in America took on a misogynist tone and the medical establishment and advertisers began to target primarily women. Other feminists and cultural theorists including Susan Bordo, Susan Faludi, and Naomi Wolf in *The Beauty Myth* have also argued that, as civil rights and social freedoms for women increased in the United States, the acceptable beauty standard for a woman's size decreased.

One concrete illustration of this trend of the ever shrinking American ideal of female beauty is the Miss America Pageant "coincidently" established the same year women got

[47] Francis Benedict, "Food Conservation by Reduction of Rations," *Nation 101* 1918, 355-57.

the vote.[48] The 1922 Miss America, Mary Campbell, stood five feet seven inches tall and was considered "flapper thin" at 140 pounds. By the 1990s the average Miss America contenders were approximately five inches taller and fifteen pounds *lighter* than their 1950s predecessors.[49] In the 1924 *Journal of the American Medical Association* one doctor is quoted: "Overweight is also a mar to female beauty….An excess of fat destroys grace and delicacy. A fat face has a monstrous uniformity. No theatrical producer would hire a plump actress to mirror the real depths of the human soul."[50] In her etiquette books, which first appeared in the 1920s, Emily Post explicitly stated that fat was a drawback for women and made them less dignified, but she said nothing about overweight men.

If by the 1920s weight control was established as a kind of moral category—a reflection of Americans' need to demonstrate moderation and control in an increasingly abundant economy with ever-loosening Christian values—then women in particular were compelled to compensate as they fought for more social freedom and control over their reproduction. Also in the 1920s, creams and drugs, including amphetamines, designed to fight fat became available in the marketplace. At the same time women became greater consumers of beauty products in general as popular culture and capitalist values enforced a subtler form of control over women's bodies, obliging them to regulate their appearance through dieting and makeup.[51] Over the course of the twentieth century, fashion liberated women from corsets and heavy, concealing garments and birth control allowed women

[48] Susan Faludi, *Backlash: The Undeclared War against American Women* (New York: Anchor Books; Doubleday, 1991), 50.
[49]Maine, *Body Wars*, 118. Stearns, *Fat History*, 72.
[50] James S. McLester, "The Principles Involved in Treatment of Obesity," *Journal of the American Medical Association* 82 (1924): 2103.
[51] Stearns, *Fat History*.105.

sexual freedom or at least some agency over the frequencies of pregnancy they experienced.

Evidence for the increasing intensity with which American culture celebrated slimness and vilified fat women in particular can be found in various cultural texts and popular images beginning in 1920. Cultural icons of slender feminine beauty emerged such as Disney's waif-like *Cinderella* (1930) and Paramount Studio's cartoon diva, the child-like teeny bodied, sexual parody Betty Boop (1930). Alberto Vargas's hand painted, "perfectly" proportioned semi-nude pin up girls became famous in the 1940s, and Mattel's busty *Barbie* doll was born in1959. Examples of the growing misogyny toward fat women can also be found in women's magazines between 1940 and 1950, which are filled with articles expressing sheer disdain toward fat women. A diet industry emerged around this kind of editorial rhetoric. In these magazines a woman with a weight problem was characterized as lazy, undisciplined, evasive, self-hating, a failure to society, and an object of ridicule and disgust. "Psychiatrists have exposed the fat person for what she really is—miserable, self indulgent, and lacking in control." Another article reads, "[A]re you aware that fatness has destroyed your sex appeal and made you look older, somewhat like a buffoon whom people are inclined not to take seriously in any area on any level?"[52] This kind of rhetoric is part of the cultural fabric from which we have constructed fat women in representation. Stearns proposes that this phenomenon of "masochistic middle-class reading material" directed at women harks back to Puritan religious pamphlets attacking sin.

Another example of how the cultural expansions of women's rights coincided with increasing pressure for women's bodies to be controlled can be found in fashion trends.

[52] Stearns, *Fat History*, 83.

The freer and less constricting a woman's clothing became, the more importance was attached to her actual body being small and contained. Over the course of the century, as corsets disappeared, more revealing garments were considered socially acceptable and fashionable with each passing decade. Beginning with the flapper's costume, it became an acceptable social convention for women to show their bodies as long as the exposed parts were slender and disciplined.[53] A toned, slimmer body was an outward sign that, despite newfound sexual freedom, a woman could still restrain her earthly appetite.[54] Conversely, sluttish behavior in a woman was frequently conflated with undisciplined eating habits and visible fat was a kind of "Scarlet A" telegraphing promiscuity. As women in the United States gained sexual independence, a sexy woman was no longer round (suggesting pregnancy and motherhood as it had in the early nineteenth century) but slender—a visible non-mother. There was a brief reappearance of the rounder female figure in the early fifties as demonstrated by Marilyn Monroe and other icons of that era, which may have been influenced by the baby boom and a renewed cultural emphasis on maternal values following WWII.[55] Nevertheless, as an overall trajectory in the latter half of the twentieth century, women have been encouraged to compensate for more sexual freedom by controlling their bodies in another way: maintaining a very slender body.

Although a renewed emphasis on motherhood and slight relaxing of slenderness standards characterized post WWII baby boomer culture, there was also an explosion of diet paraphernalia and consumer products directed toward dieters, which has continued to grow steadily to the present day. The fiscal growth of the diet industry between 1960 and

[53] Although many flappers bound their breasts in order to achieve the slender, lean line dictated by the fashion.
[54] Stearns, *Fat History*, 87.
[55] Fraser, *Losing It*, 40-43.

2006 illustrates this point. For example, in 1964 Weight Watchers, formed just a year earlier, had an annual business of $160,000 dollars. Just six years later in 1970 Weight Watchers was earning eight million dollars annually. In 1990 the diet industry as a whole was estimated at thirty-three billion annually and as of 2006 that estimated income was fifty billion dollars.[56] Diets and diet products comprise a perfect self-perpetuating industry because, statistically speaking, over ninety percent of dieters re-gain the weight they have lost. Since WWII, fashion magazines laden with advertising and articles about dieting have proliferated, including *Seventeen*, directed at teenagers, and *Cosmopolitan* (est. 1886 and taken over by Helen Gurley Brown in 1970), at which time the content increasingly focused on sexuality, diet, fitness, and beauty. By the 1980s, women's magazines such as *Ladies Home Journal* and *McCalls* typically averaged two diet articles per issue. Jack Lalanne, one of America's first health gurus, also surfaced after WWII and frequently compared his fitness campaign to that of evangelist Billy Graham, thus carrying forward the tradition of dieting as a substitute for religious crusade.

Moreover, being overweight became synonymous with certain psychological pathologies.

> The ideal of slimness was so clear and so widely acknowledged that people who did not live up to it (save for instances of glandular difficulties, which were given less credence) must have something wrong with them. Medical and psychiatric inquiry conjoined in a novel way that simply carried older moralism to a new plateau. Compulsive overeating became an 'expression of emotional maladjustment.' Rational people could lose weight or not gain it in the first place. By implication, overweight individuals were eating to mask other problems. … The common wisdom was clear, as the moral degeneracy of fat translated into post WWII psychobabble: "circumstances leading to a height-weight mark usually stem from a fatal character flaw and other psychological manifestations."[57]

[56] Campos, *The Obesity Myth*, 42.
[57] Stearns, *Fat History*, 118-19.

This association of fatness with emotional maladjustment is crucial to understanding the ways we now view fatness in representation. In the United States the expansion of the middle class and the suburbanization that followed the Second World War put more individuals under the scrutiny of middle-class values and reinforced links between morality and mental health with weight gain and overeating. Americans internalized this message and bought diet products and sought medical help to control their "problem."

Where are we now? Americans and Fat in the Twenty-First Century

According to Stearns, research tells us that during the latter half of the twentieth century, even as slenderness standards have been more rigorously promoted than ever, the weight of the average American has in fact, increased. This is particularly striking when compared to France's cultural history of fat and dieting.[58] America has a comparable trajectory, except that the more intense our media/health experts have become in an anti-fat crusade, the fatter Americans have gotten, while, statistically speaking, the French have maintained their size. The other difference is that advertising rhetoric in France does not explicitly connect fat and eating with sin, the way it has traditionally in America. Regardless, the present media mania in the United States surrounding our "obesity epidemic" has emerged. In the past ten years American attitudes as represented in the media and by the medical community have intensified from being preoccupied with weight-loss to an obsession with fat as a world-wide health threat and harbinger of the fall of Western Civilization.

One need only turn on the news or open a paper to read the latest health warnings associated with being overweight. According to popular media, childhood obesity is at an

[58] Ibid., 187-216.

all-time high in the U.S. Some medical experts predict that the current generation of children will have shorter life-spans than their parents as a result of increasing childhood obesity and type-two diabetes. Gastric bypass surgery, now covered by many insurance companies, has become an increasingly popular surgical intervention for weight-loss and has been made available to a wider socio-economic range of individuals. Published studies from various medical authorities have linked obesity and a sedentary lifestyle to premature deaths and rising healthcare costs. There is no denying that Americans, especially children, are becoming fatter and this could pose some health concerns. Certainly, there is much that medical experts have yet to understand about obesity including what, exactly, the risks are and at what point being fat becomes a significant health risk.

However, as Paul Campos, professor of law at the University of Colorado, points out in his book *The Obesity Myth*, fear tactics used in the media and the medical and cultural discourse surrounding America's weight problem exaggerate the health risks of being overweight and further contribute to the stigmatization of fat in our country. Campos is not alone in investigating the implications of the fat obsessed media and medical culture. J. Eric Oliver, a political science professor at the University of Chicago, reports in his book, *Fat Politics: The Real Story Behind America's Obesity Epidemic*, on a survey he conducted on Lexis-Nexis of major newspaper and magazine article headlines that mentioned the word "obesity" and "epidemic." In 1994 the number of articles was thirty-three. It rose to 107 in 2000 and by 2004 the numbers of headlines featuring "obesity epidemic" had risen to 700. A sample headline from 2004 found in the *New York Times* read "Death Rate from Obesity Gains Fast on Smoking." This is just one

example of how American preoccupation with fat and so-called obesity continues to intensify in the twenty-first century. [59] Campos offers a surprising critique of many of the medical studies that are the cornerstones of our current beliefs about diets, obesity, and wellness as represented in mass media. For example, in 1995, the *New England Journal of Medicine* published a study called "Body Weight and Mortality Among Women," which asserted that women of average height who were just twelve or more pounds overweight had a sixty-percent increase in mortality. This study was highly publicized and lent credibility to the notion that being even slightly overweight posed grave medical risks. Campos breaks the study down and demonstrates its inadequacies: data on 115,195 (predominantly white, middle-class) nurses, followed for sixteen years, became medical and media gospel. Without going into all of Campos's detail, some examples of the discrepancies between data and conclusion are the following: only 4,276 or 4.5% of the subjects died during the study, and the mortality rate difference between those with a Body Mass Index (BMI) of 19-24.9 versus those with the "overweight" range of 25 to 31.0 was nearly identical. But more shockingly, the study did not factor in heredity or smoking as part of the overall equation.[60] This particular study (tenuously) links being just ten pounds overweight with increased mortality and became one of the foundational arguments for doctors and the diet industry warning American women that they were risking their lives by failing to lose those last few pounds. Campos looks at several watershed studies that link obesity with health risks and mortality and finds repeatedly that the conclusions drawn fail to take in various mitigating factors such as heredity, smoking, and so on. He argues that "despite the profound effects wealth and poverty have

[59] J. Eric Oliver, *Fat Politics: The Real Story Behind America's Obesity Epidemic* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 46-9.
[60] Campos, *The Obesity Myth*,14.

on health, [. . .] despite the striking correlation in America between increasing weight and decreasing social class, almost none of the studies that purport to measure the health risks of fat even attempt to control this factor."[61] Furthermore, Campos points out the obvious problem with claims that link heart disease to weight: deaths from heart disease in the U.S. have decreased at the same rate that obesity rates (according to ever decreasing medical guidelines for weight) have increased. Along with many others researching the so-called obesity epidemic, Campos concludes that:

> For the vast majority of larger-than-average Americans, there is very little credible evidence that weight represents any sort of significant independent health risk. Being heavier than average may be a sign of other factors that are health risks, especially a lack of physical activity, but there is no real evidence that weight itself causes undue health problems, at least not until one reaches the body mass that is more than one hundred pounds above average for persons of a particular height […]. There is at present no credible evidence that losing weight is a desirable strategy for maintaining or achieving good health. . . . [62]

Glenn Gaesser, Ph.D., professor of exercise physiology at University of Virginia, makes similar assertions in his book *Big Fat Lies*, offering a careful reading of scientific literature that actually reveals that being overweight is not as bad for one's health as we have been led to believe. (For example, there is no link between fat-clogged arteries and obesity.) He even provides data that suggests that there might in fact be health benefits to being overweight.[63]

This kind of skewed data and reporting is part of the way fat bias is woven into our cultural fabric and our capitalist economy. It is not surprising that published obesity research invariably concludes Americans are overweight and should be focusing their time and money on diets and diet products. Laura Fraser points out in *Losing It:*

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[61] Ibid., 38.
[62] Campos, *The Obesity Myth*, 137-8.
[63] Glenn A. Gaesser, *Big Fat Lies: The Truth About Your Weight and Health* (Carlsbad CA: Gurze Books, 2002).

America's Obsession with Weight and the Industry that Feeds On It that less than one percent of the federal health research budget is dedicated to obesity issues and therefore, obesity research in America is invariably funded by the diet and pharmaceutical industry—those who have the most to gain from conclusions that label fat as a disease that requires medial intervention—clearly not disinterested third party funding.[64]

It is important to consider these alternative views about weight loss and obesity because they challenge deeply held American beliefs concerning fat. The widely disseminated rhetoric of the medical and science community is funneled down through the media to middle-class Americans. The media capitalizes on cultural fears and prejudices to the point of obscuring facts and manipulating data in order to get the results a public is predisposed to hear: fat is bad and dangerous. Certainly these conclusions propel the booming diet industry as well as a pharmaceutical industry eager for an "easy sell" to a nation of middle-class individuals predisposed to viewing themselves through a lens still influenced by Puritan ideology, wherein contemporary Western lifestyle is lazy and gluttonous, lacking in discipline and morality. The suggestion is that weight *is* within our control in a fast-paced culture where individuals may feel less "in control" than ever, and if Americans could only master it, they could ward off a myriad of diseases. Put another way: "The simplification and misreading of evidence about human body size reinforces our cultural prejudices about the sinfulness of fat rather than alerting us to the mysterious dynamic and contingent processes of biological and cultural evolution that continue to shape individuals and societies."[65]

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[64] Fraser, *Losing It*, 209-32. See also Gaesser, Campos, Oliver.
[65] Michael Gard and Jan Wright, *The Obesity Epidemic: Science, Morality, and Ideology* (New York: Routledge, 2006), 106.

Fat Struggles in America: Race, Class, Gender

Public attitudes about fat in America are relentlessly negative and abound with assumptions about the character of a fat person. One study in 2001 found that a quarter of college students polled believed that becoming fat was the worst thing that could happen to a person.[66] In another recent study, over half the females between ages eighteen and twenty-five would prefer to be run over by a truck than to be fat, and two-thirds would choose to be mean or stupid rather than fat.[67] And the majority of college educated adults think that obese people are weak-willed, lazy, and gluttonous.[68] J. Eric Oliver summarizes why fat has become a target of contempt in the United States:

> [T]he aversion to fatness is rooted in anxiety, specifically with regards to one's economic status and social position. White, middle-class Americans loathe fatness because it seems to violate the American creed of temperance and self-reliance; thus fatness marks those who lack the requisite moral standing to be in society's upper echelons. In other words, if someone doesn't have the wherewithal to stay thin, then surely they do not have the capability to succeed in business or society.[69]

His use of the word "marks" is particularly appropriate when we consider how to read a character onstage or in cultural representation. The actor's live performing body is a cultural marker, and the size of that body tells a story before the actor moves or says a word. People who appear fat are coded as not only gluttonous and weak-willed, but also lustful, greedy, lazy, stupid, loud-mouthed, irrational, and most importantly, lacking in any kind of self control.[70] In fact, obesity research to date has discovered very little about why

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[66] K. Brownell and Puhl R. "Bias, Discrimination, and Obesity," *Obesity Research* 9:788-805. 2001.
[67] Maine, *Body Wars*, 19.
[68] Oliver, *Fat Politics*, 61.
[69] Ibid., 62.
[70] I am deliberately using the phrase "appear fat" because it seems to me that in the U.S. our idea of what a fat person looks like has gotten narrower over the years. I believe that all the media emphasis on obesity and the notion that has emerged in the past fifteen years that the entire country could stand to lose some weight, has shaped our aesthetic to the point that today in 2010 we might consider the same actress fat who

some people gain more weight than others, and suggests that very often fat people do not eat more than thin people. Research has proven conclusively that dieting fails, but that has not stopped the medical and diet industries from continuing to promote diets as a viable solution, putting responsibility on the willpower of the individual, who, when he or she fails to lose weight or maintain a slender figure, reinforces these cultural stereotypes.

Furthermore, fat is inextricably linked with social status in America. In fact dieting culture as disseminated in mass media enforces class stratification, which occurs when upwardly mobile white women, who are presumably the most viable product consumers, are targeted by these messages. This is in contrast to minorities and lower income fat Americans, who are passed over as potential marketing targets and neglected by the medical establishment. In the following quote J. Eric Oliver explores fat prejudice in America and persistent cultural attitudes about obesity that ultimately link fat, class, gender, and race in our country.

> As with blacks and the poor, fat people are thought to violate some of the most fundamental tenets of American culture: that all people are fundamentally responsible for their own welfare; that self-control and restraint are the hallmarks of virtue; and that all Americans are obliged to work at improving themselves. …And, as we've seen, they also come from America's Anglo-Protestant heritage that emphasized individuals' unique responsibility for demonstrating their worth before God. This individualism has also been accentuated by two hallmarks of American economic development—laissez-faire capitalism and entrepreneurship—which both celebrate the good that individual initiative promotes in the free market.[71]

Thus, being viewed as overweight defies all the principles on which this country was founded. Fat people go against our collective social, political and economic ethos. The bottom line is that a fat American violates deeply held American beliefs of individual

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would have been a sex symbol years ago. Lillian Russell, Mae West, Marilyn Monroe, and even Madonna circa 1982 were all considered icons of beauty and sexiness in their time but would be considered overweight by a contemporary audience.

[71] Oliver, *Fat Politics*, 73.

freedom and responsibility by failing to control her/himself and conform to hegemonic values and beauty aesthetics that appeal to middlebrow tastes and white middle- and upper-class culture.

Oliver draws the connection between fat bias and racial and economic bias in the U.S. as follows:

> Nor does this individualistic ethos stop with the poor—it is also at the heart of many white Americans racial attitudes. […] When surveyed, most white Americans strongly endorse the principle of racial equality. But this does not mean racial bias has disappeared. Instead, according to many race scholars, many whites now couch their racial resentment in the rhetoric of individual responsibility. Blacks are not denigrated because they are fundamentally less intelligent, lazy, or some other stereotype; rather blacks are denigrated because they fail to embrace the principles of individual self-reliance and self-control. Like the poor, blacks are held accountable for racial disparities in income, employment, and wealth because of their own moral failure.[72]

In chapter four I will discuss in more detail the interplay between fatness and blackness or racial otherness in representation. But the idea that fat people choose not to live up to their individual, American responsibility is critical to understanding the way in which fat characters or fat performers are pathologized in representation. Furthermore, there is a subtle connection between queerness and fat in representation as well. However, fat prejudice is more similar to homophobia than racism because of questions of agency. Despite Olivier's assertion above, the surface argument is that individuals have no choice in their skin color, but general consensus is that fat people and queer people choose their deviant behavior and therefore deserve the scorn and ridicule heaped on them by various cultural texts and by government-sanctioned discrimination. On the other hand, skin color and fatness are immediately visible to the spectator, unlike sexual orientation, whereas gay or transgender individuals can pass within white heteronormative culture if they choose to.

[72] Ibid., 74.

Nevertheless, we shall see that in representation they are sometimes lumped together as cultural deviants.

These links between fat, black, and queer can be found, albeit subtly and semiotically, in various cultural representations and print media forms. An example of popular print media using "exposé" reporting style that purports to give the facts about our national health crisis is Greg Critser's cover story in the March 2000 issue of *Harpers* magazine entitled "Let them Eat Fat: The Heavy Truths About American Obesity." The following lengthy quote presents itself as legitimate clinical research drawing on the latest science and illustrates a number of ugly cultural assumptions about obesity in America, including the link between fat, race, and homosexuality as threats to national identity. Critser's racist, homophobic language and condescending tone exemplify the kind of rhetoric in print and electronic news media that couches racial and economic prejudices in disingenuous concern about our national obesity epidemic.

> At my local McDonald's, located in a lower-middle income area of Pasadena, California, the supersize bacchanal goes into high gear about 5 p.m., when various urban caballeros, drywalleros, and jardineros get off from work and head for a quick bite. Mixed in is a sizeable element of young black kids traveling between school and home, their economic status apparent by the fact that they have walked instead of driven. Customers are cheerfully encouraged to "supersize your meal!" … Suffice it to say that consumption of said meals is fast, and in almost every instance I observed very complete.
>
> If childhood obesity truly is "an epidemic in the U.S. the likes of which we have not seen before in chronic disease," then places like McDonalds and Winchell's Donut stores, with their endless racks of glazed creamy goodies, are the San Francisco bathhouses of said epidemic, the places where the high risk population indulges in high risk behavior. [73]

[73]Greg Critser, "Let Them Eat Fat," *Harper's Magazine* 2000, 41-7. Critser went on to write a book called *Fat Land* in 2003, which, as Michael Gard and Jan Wright point out in *The Obesity Epidemic*, is written in a non-academic style but clearly is intended for the reader to understand as a serious, scientifically informed contribution.

I see a link between this kind of discourse and Foucault's theory of *scientia sexualis*, wherein the more sexuality became watched and regulated in society, the more so-called perversions cropped up in scientific and cultural discourse. Critser's tasteless metaphor comparing obesity to AIDS suggests that we have aimed our obsession with deviant sexuality and the discourse surrounding it into the last politically correct target: eating and fat.

Certainly we can conclude that fat is a class and race issue that is propagated in cultural representation by mass media and the medical establishment in this country. It is middle-class women emulating mediatized representations of health and sexuality who least need to lose "those last ten pounds," which, as I have demonstrated, have virtually no significant health consequences, who drive the multi-billion dollar diet industry. Yet minorities and working class women (and their children) who may have more valid health concerns as a result of obesity and poor diet are neither fairly represented in the media onslaught promoting the slender American ideal nor targeted by the medical or diet industry. Lower income individuals simply don't have the economic means to pursue a perfect figure, which necessitates spending time and money at the gym, shopping and preparing healthy food, and so on. Thus, an overweight body is also an outward marker of social class. Or as Susan Bordo points out, with plastic surgery becoming commonplace in a consumer marketplace that disseminates the idea that we are defective, perfection can be bought if you have the means. On the other hand:

> If you can't afford to perfect yourself, your flawed body becomes a physical announcement that you are not among the success stories, the beautiful people, those who are able to get their act together and "Just Do It!" in this land of limitless opportunity. Poverty has always been visible on the human body, but

> with money now able to buy perfection, the beauty gap between the rich and the poor is widening into a chasm. [74]

Not only are middle-class women driving this capitalist diet machine as consumers of diet products but, as many feminists have pointed out, women's bodies actually are the material of capitalist reproduction. The female body itself is commodified in Western culture and is bought and sold in various marketplaces from fashion and advertising to music videos and pornography.

Fat White Women

Critser's article notwithstanding, middle-class and upper middle-class white women are undeniably the most targeted by fat prejudice. Research tells us that a fat white woman will earn less and is less likely to be promoted than her thin counterpart.[75] A white woman who is significantly overweight (fifty plus pounds) earns six percent less in her annual income and this does not occur for women of color or men in the same category of fat. [76] Overweight white women are five times more likely than their male counterparts to report feeling ashamed about their weight and are twice as likely to diet. African American and Latino women do not suffer the same pressure to be thin from within themselves or their community. They are more likely to report satisfaction with their bodies, although statistically America's poor and minority communities are more likely to be overweight. Nor do women and girls of color suffer from anorexia in nearly

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[74]Susan Bordo, *Twilight Zones: The Hidden Life of Cultural Images from Plato to O.J.* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), 8.
[75] David Lempart, "Size Matters," *The Atlantic* 2008. See also *New York Times* "Fat Bias Worse for Women," March 31 2008.
[76] P. Goldblatt, M. Moore, and A. Stunkard, "Social Factors in Obesity," (*JAMA* 192: 1965)1039-44.

the same numbers as white girls. Fat white women are more likely than fat white men to be harassed and abused in public and less likely to get married.[77] Much feminist theory has posited that contemporary weight standards are just another mechanism in the patriarchal machine to undermine women's power and independence. Oliver adds to this theory that middle-class and upper middle-class white women are a primary target because, at this moment in time in the U.S., they are more likely to elide class and social boundaries than any other minority. He says, "White, affluent women face the most severe beauty standards precisely because they are in the most advantageous position to challenge male power. Unlike minorities or the poor, who face racial and class barriers to political and social equality, affluent white women are only hampered by their sex."[78]

Thus, the fat (white) female body is the very antithesis of Foucault's "docile body," defying all cultural and social conventions. And if, as Judith Butler asserts, "rhetoric can control discourse and communication-speech acts are the primary processes through which identities are negotiated and narratives are constructed," then the fat female body is a cultural construction loaded with significance.[79] In what is still essentially a patriarchal culture, a woman's sex alone renders her substandard in the public sphere according to centuries of Western thought, but add to her sexed body fatness and she is a double threat to society. Her fat body is subversive and disruptive and this dissertation aims to demonstrate the ways in which these culturally constructed attitudes about fat women play out onstage and in representation.

[77] Oliver, *Fat Politics*, 79-81.
[78] Ibid.,85.
[79] Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble:Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (London: Routledge, 1999), 134.

Fat Texts

Chapter II: Fat Chicks Onstage

This first category of so-called "fat texts" includes those in which the fat female body is directly addressed as part of the subject matter. In Bourdieu's terms, as dramatic texts intended for performance, all the pieces discussed in this chapter fall into a restricted field of cultural production. Unlike film or TV, drama reaches a limited audience of viewers who not only have the economic means and cultural impetus to see theatre, possibly an indicator of higher education, but also have geographic proximity to the theatre.[1] Within that, these plays and productions are geared toward different audience subsets, more specialized and nuanced restricted fields but most would be considered to have commercial appeal and thus be economically attractive for a theatre to produce. All these plays take the (fat) female body literally as the central part of their subject matter, and I will identify what this means in terms of character psychology and dramaturgy. For example, Charles Laurence's *My Fat Friend* (1974) and Jim Brochu's *Fat Chance* (1993) feature the protagonists, played by Lynn Redgrave and Rue McLanahan respectively, padded and costumed to appear overweight. Both pieces dramatize the transformation of the fat woman from overweight to svelte and use fat primarily for comic effect. The content and fat narrative of these plays written by men and geared toward a commercial audience differ somewhat from Laura Cunningham's *Beautiful Bodies* (1987) and Madeleine George's *The Most Massive Woman Wins*

[1] David Savran touched on this when he wrote, "Perhaps the most obvious distinction between theatre and mass culture is the former's considerably higher admission price. A ticket to Broadway or a regional theatre can cost up to ten times the price of a movie ticket.[. . .] Theatre's costliness means that it remains a more specialized art form and its audiences (like those for many independent films) are often well-educated and highly professionalized spectators." *The Playwright's Voice: American Dramatists on Memory, Writing, and the Politics of Culture*. (New York: Theatre Communications Group, 1999.)iv.

(1994).[2] The latter are feminist plays and have enjoyed less mainstream popularity, initially opening in regional houses and eventually seeing subsequent productions largely in university theatre venues; they attempt to shed light on the complicated relationship between women and their bodies. The characters and their stories actively confront the pressures in American culture to be thin and beautiful. The last four plays I will discuss explore the dynamics of onstage romance between a fat or "oversize" woman and a "normal sized" man.

Broad Broads on "Broadway"

I begin this discussion with a play that exemplifies the slippage between the "fat categories" established in my introduction. *My Fat Friend* by Charles Laurence originated at the Globe Theatre in London and opened on Broadway at the Brooks Atkinson theatre on March 31st, 1974 and ran through December 7th, 1974, for a total of 288 performances.[3] The cast featured a newly slimmed down Lynn Redgrave, fresh from her Academy Award nominated, internationally successful role in *Georgy Girl* as Vicky, the overweight bookstore owner. George Rose played her feisty, gay lodger Henry, who drives much of the plot. Reviews of the American production suggest that Rose, in the role of Henry, stole the show. Rose was nominated for a Tony and won the Drama Desk Award in 1974. The predominance of a gay character and the alliance between fat and gay characters in this play might make *My Fat Friend* a candidate for chapter four and

[1] *Fat Chance* actually played at the Colony Studio Playhouse in Los Angeles and other California venues but never transitioned to Broadway. *My Fat Friend* originated at the Globe Theatre in London and did have a successful Broadway run. However, I posit that the cultural fields encompassing a London/West End or New York/Broadway audience and that of an L.A. based playhouse audience are similar in their predominately white, upper middle-class demographic and taste for material with commercial appeal.
[3] *Internet Broadway Database*, "My Fat Friend," http://www.ibdb.com/production.php?id=3323 (accessed 9/6/08).

"Queer Fat." In fact, *Time Magazine* reviewer Lance Morrow wrote, "the play might better have been called My Fag Friend."[4] On the other hand, since the plot of this play focuses squarely on the problem of a fat woman, I see it as a strong illustration of the way in which a playwright engages fat dramaturgically.

The story of the play is overly simple, or as Clive Barnes puts it: "Despite its fat subject, it is a thin play, but it gives an opportunity for a trio of very funny performances and a new view of the onstage homosexual."[5] Vicky is a lonely, somewhat surly but witty, compulsive overeater who runs her own bookshop connected to her London flat. She has two gay male lodgers, the flamboyant Henry and the younger, subdued James, who is an aspiring novelist and a great cook. Because James is always preparing wonderful meals, Henry holds him responsible for Vicky's most recent weight gain, which has put her over the edge emotionally. In the opening scene she has a revelation that she is fatter than ever and deplores her shape, even as she continues eating and Henry insults her. A good part of the first act is sustained by many wisecracks and fat jokes among the three friends, but the major plot point is that a gentleman caller, Tom, comes into the bookstore, meets Vicky, and asks her on a date. They have a wonderful time, but he must leave the country for several months for business. Upon his departure, Henry (whose name could be a reference to *Pygmalion's* Henry Higgins) proposes that Vicky lose weight and surprise her new paramour when he returns for Christmas. By the second act Vicky has dramatically transformed her figure, with Henry verbally abusing her all the way. However, Tom returns from his business trip, and we discover that he actually

[4] Lance Morrow, "Taking It Off" *Time*, April 15,(1974), http://www.time.com/magazine/article/ (accessed February 18, 2008).
[5] Clive Barnes, "My Fat Friend' From Britain," *New York Times*, April 1, 1974, http;//newyorktimes.com/ (accessed February 2, 2008).

liked the way Vicky looked before she lost weight, so she breaks off the relationship with him. Tom, who has brought her candy and other sweetmeats from his travels, hints that she could gain some weight back, and she retorts:

> VICKY. No, I'll make bloody sure I don't. This is me, I like the way I am and I haven't enough spirit to be a pioneering sex symbol.[6]

Newly in control of her life as a thin person, she decides it is time for James and Henry to move out. End of play.

For comic effect Laurence engages many of the classic fat jokes and fat pathologies that I have discussed in the first chapter. Vicky is the quintessential fat girl. She has relatively low self-esteem, makes self-deprecating jokes but just can not stop eating. She hides candy and sweets, pours extra sugar over her cornflakes, eats to salve all of her emotions, and doesn't even notice she's eating until she catches a glimpse of herself in the mirror or notices that her jaws hurt from chewing. She is characterized as a liar both by Henry's comments and by his description of her past behavior. For example, when Vicky is out (actually buying a new dress for her date), Henry explains to young James what she is most likely up to:

> HENRY. The clever cunning cow.… Well it's obvious. She wouldn't dare sit here in the fat dress and make a pig of herself, so she's decided to cheat. One last glorious tour around the chip shops stuffing herself silly, I bet. […] I know her better than you do. It's like living with an alcoholic, junky, kleptomaniac. You wait, these next few weeks are going to be murder. She'll announce some grand new diet and beg us both to help her and then she'll be up to every trick in the book. She'll sit here large as—larger than life, moaning away and nibbling a carrot and all the time there'll be cream cakes behind the cistern and Mars bars up her knickers. [7]

This monologue touches on nearly every aforementioned fat stereotype, although in the course of this play Vicky does not lie, hide food, or complain overly about her diet. She

[6] Charles Laurence, *My Fat Friend*, Oberon Modern Plays (London: Oberon, 2003), 97.
[7] Ibid., 34.

does drink excessively in one scene and she does smoke, which Henry praises as a good alternative to eating. However, from a viewer perspective, the smoking reinforces the notion that she is orally fixated and must substitute cigarettes for food.

As Vicky prepares for her date and Henry teases her mercilessly, she emphasizes to him that Tom is "normal" because Henry believes he must be a monster of some sort to go out with her. (He advises her to bring a silver bullet, crucifix, and pepper spray on her date.) In another stereotypical behavior, Vicky frequently engages in self-deprecating humor, quipping to Tom: "Always ready to eat—story of my life."[8] When she returns from her date having had a wonderful time, Vicky admits:

> VICKY. […]We went to a marvelous restaurant where I tried to be good but eventually made an incredible pig of myself. The sweet trolley alone was paradise.[9]

Clearly the playwright relies on all commonly held assumptions about fat women, including the self-awareness that eating is bad and within their control, if only they exercised restraint.

The second act begins four months later and opens with the grand revelation that Vicky has dropped forty plus pounds, which is accomplished onstage by the actress removing padding for the second act. By now Vicky is so enthusiastic and "in control" that she is taking diet pills and turning down the weekly sanctioned treat that Henry allots her. On Christmas Eve the three roommates eagerly await Tom and his reaction to Vicky's new body. He arrives and is clearly surprised at her appearance and asks if she is ill. She refuses to join him in a drink because "Dr. Henry," who has achieved the "world's first body transplant," made her give up alcohol as part of her weight loss

[8] Ibid., 52.
[9] Ibid., 61.

program. Vicky further emphasizes her lack of self-control and personal agency by giving all the credit for her accomplishment to Henry, whose support included berating her, infantilizing her, and watching her run laps around the park. When they are left alone, Tom confesses that he preferred her at her old weight and is appalled that she is trying to lose still more. Vicky declares she prefers her new body above anything, and Tom leaves.

During the dénouement scenes, Vicky and Henry try and understand why Tom preferred Vicky fat. They essentially conclude that Tom was indeed the monster that Henry thought he was for being attracted to a fat woman. Regardless, Tom's response does suggest that he was more interested in Vicky's body than anything else about her which is an interesting, yet still misogynist reversal. Nonetheless, her weight loss has miraculously made Vicky a saner, more balanced, independent woman. She muses:

> VICKY. When Tom left this evening I was disappointed and a bit annoyed but I wasn't shattered—none of my usual reactions, I didn't rush to the nearest piece of cake, and suddenly I realized why—I'm a different person, Henry, externals do affect one's way of thinking and I think it would be impossible for me not to change my way of living. [10]

With this speech the slim Vicky, now in control of her life because she is in control of her weight, asks the abusive Henry to move out, thus reinforcing another fat stereotype, which is that weight loss actually changes a person's character.

Referring back to my statement about the way in which *My Fat Friend* intersects with "queer fat," it is notable that throughout the play Henry characterizes himself as a kind of pariah and outsider due to his homosexuality. He suggests that his alliance with Vicky is in part due to their mutual status as societal outcasts and lumps James, who is in

[10]Ibid., 109.

the closet and socially awkward, into this mix as well. He quips to James, who has maintained that he cared for Vicky regardless of her appearance and disliked her dieting:

> HENRY. You're pretty peculiar too. You know, it's a funny sensation and one I never thought I would experience, but for the first time in my life I feel completely and utterly normal.[11]

As I shall discuss in greater detail in chapter four, *My Fat Friend* illustrates, as do many plays and cultural texts featuring fat characters as deliberately subversive individuals, the nuances linking fat to gay identity. In this case, while Vicky is fat she is a "fag hag," but when she loses weight, she dismisses her two gay friends, implying that she can now enter the realm of heteronormativity.

I must briefly move from the text of *My Fat Friend* to discuss the performance of Lynn Redgrave in the title role, which added complexity to the critical reception of this play and its relative popularity. Redgrave was one of the first celebrities to undergo a public battle with weight loss and spin her transformation into publicity by advertising for Weight Watchers in the 1980s.[12] However, at the time of *My Fat Friend* in 1974 she had only recently left behind her *Georgy Girl* reputation as the hefty Redgrave sister. When the play opened in the U.S., the *New York Times* featured an article entitled "Lynn Redgrave Fat? Only with Pads Now." Below her picture, the caption reads, "Lynn Redgrave who went from 180 pounds to a svelte size ten by eating only one meal a day." The focus of the article is not particularly on the play but on Redgrave's weight-loss journey following *Georgy Girl*. She talks about all the diets she has tried and how the only success she has found to maintain her "Ford Model" figure is to eat only one meal a day, usually of steak or lamb chops, spinach, and an apple. If she gets really hungry

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[11] Ibid., 79.
[12] See *Internet Movie Database*; Redgrave was Weight Watcher's spokesmodel from 1983-1991 http://www.imdb.com/name/nm0001655/otherworks (accessed November 13, 2008).

during the day she allows herself to eat the apple earlier than the dinner meal time. Years later, following her success as a Weight Watchers spokesperson, it came to light that Redgrave struggled with bulimia. At the time of the interview in 1974, Redgrave told the *New York Times* that she was finally inspired to lose weight because she didn't like the parts she was being offered and desired to be taken seriously as an actress. Redgrave says, "I didn't want to limit myself professionally because of my physical size." Yet neither Redgrave nor the reviewer comment that despite her weight loss, she is still playing a fat girl in a comic role. The only difference is that she gets to take the fat off in the second act. She goes on to say that she is influenced like everyone else in her aspirations to shape her appearance "the way magazines tell us to. And I'm as guilty as everybody else. If we all lived in the times of Rembrandt and Rubens, Twiggy would have to go to a fat farm to get fat."[13] One of her final comments in the article concerns her constant worry that her kids will turn into fat people.

The irony of Redgrave padding up for her role as Vicky would not have been lost on her American audience. Did the fact that she had actually suffered as a real fat person added some pathos to her performance? Perhaps knowing that she was no longer fat in real life but only playing a fat person enabled audiences to enjoy the fat jokes made at her character's expense.

Jim Brochu's *Fat Chance*, which premiered at the Colony Studio Playhouse in 1993, starring Rue McLanahan, is perhaps even more formulaic and "thin" than *My Fat Friend* in terms of dramaturgical and literary merit. The play did not make it to Broadway, but did the rounds at a number of small playhouses in California, including one production with the Blue Sphere Company in North Hollywood, as well as other

[13] Judy Klemesrud, "Lynn Redgrave Fat? Only with Pads Now," *The New York Times*, April 13 1974.

small theatres in Arizona and Florida.[14] The structure of the play is more or less a sit-com. Brochu appears to have written *Fat Chance* with commercial success in mind, aiming to entertain a predominantly middle/upper middle class, white audience with middlebrow tastes influenced by television that one would find in the small suburban playhouses of the greater Los Angeles area.[15] In that sense, I believe the play fits into the same cultural field of production that might attract a Broadway audience.

Like *My Fat Friend*, the simple, if far-fetched, plot of *Fat Chance* centers on Mattie, a successful sculptor, who is fat. The character description reads: *"Matisse "Mattie" Salinger—She admits to forty. Spoiled, self indulgent, successful, dynamic. One of the more famous artists in the country. She has a weight problem and a secret."*[16] So Mattie—whose name rhymes with fatty—is clearly set up to embody many of the stereotypes of a fat woman, including that she lies. And these fat pathologies play a significant part in the unfolding of the story.

Mattie is essentially an agoraphobic. Despite her success as an artist, she has not left the house in years. Presumably she is so ashamed of her appearance that she will not be seen in public. She is a sculptor who sculpts the body parts of physically perfect models whom she contracts through an agency. Her housekeeper Aura brings her food and cooks and cleans for her. Like Henry in *My Fat Friend*, Aura babies Mattie at times, functions as Mattie's voice of reason at other times, and delivers the many ubiquitous fat jokes. The opening scene finds Mattie on the sofa watching soap operas and eating candy

[14] Produced at Blue Sphere in 2002 according to review *Talkin' Broadway* review; http://www.talkinbroadway.com/regional/la/la52.html. I also contacted Samuel French directly and they had the following production history of amateur performances since 1999: Firehouse Cultural Center, Fl., Octad Lakeside Productions, Lakeside CA., Willits Community Theatre, Willits, CA., The Valley Players, Green Valley, AZ.

[15] Brochu is an actor-playwright-novelist-composer based in Los Angeles who has been a player on the LA theatre scene and on the New York theatre scene for years.

[16] Jim Brochu, *Fat Chance* (New York: Samuel French, 1993), V.

so rapidly and unconsciously that she empties the box and brings an empty hand to her mouth before realizing there's nothing in it. She rummages around and finds cake, which she covers with whipped cream and eats. She then fills her mouth with whipped cream from the can, making for a sight gag.

A phone call from Victoria, her acid-tongued mother who is also her agent, destroys her eating reverie. She announces that Mattie must appear at her next gallery opening. Mattie flatly refuses. Throughout the play Victoria's coldness toward Mattie is represented as a mitigating factor for Mattie's present self-destructive behavior, alluding to the widely held belief that being overweight is symptomatic of some kind of mental disorder. In this case, Mattie eats to compensate for a lack of love from her mother. Soon a mysterious, handsome young stranger named Alex appears at Mattie's door to borrow jumper cables. It is not long before this charming drifter, who happens to have a perfect body, decides to stay and be her next model.

The next scene begins three days later. Mattie and Alex have embarked on a sexual relationship, which, it seems, is a pattern for Mattie. Her promiscuity is yet another common stereotype associated with fat women. Although they have been voraciously making love (Mattie can hardly believe that someone has a greater appetite for sex than she does), Mattie follows every lovemaking session by eating candy, and she refuses to allow Alex to see her naked with the lights on. When he asks if she is ashamed of her body, Mattie says: "Are you kidding? Everybody is ashamed of my body."[17] Yet Alex is suspiciously undeterred by her fatness and eventually convinces her to reveal herself, which she does by opening her robe with her back to the audience. The stage directions read that when he kisses her body she "squawks and squeals" with delight,

[17] Ibid., 37.

effectively animalizing her. They are interrupted by her mother, who then reveals that she hired Alex to build Mattie's esteem, and ideally be her date to the art opening. Mattie is crushed, despite Alex's protestations that he has indeed fallen in love with her.

When Mattie discovers her mother and Alex's betrayal, she openly turns to food to drown her sorrows. First, she asks everyone to leave. When Aura refuses, claiming she wants to be there for Mattie as a friend, Mattie responds:

> MATTIE: (*walking to the kitchen, zombie-like*.) Only bologna sandwiches are my friends now. Would you excuse me while I eat myself to death. (*Mattie exits to the kitchen.*)[18]

She then runs away from home. This act is characterized by her mother and Aura as harmless and childish: she did the same thing as a child after her father died, but they actually found that she had been hiding in the closet eating Devil-Dogs. Eventually the police find Mattie and deliver her home drunk. Mattie has been hit by a car (no damage to the car, as the joke goes) and requests another cocktail. Victoria tells her she has had enough to drink, and Mattie responds: "How can a person who does all things to excess have enough?"[19] As with Vicky in *My Fat Friend*, this fat character has remarkable self-awareness of the character flaws that have led to her "unfortunate" condition. Notice also how these plot events rely on the same stereotypes of the fat woman as childish, lacking in self-control, prone to excessive drinking and lying, and emotionally damaged by some childhood trauma. The scene concludes with drunken Mattie confronting Victoria for her callous lack of mothering, and they hash out all her childhood traumas and begin to make peace.

[18] Ibid., 53.
[19] Ibid., 62.

Thus, having solved all the psychological factors that made Mattie into an eating machine, the playwright begins the final scene on the night of her art opening and with another grand reveal of a slimmed down fat woman. Stage directions read: "*Mattie has changed. She looks like Cinderella going to the ball—thinner, chic and very attractive*."[20] The play ends in true fairytale style. Her mother arrives with a peace offering, a self-portrait of Mattie's deceased father that she has always wanted. Mattie is touched and almost begins to "overflow" or "blubber," as her mother puts it.[21] Nonetheless, their mother-daughter relationship is on the mend. Alex, the "handsome prince," has remained loyal and, even though Mattie has ignored all his letters, shows up to escort her to the opening. She protests mildly before conceding, and they kiss. End of play.

My Fat Friend and *Fat Chance* rely entirely on stereotypes of fat women as emotionally damaged. Vicky and Mattie have self-awareness that they have a problem with food but simply cannot help themselves. However, some of their self-analytical remarks sound more like the playwrights' commentaries on the character and a reflection of the playwrights' attitudes about fat, rather than the truth of someone who actually is afflicted with an emotional disorder. Regardless, both plays are completely driven by all the assumptions many people make about fat women, including that they should lose weight, indeed that they *want* to lose weight and will not be happy until they do so. Mattie and Vicky are depicted variously as isolated, lonely, opinionated, boisterous, maladjusted, and out of control emotionally as well as in their eating. They are incapable of taking care of themselves physically and emotionally, and this paves the way,

[20] Ibid., 76.
[21] The notion that a fat person literally overflows with tears or sweat, for example, is another common social fear/stereotype. For a full discussion on fear of contamination as it relates to bodily fluids and obesity triggers disgust, see William Ian Miller's *The Anatomy of Disgust* (Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1997).

dramaturgically, for Henry and Victoria, their respective antagonists, to complicate the action. In both plays the interference of another character is what moves the plot forward and enables the fat woman to change her physical appearance, an action that is linked directly to her emotional recognition and transformation. The fat protagonists have almost no agency in terms of making any changes, but are compelled to do so by the actions of others. It is also worth emphasizing that since both plays call for the actress to transform in the second act, neither role can be played by an actual fat woman. I submit that part of the comedy in these plays relies on suspension of disbelief on the part of the audience, who ascribe the fat pathologies I have discussed as part of the "psychological realism" of the characters, but are able to find humor in the narrative because they know that the actresses onstage are not really fat.

Feminist Fat Onstage

One of the most curious points about Laura Cunningham's *Beautiful Bodies* is how relatively little time this full length, kitchen-sink realism play spends on bodies. The title is misleading, suggesting that the play will interrogate issues surrounding women's bodies or celebrating the female form, but it does not. *Beautiful Bodies* is vaguely unsatisfying as a feminist play in the same way that Wendy Wasserstein's *Heidi Chronicles* is; the format of the play and the conclusions the characters come to are still firmly entrenched in patriarchal mores.[22] Although the play is written by a woman and

[22] When *The Heidi Chronicles* hit Broadway (1989), Jill Dolan was among many feminist scholars who criticized the play as "co-opted" and "assimilated to the liberalism of those who sell out to established systems like the meritocracy of mainstream American theatre [. . .]." She believed the play "belittled and dismissed the feminist movement" and that, "[I]t's form—realist comedy—and its context—Broadway and subsequently American regional theatres—meant a priori that the play was ideologically corrupt and had nothing useful to say to or about feminism." After Wasserstein's death (2006), an article appeared in *Theatre Journal* in which Dolan revised her some of her earlier assertions and explored the possibilities for

features female characters talking extensively about what it means to be a woman in the 1980s, they are still trapped in the domestic, feminine sphere. The setting is a baby shower, and the discussions revolve around stereotypically female issues of marriage, children, beauty, and friendship and how they all do not know how to be liberated in this post feminist era. As Sue-Ellen Case points out, the constraints of realism present a particular problem for feminist playwrights.

> Realism, in its focus on the domestic sphere and the family unit, reifies the male as sexual subject and the female as sexual 'Other.' The portrayal of female characters within the family unit—with their confinement to the domestic setting, their dependence on their husband, their often defeatist, determinist view of opportunities for change—makes realism a 'prisonhouse of art' for women, both in their representation on stage and in the female actors preparation and production of such roles.[23]

Cunningham's characters are "liberated" career women; they have babies out of wedlock and openly discuss and enjoy sex. Yet the realist style of the text still inevitably constrains them to positioning themselves within the framework of a heteronormative, patriarchal society.

Set in New York City in the late eighties, the circumstance of the play is that Jessie is throwing a baby shower for Claire. Claire is an eccentric musician who got pregnant from a one-night stand and intends to raise the child herself. She is visibly pregnant. Jessie has invited Claire and four other women, all of whom are old friends, to her NOHO loft. Much of their discussion about their bodies is rooted in American cultural assumptions about women and weight. Their struggles are perhaps painted more sympathetically than Vicky or Mattie's, but many of the jokes are still at the expense of women's bodies.

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feminist aims in popular theatre and the work of liberal feminist playwrights within that. Jill Dolan, "Feminist Performance Criticism and the Popular," *Theatre Journal* 60 (2008) 433-5.

[23] Sue-Ellen Case, *Feminism and Theatre* (New York: Routledge, 1988), 124.

Nina is the character who comes closest to fulfilling fat stereotypes in the way that Vicky and Mattie do, albeit more subtly. Her character description reads*: "Nina is thirty three, but is an all together bigger woman: bigger voice, bigger breasts. …we see she is faddishly dressed in a designer outfit that is almost too small."*[24] Throughout the play Nina tends to depict all the stereotypes associated with "big girls." She is highly opinionated, the most likely to use vulgar language, and the most sexually demanding. When the friends talk about sex, Nina is the most adamant that a lover should have a big penis and muses that she might draw a map on her body to point men to her clitoris. She is on a diet, however, fulfilling the idea that she must control her appetite in some area. If she is sexually free, she must compensate by slimming down. She refuses wine in favor of diet coke most of the evening and brings her own diet shake to drink while the others enjoy a full meal prepared by their host. Of the six women gathered for this baby shower, Nina is the most sexually active. She goes through the most men and coaches her friends on how to get over the loss of them quickly. She claims she doesn't mind that the men in her life leave, but even as she asserts this she *"unconsciously seizes a piece of chocolate cake, devours it in compulsive need."*[25] Here again we have a playwright using a character's eating to express certain psychological needs. Nina also dreams of breast feeding long lines of men, an allusion to her large breasts as nurturing in contrast to her libido-driven desire for intercourse, which is characterized as consuming.

Nina is drawn in contrast to Lisbet, who is so malnourished following a break up with an indifferent boyfriend, that she is no longer a print fashion model, but instead poses for the *Journal of American Medical Association* because she so accurately

[24] Laura Cunningham, "Beautiful Bodies," in *Plays for Actresses*, ed. Eric Lane & Nina Shengold (New York: Vintage Books, 1997), 158.
[25] Ibid., 239.

embodies the look of depression. Lisbet has a wispy voice, is walked all over by men, and has a difficult time asserting herself. Nina is also strongly contrasted with Martha, who is the most uptight and conservative of the women (and who makes the most derogatory remarks about Nina's weight). Martha is also very slim, corporate, and buttoned up in her appearance. She has the most masculine demeanor and expresses the most traditional view of the group, that women should get married and have children. Later she reveals that she only has sex once a year. There is a subtle semiotic line drawn between skinny, sexless Lisbet and Martha, and curvy, salacious Nina and pregnant Claire, who eats heartily throughout the play.

Despite its feminist leanings, Cunningham's *Beautiful Bodies,* which premiered in 1987 at the Whole Theatre in Montclair, New Jersey, and sees regular college productions still, uses fat very similarly to Laurence and Brochu. Fat is a staple joke and a means to express certain female character flaws. The realistic style and domestic scenario make the play approachable for young actresses and white, middle-class, conservative audiences. The assumption that any woman can and should be slim is taken for granted, and every time Nina or Claire eats, one of the other characters remarks on it. As far as food and eating go, the party line in *Beautiful Bodies* remains the same.

On the other hand, Madeleine George's *The Most Massive Woman Wins*, which premiered at the Public Theater in New York in 1994 as part of the Young Playwrights Festival, is a stronger counter-example to the aforementioned "Broad Broads." In certain regards, George's characters embody the stereotypes I have discussed, or at least they believe they fit the stereotype as expressed through their monologues. But in this case, the playwright explores the psychology of their behavior from the perspective of women

suffering under cultural imperatives of beauty and body size. The characters demonstrate how deeply white, middle-class American women have assimilated messages about eating, fat, sexuality, and body shame that are part of our culture.

The setting of *The Most Massive Woman Wins* is the waiting room of a liposuction clinic. Of all the plays discussed so far, this piece is the least realistic in terms of a linear cause and effect plot. At times the characters play other characters in order to flashback to an event in the past. They frequently use direct audience address and sometimes underscore the onstage action by singing childhood nursery rhymes. The effect is similar to a Greek chorus. When one character utters a short line of dialogue and then the next character chimes in, they all become "every-woman." On the other hand, the emotional life of each individual character is still rooted in psychological realism, and they each have specific narratives of their experience with their imperfect, fat bodies. The audience is expected to understand the characters as fully developed psychological portraits of real people and be able to relate to them as such; they are not icons or metaphorical emblems for a "type" or an idea as we might find in a Greek tragedy or a Brechtian parable. The four female characters Sabine, Carly, Rennie, and Cel range in age from thirty-one to seventeen and are somewhat diverse socially and economically. In the stage directions the playwright indicates that not all the women need to appear overweight. They have all decided on liposuction because they believe there is something wrong with their bodies. In Carly's case, the eldest and a mother, her boyfriend has told her she is fat and given her money for liposuction.

As mentioned earlier, these characters often embody the very stereotypes that other playwrights I have discussed use for comic effect. The difference in George's play

is that the characters try to get to the bottom of their subjective cultural experience that has created their dysfunctional relationships with food and their bodies. The first sequence of dialogue addresses the way in which these women feel "out of control" and yet desperately need food for reasons beyond their understanding. Their feelings reflect the kind of advertising rhetoric Susan Bordo discusses in *Unbearable Weight*, which promotes the idea that eating delicious food makes women "bad," or that women should "lose control" just once for Duncan Hines Cakes or some other forbidden, calorie-laden treat.[26] The characters in *Most Massive Woman* know it is "wrong" to eat compulsively, but the pressures of their lives compel them to do so, and then they are left feeling ashamed and worthless. Like Foucault's Panopticon, they police themselves and are their own "worst enemy." They discuss the emotional consequences of overindulging in food and why they are constrained to have liposuction:

> RENNIE. You may be making like everything is fine fine fine but you know what what you've done, you bit it, you blew it.
>
> CARLY. It's your fuckin fault—you lost control.
>
> CEL. You know better than that.
>
> SABINE. So it's time to make an adult decision.
>
> CARLY. (*Smacks her own butt*) Throw out the evidence.
>
> RENNIE. You think of every sin in your past—
>
> CEL. Every slice of pie—
>
> CARLY. Every French fry—
>
> SABINE. Every chocolate croissant—
>
> RENNIE. You know it's all in there, simmering under your skin, and the nice

[26] Susan Bordo, *Unbearable Weight: Feminism, Western Culture, and the Body* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), 99-134.

man is gonna get rid of it all. Purify you.

… . . . . . .

SABINE. You are responsible for your own behavior.

ALL. You are responsible.

RENNIE. You are guilty. [27]

This passage shows that the characters believe there is something wrong with them because they cannot master their figures and their food intake. Carly blames herself for "losing control," Rennie calls food a sin, harking back to Stearns's assertion that fat is a secular sin. They see themselves as prisoners of their bodies and their behavior as deserving of public scorn and shame. They no longer trust themselves and willingly undergo medical mutilation to atone for their "sins."

As the play unfolds, the four characters recount various childhood traumas in gym class and at the hands of critical parents that have led to their feelings of worthlessness. In doing so they articulate the struggle and incongruities of their feelings about themselves and their bodies and the profound impact body image has on the life of many women in America. Carly and Rennie seem to have submitted to the idea that there is something inherently wrong with them and have spent their lives trying to change their appearance and failing, thus reinforcing their feeling of powerlessness. They refer to themselves frequently as weak and wimpy.

In a flashback sequence Carly tries to understand how her beautiful, skinny daughter allowed herself to get pregnant. She says, "I thought only fat girls didn't know what they were doing." [28] Of course, this is a critique directed at herself. When she suggests to her daughter that she tell the boy (father) about her condition, the daughter

[27] Madeleine George, The *Most Massive Woman Wins*, in *Plays for Actresses*, ed. Eric Lane and Nina Shengold (New York: Vantage Books, 1997), 275-6.
[28] Ibid., 284.

reminds her that boys don't like bossy girls. Sadly, both Carly and her daughter have deeply assimilated all the messages concerning a woman's place in our culture, which disempowers both of them in different ways. In order to gain love and approval, a girl must be slim and acquiescent. Carly is a failure. She is overweight and potentially bossy, and her own daughter recognizes this as behavior that violates societal expectations.

Sabine has a more complex relationship with eating and body image. In another flashback sequence, Sabine argues with her professor as to the relevance of writing her thesis on eating disorders and the subjugation of women through body image. The professor argues not only that her topic is insignificant but that everyone should be responsible for themselves (harking back to Oliver's argument that fat prejudice arises from core American values of individuality). Her professor believes women should simply "get over" the eating disorders that Sabine argues are caused by looking at two-dimensional images. Sabine asserts that, "…[C]onformity to societally established standards of beauty has a much greater impact on women's lives than men's; this includes social status, marital status, income, and work related achievements—."[29] In the end, we learn that although Sabine recognizes she is a victim of society, she cannot bear the social stigma of being fat. She needs to feel sexually viable and be validated for her appearance in order to boost her esteem. She knows that by conforming she is submitting to the "undeclared war against women." Yet she concludes: "If I can't change the world, I have to change myself."[30]

This statement brings up some post-feminist questions and ideas around the willingness to submit to cultural standards of beauty. Some feminists argue that doing so

[29] Ibid., 278.
[30] Ibid., 286

affirms the individual subject, which could still be considered one aim of feminism. Sandra Lee Bartky summarizes the tension between feminism and cultural beauty imperatives:

> To have a body felt to be 'feminine'—a body socially constructed through the appropriate practices—is in most cases crucial to a woman's sense of herself as female and, since persons currently can be only male or female, to her sense of shame as an existing individual. To possess such a body may also be essential to her sense of self as sexually desiring and desirable subject. Hence, any political project which aims to dismantle the machinery that turns a female body into a feminine one may well be apprehended by a woman as something that threatens her with desexualization if not outright annihilation.[31]

Bartky's quote helps explain why it is so important for a woman to feel sexually viable in our culture. If a woman cannot position herself in society in relation to her femininity and beauty, she has no identity. The quote is particularly provocative juxtaposed against the final image of the play, which is the moment when the play significantly deviates from the mode of realism in favor of a final tableau that is theatrically dramatic. The character Cel, who has been consistently unable to tame her flesh into behaving exactly as she thinks it should, first resorts to cutting herself and finally opts for self-immolation as her "final solution" to "get rid of all the flesh at once."[32] This chilling image is the ultimate metaphor for a woman's desire to escape the cultural constructs of body image. Cel cannot live within her own body because she cannot discipline it to adhere to cultural standards of beauty, and so she purposely sets herself on fire, hoping that without her fat, she will finally feel free.

Arguably, the characters in *The Most Massive Women Wins* exemplify the emotional volatility that is part of the fat stereotype. They create their own suffering and

[31] Sandra Lee Bartky, *Femininity and Domination: Studies in the Phenomenology of Oppression* (New York: Routledge, 1990), 77.
[32] George, *The Most Massive Woman*, 291.

eating disorders by getting fat or failing to lose weight. They acknowledge their eating as compulsive. On the other hand, their experience of their bodies in relationship to cultural standards creates a chicken-or-the-egg question. Economics aside, which comes first? Do poor body-image and some pre-existing emotional deficiency result in disordered eating and diet habits? Or does the inability of the women to maintain their figures within strict cultural guidelines of beauty create the poor body image and obsessive behavior? The play poses the questions but leaves us with no answers.

Eve Ensler tries to get to the bottom of those questions in *The Good Body* (2004). *The Good Body* is uniquely positioned between the aforementioned performance fields. Although the one-person format and feminist nature of the material typify the kind of piece geared toward an off-Broadway audience, thanks to the massive success and dissemination of *The Vagina Monologues*, Ensler's name (and the word vagina) have become household words.[33] Thus, there was a kind of ready-made Broadway audience for *The Good Body*, which opened at the Booth Theatre (which seats approximately eight hundred) on Broadway in 2004 and played for forty performances. In a vein similar to that of *The Vagina Monologues*, Ensler aims to break down the symbolic violence directed toward women by a culture obsessed with weight and body size.

In her introduction, Ensler tries to explain her impulse to create this play following the success of *The Vagina Monologues*. Her research and experience of performing and promoting *The Vagina Monologues* enabled Ensler (and many other

[33] *The Vagina Monologues* was made into a movie for HBO with Eve Ensler reprising her role. It has also been performed at Madison Square Garden with a celebrity cast. It has been translated into multiple languages and is performed around the world each year on February 14th to promote V-Day, which is a global non-profit that raises money for charities dedicated to stopping violence against women. For more information see http://newsite.vday.org/ .

women) to make peace with the cultural shame surrounding vaginas and female sexuality. However, she writes:

> …The deadly self-hatred simply moved into another part of my body.
>
> *The Good Body* began with me and my particular obsession with my "imperfect" stomach. I have charted this self-hatred, recorded it, and tried to follow it back to its source. Of course the tools of my self-victimization have been made readily available. The pattern of a perfect body has been programmed in me since birth. But whatever the cultural influences and pressures, my preoccupation with my flab, my constant dieting, exercising, worrying, is self-imposed. *I* pick up the magazines. *I* buy into the ideal, *I* believe that blond, flat girls have the secret. What is more frightening than narcissism is the zeal for self-mutilation that is spreading, infecting the world. […] This play is my prayer, my attempt to analyze the mechanisms of our imprisonment, to break free so that we may spend more time running the world than running away from it….[34]

The show is a series of monologues based on interviews with a wide cross-section of women of all ages talking about their bodies. The interviewees include Helen Gurley Brown, editor of *Cosmopolitan*; actress and Lancôme model Isabella Rossellini, who was fired when she turned forty; a Puerto Rican woman from Brooklyn who fears the spread of her thighs; an African American teenage girl at a fat camp; a thirty-five year old model who willingly undergoes multiple plastic surgery procedures such as liposuction and breast implants at the hands of her plastic surgeon husband; a seventy-four year old African Masai woman; and a middl- aged woman from India, among others. In the Broadway production Ensler alternately played these characters and herself. But the piece can be done with several actors playing the different characters and has been produced in this manner at Hartford Stage and Pittsburgh Theatre Center, among other venues.[35]

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[34] Eve Ensler, *The Good Body* (New York: Villard, 2004), Preface.

[35] *The Good Body*, with its Broadway venue and popular appeal, may be an example of what Jill Dolan is referring to when she writes, "I also find lately that many would be 'downtown,' materialist, feminist performance artists hold a lot in common with many so-called uptown, liberal feminist playwrights. Although they might employ different techniques and styles (and budgets) to address different topics in very different production contexts, their aspirations are similar and simple: to reach as wide an audience as

Ensler has many laughs at her own expense, highlighting the absurd double-bind in which many American women willingly participate. In her opening monologue she contemplates how she has always wanted to be considered a "good girl," and that is inextricably entwined with being skinny. She punctuates this monologue and later segments of the show by doing sit-ups on an exercise ball at the same time she is describing her own experiences surrounding food and exercise:

> My body will be mine when I am thin. […]I will vanquish ice cream. I will purge with green juices. I will see chocolate as a form of self-punishment. […] Bread is Satan. […] I stop eating bread. I watch AB-Roller infomercials until four a.m. as I eat a bag—no a family size bag—of peanut M & M's. […] The next day I bite the bullet, well, at least I bit something, and hire Vernon, a fascistic trainer. Of course he is totally flat and muscular. He looks at me with pity and punishment. Right away he has me lifting heavy objects. Very heavy. The good news is I'm so fucking sore I can't move my head so I am unable to see my disgusting stomach anymore.[36]

Here again, as in *The Most Massive Woman Wins*, the protagonist, who does not appear particularly fat, understands to some degree her irrational behavior but feels powerless to stop obsessing about it. Nonetheless, she keeps the audience laughing with her tongue-in-cheek observations.

Ultimately, Ensler has to leave the country to make peace with her lumpy belly. She goes to Africa where her Masai friend tells her to regard her body as a tree: one tree is not more beautiful than another simply because it is different. In India she confides that she hasn't left the gym in order to sight-see to her Indian friend, who tells her "You only know one country—a little country, your body with a population of one. You spend all your time fixing and renovating it. You need to look up." [37] Finally, she finds herself

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possible with innovative, socially progressive work." Jill Dolan, "Feminist Performance Criticism and the Popular," *Theatre Journal* 60: (2008),435.

[36] Ibid., 7-9.

[37] Ibid., 86.

risking her life, hidden beneath a burka, sneaking ice cream with Afghani women in a tent being circled by the Taliban. On the one hand, the multiculturalism of *The Good Body* reminds contemporary American women living in a particular cultural moment that other values pertain in other times and places. Ensler aims to put American cultural and social myopia in perspective. She suggests that Americans expect our culture to shape the rest of the world and even refers to America as "exporting eating disorders." With this final moment she may be asking why it should not occasionally be the other way around. Why can't American women take strength from other cultures? However, I believe Ensler does not entirely achieve her goal of dismantling American cultural constructs by conducting interviews outside the United States. She compares herself to women in completely different cultural circumstances who live under more overt and violent forms of cultural oppression and decides that her "imperfect" body may be okay after all. For me, this is weak conclusion that seems intended to shame American women who are lucky enough to eat ice cream without the threat of a public flogging or execution into eating with gusto and gratitude because we can. This obsession with slender bodies that she is interrogating is a uniquely American construct. By pulling in other cultures, Ensler is less effective in breaking down American cultural mechanisms that keep even the most feminist women such as herself monitoring their weight and obsessing about carbohydrates.

New York Times reviewer Charles Isherwood was not satisfied with *The Good Body*. He wrote:

> The proliferation of televisions shows depicting desperate self-improvement stunts ("The Swan," etc.) may attest to the continuing relevance of the issues Ms. Ensler raises, but it is disappointing that she fails to explore areas that might add new dimensions to the discussion. And perhaps she is a little guilty, as are those

> innumerable books and magazines, or helping to hype a pathology even as she offers her own form of therapy. […] It's sad to report that Ms. Ensler's analysis of the complicated relationship between self-esteem and cellulite is itself little more than skin deep.[38]

The last tableau of the show is Ensler rapturously eating ice cream and celebrating her "good body." I heard a rumor later that the ice cream was in fact fat-free tofutti.

Ensler and the voices expressed in *The Most Massive Woman Wins* are struggling with what Bourdieu would call symbolic violence. They are somewhat aware that their attitudes about their bodies perpetuate their oppression but feel powerless to change these attitudes. In his book *Masculine Domination*, Bourdieu describes symbolic violence as a product of culture and points out the multiple layers of social and economic factors at work in creating aesthetics for the female body.

> Symbolic force is a form of power that is exerted on bodies, directly and as if by magic without any physical constraint; but this magic works only on the basis of the dispositions, deposited like springs, at the deepest level of the body. […] This transformative action is all the more powerful because it is for the most part exerted invisibly and insidiously through insensible familiarization with a symbolically structured physical world and early, prolonged experience of interactions informed by the structures of domination. [39]

He goes on to explain why many women are unwittingly complicit in their oppression.

> Because the foundation of symbolic violence lies not in mystified consciousness that need only be enlightened but in dispositions attuned to the structure of domination of which they are a product, the relation of complicity that the victims of symbolic domination grant to the dominant can only be broken through a radical transformation of the social disposition that lead the dominated to take the point of view of the dominant on themselves. [40]

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[38] Charles Isherwood, "Our Bellies, Ourselves: Eve Ensler Talks About Fat," *New York Times*, November 16, 2004.
[39] Pierre Bourdieu, *Masculine Domination*, trans. Richard Nice (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2001), 38.
[40] Ibid., 41-2.

Thus, it is no surprise that Ensler can accept her body outside the U.S. She radically alters her perspective when she communes with her African, Indian, and Iraqi subjects, and this enables her to step out of Bourdieu's paradigm of symbolic domination. Unfortunately, most American women, who do not have the opportunity to travel extensively in foreign countries and have bodily experience of other cultures, cannot even fathom such a shift.

Fat Love

Very often the excess weight of a fat woman in the representations I am studying is seen as a metaphor for her sexual aggressiveness. Thus, one role a fat actress is consigned to is that of the slut or prostitute. However, this section explores the ways in which four male playwrights treat the problem of a romantic love between a fat woman and a "normal-sized" man. Eugene O'Neill's *Moon for the Misbegotten* (1952, 1974), Edward J. Moore's *The Sea Horse* (1969), Terrence McNally's *Frankie and Johnny in the Claire de Lune* (1988) and Neil LaBute's *Fat Pig* (2004) are all, in essence, love stories. *Fat Pig* and *The Sea Horse* expressly call for a fat woman, while *Moon for the Misbegotten* and *Frankie and Johnny* call for an "oversize" actress and someone with "non-conventional good looks" respectively. Despite the spread of years between these pieces, there is a through-line connecting all the heroines in terms of their emotional make-up and the ways in which they interact with their suitors as potentially romantic subjects.

I will discuss the oldest play first. Written in 1943, *Moon for the Misbegotten* was first produced in 1947, and by all accounts was not a success. It was one of O'Neill's last plays and was written in the same period as his other autobiographical plays, *The Iceman*

Cometh (1939) and *Long Day's Journey Into Night* (1941). *Moon* tells the story of two social misfits, Josie Hogan and Jim Tyrone, who come together for a night and share their secrets in order to find redemption in one another. In the script O'Neill describes Josie, the protagonist of the play, as follows:

> Josie is twenty eight. She is so oversize for a woman that she is almost a freak—five feet eleven in her stockings and weighs around one hundred and eighty. Her sloping shoulders are broad, her chest deep with large, firm breasts, her waist wide but slender by contrast with her hips and thighs. She has long smooth arms, immensely strong, although muscles show. The same is true of her legs.
> She is more powerful than any but an exceptionally strong man, able to do the manual labor of two ordinary men. But there is no mannish quality about her. She is all woman. […] The map of Ireland is stamped on her face. […] It is not a pretty face.[41]

As with all his stage directions, O'Neill is very detailed in his description of Josie. Although he does not specifically call her fat in the above quote, in the original production he kept encouraging Mary Welch, who originated the role of Josie, to eat potatoes and bananas so that she would better resemble his idea of the character.[42] Clearly it was important to O'Neill that the actress playing Josie appear heavy in order to embody the character he had in mind. Although he relies on some of the stereotypes, O'Neill uses fat more abstractly to deal with the problem of his plot than some of the previous plays I have discussed.

Josie is essentially an eccentric spinster living with her irascible father, having sent her brothers away for their own good. She is responsible for the maintenance and success of their farm and more or less functions as a surrogate wife to her father Phil Hogan, who is happy to keep her since she does the work of two men and is too big and he believes she is too ugly to make an advantageous marriage. Josie has given up all hope

[41] Eugene O'Neill, *A Moon for the Misbegotten* (New York: Vintage Books, 1974), 1.
[42] Ibid., Introduction by Barbara Gelb.

of finding a husband, believing she is too large, unattractive, and surly. However, she does have a special relationship with their neighbor and landlord, Jim Tyrone, who is handsome and wealthy but also a depressed, philandering alcoholic. From a dramaturgical perspective, O'Neill sets Josie as counterweight to Jim Tyrone. Josie must be ugly on the outside so that she may redeem Tyrone, who is ugly on the inside.

Because she perceives herself as ugly and is reluctant to abandon her father, Josie cultivates a bawdy, gruff persona that belies her true emotions and keeps away potential suitors. She deliberately circulates rumors about herself to make people believe she is promiscuous. In fact, she goes out drinking with men and is able to drink them under the table. By the time they are alone with Josie, she can easily stifle their drunken advances and they pass out. They are too embarrassed to reveal to their buddies that Josie squelched their sexual advances, because each man she encounters in this way believes all the other barflies have successfully bedded her. And for her part, Josie puts it out that she has bedded all these men. Only her father and Jim Tyrone know the truth; Josie is a virgin. In creating Josie, O'Neill plays with fat stereotypes ironically. Josie isn't actually a booze swilling, bed-hopping, foul-mouthed broad. She is only pretending in order to protect herself emotionally and spare herself the disappointment of not finding romantic love. In fact she has romantic feelings for Jim, but he is too emotionally damaged to reciprocate.

She is well aware that Tyrone is a playboy who travels to New York and beds beautiful actresses—Broadway "tarts"—whom she teases him about as though she were one of the guys and to whom she frequently compares herself unfavorably. Like some of the previously mentioned fat characters, Josie is a master at self-deprecating humor.

Tyrone has a genuine affection for Josie and even an attraction to her. But he is wallowing in self pity and shame and is drinking himself to death in response to his mother's death. He can only have sexual intimacy with nameless prostitutes and showgirls (whom he calls "pigs") as a kind of self-punishment. On the night Josie and Jim share their secrets, Josie has contrived with her father to get Jim drunk and in her bed so that her father can blackmail Jim into not selling the farm out from under them. The unquestioned assumption between father and daughter is that ugly Josie will be unable to seduce Jim unless he is drunk.

The following passage from Act Three is part of the complicated dance that leads up to the confessions and typifies Josie's sexual bravado and emotional bluffing, which belie her true feelings for Jim. We shall see that her self-deprecating and teasing manner is a blueprint for the fat roles later in this discussion. The passage also hints at Jim's melancholy notions of romance, which will make it impossible for Josie and him to become lovers. Josie has just filled his glass with more of her father's top-shelf whiskey.

> TYRONE. (*Kiddingly*) I might forget all my honorable intentions, too. So look out.
>
> JOSIE. I'll look forward to it—and I hope that's another promise, like the kiss you owe me. If you're suspicious I'm trying to get you soused—well, here goes. (*She drinks what is left in her glass*) There, now I am scheming to get myself soused, too.
>
> TYRONE. Maybe you are.
>
> JOSIE. (*Resentfully*) If I was, it'd be to make you feel at home. Don't all the pretty little Broadway tarts get soused with you?
>
> TYRONE. (*Irritably*) There you go again with that old line!
>
> JOSIE. Alright I won't! (*Forcing a laugh*) I must be eaten up with jealousy for them, that's it.

TYRONE. You needn't be. They don't belong.

JOSIE. And I do?

TYRONE. Yes, you do.

JOSIE: For tonight only, you mean?

TYRONE. We've agreed there only is tonight—and it's to be different from any past night—for both of us.

JOSIE. (*In a forced, kidding tone*) I hope it will be. I'll try to control my envy for your Broadway flames. I suppose it's because I have a picture of them in my mind as small and pretty—

TYRONE. They are just gold digging tramps.

JOSIE. (*As if he hadn't spoken*) While I am only a big, rough, ugly cow of a woman.

TYRONE. Shut up! You're beautiful.

JOSIE. (*Jeeringly, but her voice trembles*) God pity the blind!

TYRONE. You are beautiful to me.

JOSIE. It must be the bourbon—[43]

As the night wears on, Jim will never be able to convince Josie that she is beautiful, because Josie equates his seeing her as beautiful to his being sexually attracted to her. Unfortunately for Josie, Jim needs forgiveness from her more than he needs her romantic companionship. Josie hopes to consummate their relationship as lovers, but Jim sees women only as Madonnas or whores, and Josie falls into the former category. To make love to her would sully the beauty of his feelings for her. He reveals to Josie that, following his mother's death, he traveled by train with her corpse for burial. In a drunken haze, he made love to a prostitute repeatedly, quite literally over his mother's dead body.

[43] Ibid., 76-7.

Eventually Josie understands he needs absolution more than physical intimacy, whereupon she abandons her hopes for a romance and offers him her forgiveness. The hulking Josie gives up her dreams in order to offer him salvation, realizing that they can never be together intimately, but that she can offer him purity and beauty. He sleeps in her lap through the remainder of the night. Jim awakens refreshed for the first time in years, and although it is clear that he will still continue to drink himself to death, he will go to his grave with more peace in his heart, having watched a beautiful sunrise in Josie's platonic embrace.

Consider how specific O'Neill was that the type of woman to embody Jim Tyrone's confessor must be so oversize. Was he implying that the actress should not be considered sexually viable to the audience or to Jim? Why is it important that Jim Tyrone's confessor be a giantess? Is it, as Barbara Gelb suggests in a *New York Times* article commenting on the 2000 Broadway revival starring Cherry Jones, that O'Neill "wanted whoever played the role to convey a quality of supernatural power? He wished Josie to be seen as Jim's savior, the one person to whom he could confess his betrayal of his mother and be given absolution in his mother's name."[44] On the other hand, his attempts to get the original actress to gain weight suggest that his call for "so oversize a woman that she is almost a freak" was quite literal and that he interpreted oversize not only as tall, but fat or at least visually overweight relative to some standard he had in mind.

Whatever O'Neill's intentions were, it is worth briefly mentioning the actresses who have played the role of Josie on Broadway and their critical reception. As I

[44] Barbara Gelb, "A Second Look, and a Second Chance to Forgive," *New York Times*, March 19, 2000, http://newyorktimes.com/ (accessed April 25, 2008).

mentioned, the initial production, starring Mary Welch, the trim, ingénue that O'Neill was trying to force-feed, was essentially a flop. However, the 1974 revival directed by José Quintero and starring Colleen Dewhurst was critically acclaimed. It was a highlight of Dewhurst's career, earning her a Tony Award. She was fifty years old at the time and tall and heavy set for an American actress. The production ran for 313 performances and was made into an Emmy-nominated television movie. Her performance alongside Jason Robards Junior as Jim Tyrone is considered by most the watershed moment in the play's production history. Although reviewers don't dwell on Dewhurst's size per se, they praise her performance as "beautiful" *despite* the confines of her/Josie's appearance. And with each subsequent revival, the appearance of the actress playing Josie has always been a point of discussion. The play was revived again in 1984 starring the fine featured, lithe Kate Nelligan and ran for only forty performances. Nonetheless, critic Frank Rich praised the production and spent a paragraph describing her transformation from "fine boned actress" known for her feminine, upper-class roles to someone whose "flat forehead suggests a heritage more Cro-Magnon than aristocratic," and whose eyebrows are thick and mannish."[45]

Subsequent Broadway revivals in 2000 and 2007 starred Cherry Jones and Eve Best respectively, and both ran significantly longer than the Nelligan revival. Was this because the actresses' body types were more suited to play the giantess Josie? While neither woman is fat, both are somewhat oversize by American standards of beauty, although Eve Best is still "fine-boned" according to Ben Brantley.[46] In fact, Jones's and

[45] Frank Rich, "Kate Nelligan in 'Moon for the Misbegotten'," *New York Times*, May 2, 1984, http://newyorktimes.com/ (accessed April 25, 2008).
[46] Ben Brantley, "A Moonlight Night on the Farm,Graveyard Ready," *New York Times*, April 10, 2007, http://newyorktimes.com/ (accessed April 25, 2008).

Best's acting resumes hold several of the same roles, including Ruth and Arthur Goetz's *The Heiress*. Certainly something about their appearance links the two women in their ability to play the oversize, unattractive Josie, and reviewers cannot resist discussing the appearance of the actress in terms of her size-appropriateness. Ben Brantley reviewed both productions seven years apart and uses nearly the same language to describe both actresses. He refers to Cherry Jones's "wrestler's arms" and to Eve Best as clomping about the stage "like a wrestler in search of a match."[47] In the case of Josie, it seems that reviewers cannot separate the character's emotional nature from the actresses' physical type, and indeed the most praiseworthy performances are by "big" actresses who accentuate Josie's hulking clumsiness.

The next play in my progression of fat romantic roles is *The Sea Horse* by Edward J. Moore. Written over the course of several years between 1969 and its opening in 1974, *The Sea Horse*, which won Moore the Vernon Rice Drama Desk Award for Outstanding Playwright, harks back to some of the fat conventions established in *Moon for the Misbegotten* and looks forward to *Frankie and Johnny* in terms of how a fat body factors into inspiration and dramaturgy. *The Sea Horse* opened at Circle Repertory Theatre in 1974 and then moved to the Westside Theatre in April of 1974, playing at the same time as the successful Dewhurst-Robards *Moon for the Misbegotten* revival.

In his preface, as well as during an interview with Mel Gussow, playwright Moore admits that his inspiration for writing the play was a particular actress, Susan Riskin, who was his real-life love interest at the time. He originally wrote the play under the pseudonym James Irwin for Riskin and himself to perform in Uta Hagen's master acting class. In his preface Moore admits that he could not accept Rifkin because of her

[47] Ibid.

size and wrote scenes between them to try and exorcise his feelings.[48] He let go of the alias when the play gained traction and told Gussow: "I had a hangup about physical looks. I always wanted to be seen with beautiful girls. I fell in love with Susan but I couldn't believe it. She was a big fat lady—200 pounds."[49] Although he developed and rehearsed the role with Riskin, Conchata Ferrell eventually played the role off-Broadway and won the 1974 Theatre World Award and the Drama Desk Outstanding Performance Award for her portrayal of Gertrude Blum.

The Sea Horse, which is kitchen-sink—or in this case barroom—realism in style, tells the story of two social misfits who bond sexually out of desperation and struggle to find some piece of romance and happiness in their otherwise brutal lives. Harry is a merchant seaman who is frequently out at sea for lengths of time. When he is in town, he stays at the Sea Horse, a bar that caters to the longshoreman crowd, owned by Gertrude Blum, known affectionately by her regulars as "Two-Ton Dirty Gerty." The character description for Gertrude reads: "She is in her late thirties, a big woman weighing about two hundred pounds. Fat but not flabby, and stands five foot seven or eight."[50] Harry, who is prone to drinking too much, is a simple man who realizes after weeks at sea that he is no longer satisfied with a purely physical relationship and a place to sleep. He has decided he wants to marry Gertrude and settle down and perhaps have children. His return from a voyage and his proposal are the inciting incidents of the play. Gertrude is the boisterous, cynical, foul-talking proprietor of a rough bar, who claims she enjoys numerous men other than Harry for sexual pleasure and is appalled at his proposal. She

[48] Edward J. Moore, *The Sea Horse* (Clifton, NJ: James T. White and Company, 1969), 7-8.
[49] Mel Gussow, "The Sea Horse's Star (and Its Author) Sheds Alias," *New York Times*, April 22, 1974, http://thenewyorktimes.com/ (accessed March 8, 2008).
[50] Moore, *The Sea Horse*, 17.

violently rebuffs his romantic overtures, insisting that she has no interest in the life he is offering her, nor does she truly believe he is in earnest.

Gertude is a version of O'Neill's Josie, albeit conceived post 1960s sexual revolution; her sexual bravado and her rough talk are a mask for a woman who fears rejection yet is dying to be loved tenderly by a man. *Times* reporter Gussow notes the similarities between Gertrude and Josie:

> Miss Ferrell (who played the fat garrulous prostitute in *Hot L Baltimore*) is Gertude Blum, "two ton Gertie," [. . .] she is strong as a bouncer, and there is a sawed-off baseball bat behind the bar counter waiting for obstreperous customers.
>
> But like Josie in *A Moon for the Misbegotten*, the bluster is a façade. The impudence—and even the fat—is a way to avoid confronting herself. Miss Ferrell, who never forgets the softness behind the swagger, is lovely.[51]

Through the course of the play, the saintly Harry, who is genuinely in love with Gertrude, tries to persuade her that his intentions are sincere. Like Jim Tyrone, Harry can get any girl he wants, but he has decided that he wants Gertrude to be the mother of his child, casting her as a Madonna in the same way Jim does Josie. Gertrude keeps Harry emotionally at bay with cynical, witty wisecracks and bawdy talk, when in truth she would like to accept his proposal. She embodies many of the fat stereotypes I have discussed. She is unable to control her mouth, swearing like a sailor and eating compulsively. She frequently, deliberately insults Harry's masculinity and intelligence—like a "maneater"—a stereotype that is fully realized in Albee's Martha in *Virginia Woolf*. For example, Gertrude teases Harry so mercilessly about his romantic proposal that he jumps up in anger with clenched fists, and she says: "You don't have any balls,

[51] Mel Gussow, "Two Poignant Characters in Irwin's 'Sea Horse'," *New York Times*, March 5, 1974, http://newyorktimes.com/ (accessed March 8, 2008)

Harry. You belong in a dress! Who'd wanna run away with you?"[52] In fact, during this scene she succeeds in goading Harry into attacking her physically. When he can take her mockery no longer, he lashes out verbally and calls her a "lard ass," among other insults. She, in turn, attacks him physically. Harry restrains Gertrude and then strikes her, which effectively terrifies her and leaves her crying hysterically like an injured child. This concludes the first act.

In the second act—or "the morning after"—the two warily circle around each other. Harry tries to recoup the emotional damage he has wrought by hitting Gertrude, and she returns to her nonchalant, tough-talking self although, like Josie awaiting Jim in her shabby Sunday dress for their moonlit date, Gertrude wears a dress this morning. It is "old fashioned and a bit snug," and it hints at her secret desire to be treated like a lady rather than the tough broad she pretends to be. Eventually Harry manages to wring her secret from her. When she was young (and not fat), her first husband abused her physically and forced her to work the rough bar alone, during which time she was gang raped. This trauma scarred her physically as well as emotionally; Gertrude is unable to bear children. Since that incident (and the death of her father—recall Mattie's fat pathology in *Fat Chance*)—she has been unable to trust men. She concedes that she deliberately grew fat as a form of self-protection. The play ends on a hopeful note with Harry proclaiming his love and commitment despite her abrasive behavior and refusal to believe in him. And, even as she protests that she does not trust him, Gertrude allows him to embrace her, as he promises her she will learn to trust him. Although the ending might be considered cliché today, reviewers championed the 1974 production, which extended its limited engagement at Circle in the Square and transferred to the Westside Theatre.

[52] Moore, *The Sea Horse*, 56.

They attribute the play's success to the standout performances of Edward Moore and Conchata Ferrell.[53]

Frankie of Terrence McNally's *Frankie and Johnny in the Claire de Lune,* which premiered at Manhattan Theatre Club in 1988, continues the progression with another tough talking, independent female character who is actually hiding the scars of spousal abuse. Although McNally does not explicitly call for a fat actress, the character description for Frankie reads, "Striking but not conventional good looks. She has a sense of humor and a fairly tough exterior. She is also frightened and can be hard to reach."[54] This character description could easily be for either of her oversize predecessors Josie or Gertrude. The playwright also notes that Johnny's best feature is his personality, but mentions that he is in good physical shape. Remarkably, in *The Sea Horse* Moore also makes a point to describe Harry as "athletic and powerful" in his appearance. Both playwrights seemed to find it significant that the male characters should be considered relatively attractive in contrast to their unattractive love interests.

Another parallel between *The Sea Horse* and *Frankie and Johnny* is that McNally wrote the play with Kathy Bates in mind, just as Moore wrote with his heavyset girlfriend Susan Riskin in mind.[55] Both playwrights come up with very similar emotional pathologies for their respective fat actresses. Like her predecessors, Josie and Gertrude, the character of Frankie is emotionally vulnerable and fears rejection, which she compensates for by being emotionally unavailable and using foul language and wise-

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[53] Mel Gussow, "Two Poignant Characters in Irwin's 'Sea Horse'," *New York Times*, March 5, 1974, http://www.nytimes.com, Gussow reviewed it again on April 16, 1974 after it transferred and called the performances "tender" and "wistful" and praised the playwriting.

[54] Terrence McNally, *Frankie and Johnny in the Clair de Lune* (New York: Dramatists Play Service, 1988), 5.

[55] In the *New York Times* op ed article he wrote on June 23, 1991 entitled "Theater: Hearing Voices is the Good Part in Writing a Play," McNally writes that he envisioned Kathy Bates playing Frankie the entire time he was writing, although he did not know her personally. (http://www.nytimes.com/).

cracks to unman her would-be suitor, Johnny. Like Jim Tyrone and Harry, Johnny is a romantic dreamer who puts Frankie on a pedestal. He guilelessly declares his love for her.

The opening moments of *Frankie and Johnny* take place in the dark, and all the audience can hear is the sound of the two noisily making love. The lights rise after they have climaxed. We learn that Frankie is a waitress and Johnny is a short-order cook at the same diner. They are both lonely, socially isolated, working-class misfits with few prospects personally or professionally. Frankie intended only to enjoy some sexual relief with Johnny and then send him on his way. She gets up and makes him a meatloaf sandwich for the road. Johnny, a hopeless romantic, has other plans. As they trade stories over sandwiches, Johnny realizes how much they have in common and insists that they are soul mates.

Johnny spends the rest of the play trying to convince the guarded, reticent Frankie to open up to him emotionally and give their love a chance. In the following passage we see Johnny placing Frankie on a pedestal, casting her as potential mother to his children, and therefore his need for her to talk purely just as Jim requests of Josie. He cannot bear to listen to her swear. Frankie, in turn, acts out the stereotype of the foul-mouthed, abrasive fat girl, pushing him away.

> JOHNNY. […] I might as well come right out with it: I'm in love with you. I personally think we should get married and I definitely want us to have kids, three or four. There! That wasn't so difficult. You don't have to say anything. I just wanted to get it on the table. Talk about a load off!
>
> FRANKIE. Talk about a load off? Talk about a crock of shit!
>
> JOHNNY. Hey, come on, don't. One of the things I like about you Frankie, is that you talk nice. Don't start that stuff now.

FRANKIE. Well fuck you how I talk! I'll talk any fucking way I fucking feel like it.[56]

Frankie then goes on to reveal some of the reasons for her reluctance to let Johnny in. As with several of the other fat characters I have discussed, she lost a parent (in this case her mother). Like Gertrude, Frankie was a victim of domestic abuse and is physically unable to have children as a result of sexual assault, which is framed as the primary reason she does not want to get close to Johnny.

Johnny dedicates himself to getting her to trust him and believe in romance, but like Gertrude, Frankie uses every possible tactic to rebuff him, including emasculating him, in this case rather literally. At the end of act one Johnny convinces the radio disc jockey to play their song and Frankie to let him spend the night. The two retire to make love once again. This time Johnny is unable to perform. The second act opens with the two negotiating this unfulfilled expectation. To lighten the mood, Frankie tries to get Johnny to make her a Western sandwich.

JOHNNY. Alright alright! (*He starts getting ingredients out of the refrigerator and slamming onto work counter.)* I just wish somebody would tell me how we got from mini-sex problem to major pig out.

FRANKIE. I don't think there's a connection.

JOHNNY. I wasn't going to tell you this but since you're not sparing my feelings, I am not going to spare yours: this is the first time anything like this has happened to me.

. . . . . .

FRANKIE. Then don't blame me your dancing dog didn't dance when you told it to. That sounds terrible. Don't blame me for your limp dick. Now where's my Western?

JOHNNY. You expect me to make you a sandwich after that?

[56] Terrence McNally, *Frankie and Johnny in the Claire de Lune*, (New York: Dramatists Play Service inc., 1988), 30.

FRANKIE. After what?

JOHNNY. Insulting my manhood.[57]

The conversation not only suggests Frankie as a cruel "maneater," callously emasculating Johnny, but highlights the connection between sex and food for Frankie, as with many characters I will discuss later. After each love-making session, Frankie turns to food. In this case, Johnny's being a cook makes him the perfect paramour.

Eventually, Johnny wears Frankie down and she reveals her scars to him, specifically the marks left by her ex-lover's belt buckle. This act of trust brings them together and, as in *The Sea Horse*, the play ends on a hopeful note, with Frankie acquiescing to dance in the moonlight to Debussy. Then the two awkward lovers brush their teeth before retiring in order to wake up next to each other in the light of day.

Among all these "Fat Love Stories," certain similarities emerge. The men are all dreamers who fall for oversize women not so much as sexual creatures (although Gertrude and Frankie do have sex with their partners) but rather as their romantic ideal; their personal Madonna, savior, and future mother of their children. Indeed, Harry and Johnny are saintly in their dedication to women who continually rebuff them and are considered physically unattractive by most standards. The women are all unable to trust or accept love and rebuff and test the men's sincerity, using similar tactics, including foul-mouthed scolding, insulting their masculinity, and withholding or denying their true feelings. All three women also share sexual secrets that add emotional scars to their flawed physicality. In Josie's case it is her virginity, and for Gertrude and Frankie it is rape and abuse. And despite their paramours characterizing them as Madonnas, all three

[57] Ibid., 42.

will remain childless due to their perceived or real physical deficiencies. Both Gertrude and Frankie eventually confess that they are infertile as a result of previous sexual assault. And although Josie does not share this trauma, the ending of the play suggests that she will not seek another romantic partner and at twenty-eight in 1923, when the play is set, it seems reasonable to assume she will never marry or have children. This is paradoxical, considering fatness in many cultural references is most often linked to fertility, but in the case of these plays, the fatness is a metaphor for emotional imperfection as much as anything else. In other words, the playwright renders these characters as fat as an outward expression of their psychological shortcomings.

Neil Labute's *Fat Pig*, however, takes a sharp turn in a new direction for fat roles. Like the aforementioned playwrights, he explicitly calls for a fat actress, and the plot of the play revolves largely around questions of her size. It is also a love story but, unlike *Sea Horse* and *Frankie and Johnny*, does not end happily, nor does it resolve with self-recognition as *Moon* does. This is because LaBute, known for his ruthless portraits of social behavior, is the only playwright in this section who is actively interrogating cultural codes surrounding fat women in American society, rather than using fat as a metaphorical expression of a character's emotional pathology.

Fat Pig premiered in November 2004 at the MCC theatre in New York City and featured well-known television and film celebrities in all but the title role. It played simultaneously with Ensler's *The Good Body*. However, it ran much longer, turning over cast members, who were forced to return to their television and film commitments when

the run was extended.[58] In a way, *Fat Pig* takes on the question posed by Henry in *My Fat Friend*, the first play discussed in this chapter, who assumed that the only reason Tom would date Vicky was because there was something wrong with him. In the case of *Fat Pig*, the male love interest, also named Tom, struggles with this exact supposition. Much to his own surprise, he falls in love with Helen, who is fat. When he learns her name, he can't resist quipping "of Troy?" To which Helen replies:

> HELEN. Right, the thousand ships and all. But that was just so they could carry me back.[59]

LaBute describes the character of Helen only as "plus size. Very." And LaBute doesn't describe Tom at all, although the dialogue and the casting of Jeremy Piven, who originated the role, indicate that he is on the handsome side. The play opens with Tom bumping into Helen at a crowded cafeteria-style restaurant, where he takes a seat next to her because no others are available. Helen has been quietly eating her three slices of pizza. (In the MCC production Helen, played by Ashlie Atkinson, ate her large meal, including the pizza, salad, two puddings, and garlic bread, as the audience filed in. The audience around me was visibly disconcerted. Murmurs erupted when she reached for the bread following her first slice of pizza.) Tom and Helen have instant chemistry. She is a librarian and a movie buff. She eventually diffuses Tom's embarrassment about her size by addressing it directly. When he tells her she has a terrific laugh (and a "potty mouth"), Helen is quick to point out to him that women of her size always get compliments that avoid commenting on their overall appearance, such as having pretty eyes or a nice

[58] See Lucille Lortel off-Broadway database for replacement casts, and awards nominations http://www.lortel.org/LLA_archive/index.cfm?search_by=show&title=Fat%20Pig (accessed November 10, 2008).
[59] Neil LaBute, *Fat Pig* (New York: Faber and Faber, 2004), 15.

personality. Although throughout the play Helen makes some self-deprecating remarks, she is comfortable with her size, even as she knows others are not. She makes the remarks more out of obeisance to what is expected of a fat woman: shame and apology. When they part, Tom takes her phone number and Helen reveals her vulnerability in contrast to some of the previous fat heroines when she says: "There's every reason why I'll never hear from you again, I mean, besides the obvious one. [...] Please do not let yourself be afraid of me or taking some kind of blind chance, or what people think […] because this could be so nice."[60]

In the following seven scenes, Tom wrestles with just that. LaBute juxtaposes scenes between Tom and Helen, which are sweetly intimate, with scenes between Tom and his co-workers. The honesty between Helen and Tom is starkly contrasted to Tom's exchanges with Carter, his snarky, admittedly superficial best friend, and Jeannie, a co-worker from Accounting, whom he dated briefly. Tom tries to hide his romance with Helen because he knows how his co-workers will react. Meanwhile, even as they enjoy romantic and sexual encounters, Helen is painfully aware that Tom has not introduced her to any of his friends or taken her anywhere highly public. When his co-workers discover Tom's secret, they are ruthless, just as he feared. Narcissistic Jeannie feels not only jilted, but personally attacked and humiliated by his choice to date someone whom she refers to as "huge," a "fat chick," and finally a "pig." Carter, who calls Helen a circus freak, posts her picture on all the office screen savers and eventually counsels his friend that he is "begging for trouble" by dating Helen. He informs Tom that it doesn't matter that Helen has many attractive qualities about her as a person; the fact that she is fat puts her outside

[60] Ibid., 16.

of Tom's social circle. When Tom argues that it should not be all about appearances, Carter suggests he turn on a T.V.

Tom tries to stand by his scruples and his genuine love for Helen and takes her to the company picnic—a beach volleyball party. Helen gamely arrives in a bathing suit carrying a vast picnic lunch and sits down with Tom, who has strategically made their camp far away from the center of the party.[61] Helen suggests they join the volleyball game, but Tom can not bring himself to do it. This is the only time Helen eats clearly as an emotional response to something upsetting her. Helen presses him to disclose what is troubling him, although it is clear she has known all along but dared hope that he might buck convention. Tom confesses that he is a weak person, and he simply can't imagine having her as a long-term romantic partner because of her appearance. She tells him that she loves him so much that he is the first person she has been willing to change her appearance for and volunteers to get surgery or do slim-fast or something else drastic. But it is too late for Tom. Just as Jim, Harry, and Johnny idolize their romantic counterparts, Tom places Helen on a sort of moral pedestal above him. Even though he does not have the strength to date a fat girl, he loves her too much to ask her to change or

[61] In the MCC production, directed by Jo Bonney, Ashlie Atkinson appeared in a bathing suit alongside Keri Russell (who played Jeannie and is well known for her turn in the lead role of TV series *Felicity*). There was a deliberate tableau, allowing the audience to really compare their two bodies. Russell's ribs were strikingly visible even from the back of the house. She was frighteningly skeletal. Atkinson had visible rolls of fat around her midsection and very chubby arms and legs (although the flesh didn't hang). From my perspective I couldn't help but marvel that Russell's sickly body is considered the ideal. Different reviewers disagreed on whether or not Atkinson was actually fat enough. John Simon of *New York Magazine* (December 27, 2004 http://nymag.com/nymetro/arts/theater/reviews/) claimed there was no chemistry between Piven and Atkinson and that he found the romantic scenes hard to watch. This was in contrast to most of the other reviewers such as Dan Bacalzo (December 16, 2004 http://www.theatermania.com/content/news.cfm/story/5453) and Ben Brantley (December 16, 2004, http://theater2nytimes.com/2004/12/16/theater/reviews/16pig.html.), who remarked on their excellent chemistry (which was also my opinion when I saw the play). Bacalzo wondered if it would be different if Atkinson was more than merely plump, but grossly obese. The differing opinions on what exactly is fat highlight the subjectivity of perceptions.

to allow her to see him weather the challenges of being in love with her, because he knows he will fail her.

Conclusion

This chapter has explored nine dramatic texts written and successfully performed in the last quarter of the twentieth century and just beyond, to see how playwrights use fat dramaturgically and to develop character.[62] Patterns emerge. Across the board all these playwrights use fat to establish their female characters, and their size is a metaphor for some emotional deficiency or psychological or behavioral quirk that is similar in all the roles discussed here. In the case of comedies such as *My Fat Friend* and *Fat Chance*, fat women are the butt of jokes; they are loud-mouthed, emotionally volatile, childish overeaters who cannot help themselves. The momentum in these comedies centers on their struggles (and the struggles of those around them) to change their size, which in turn, changes their personality and behavior and brings a new harmony to the world of the play. The comedy also seems to rely on the actress actually *not* being fat, so that the audience can be assured that the character will undergo a transformation.

The plays written by women, *Beautiful Bodies, The Most Massive Women Wins*, and *The Good Body*, all endeavor to address questions of body size and dieting from a woman's perspective as a playwright and with female characters. *Beautiful Bodies* essentially capitalizes on the same stereotypes as the aforementioned comedies, according to which the overweight character cannot control herself. She is sexually voracious, vulgar, outspoken, and can't help but overeat to compensate for some vaguely

[62] *Moon for the Misbegotten* was composed in 1947 but saw its most successful performances in the last third of the twentieth century.

stated emotional flaw. *The Most Massive Woman* attempts to solve the "chicken or the egg" question in terms of presenting each character's narrative and trying to identify how she became either overweight or completely dysfunctional in her relationships with food. And the characters all admittedly have some sort of pathological relationship with their bodies, food, and dieting. Likewise, *The Good Body* tries to understand why an avowed feminist activist can still be dieting and struggling with self image. Ultimately, Ensler fails to offer any real explanation or hope for change and paints herself into the same corner of psychically damaged American woman, forever obsessed with food and her body.

The heroines of the "fat love" plays all demonstrate similar character psychology and behavior, despite the nearly sixty-year spread in which they were written. They are all fiercely independent and unable to accept or trust love. They all wear a mask of sexual bravado and wit that covers their true feelings. The implication for most of the characters is that their fat, which perhaps has arisen from some emotional scar, protects them from being hurt any more than they already have been. Their suitors are all romantic dreamers, which implies that men have to be fantasists to even consider dating a fat woman or that a woman's fat somehow desexualizes, her allowing her to be the object of chivalrous, platonic love. Helen in *Fat Pig* is the possible exception to some of the stereotypes. While most of the characters I have mentioned, both comic and romantic, embody most of the fat stereotypes, Helen seems to have them imposed upon her by the characters in the play. They have all assimilated cultural beliefs about fat women and refuse to accept her as "normal," although LaBute paints her as the most well-adjusted character onstage. Nonetheless, to create a dramatic narrative, all the plays in this chapter capitalize on

cultural constructions of fat including assumptions about the emotional makeup of a fat woman that I have established in chapter one.

Ch III: Ravenous Women

In fat-obsessed cultures we are all "lipoliterates" who "read" fat for what we believe it tells us about a person.[1]

This chapter explores a number of plays that construct female characters and shape their personalities through a myriad of negative stereotypes associated with fat. I mainly focus on the portrayal of fat women as voracious consumers who threaten the equilibrium of the world of the play. I use the word *consumer* both for its economic connotations and for its other meanings, to refer to women who eat, devour, and destroy what is around them, literally or emotionally. I want to highlight the connection between portrayals of women as primary product consumers in a capitalist marketplace and portrayals of (fat) women as excessive, wasteful consumers of food, drink, and space in our culture.

The fat female body and/or weight loss is not the central focus of these plays, unlike those in the previous chapter. Rather, dramaturgically speaking, the strong female characters portrayed in these plays disrupt the stasis of the play with their immoderate behavior and therefore drive the plot forward. The plays I will cover do not explicitly call for fat actresses, but within the texts, there are more subtle semiotics that connect the excessive behavior of the character with her body type. Frequently, powerful female characters, or those who are seen as inappropriately aggressive (sexually or otherwise) or overly passionate, are identified as fat either literally or metaphorically, and this is subsequently reflected in casting. Another part of this characterization includes

[1] Mark Graham, "Chaos," in *Fat: The Anthropology of an Obsession*, eds. Don Kulick and Anne Meneley (New York: Penguin, 2005), 178-9.

"animalizing" the female. Often, playwrights endow aggressive female characters with animal traits or behaviors, as described in stage directions. And although the playwrights do not always call for a large actress to play these roles, within the plays, other characters often remark on the size of such a character. As a result, casting has often turned to actresses who are oversize in some way, and critical reception has hinged on those choices. With the following examples, I suggest that playwrights capitalize on cultural fears and prejudices concerning the (fat) female body and use the associations explicitly linked to fat/consuming women to create characters who embody what I call "fat behavior," and thus contribute to dramatic conflict within the play.

Fat behavior refers to the qualities and characteristics that Western culture, Americans in particular, attach preconsciously to fat female bodies. These include the assumptions I describe in chapter one of a fat woman as out of control on a physical and emotional level, outspoken, and voracious in her appetite for food, sex, and power. I also link fat behavior to inappropriately masculine behavior from a woman because it implies a woman who does not abide by gender roles. She assumes roles of power and leadership typically associated men. For example, fat behavior might include consuming a "masculine" amount of food or alcohol, or literally taking up too much space not only in size but in bodily gesture. In her book *The 'Fat' Female Body*, Samantha Murray furthers my description when she writes:

> I would argue that we have a well-developed and readily deployed 'literacy' when it comes to reading bodies. [. . .] The logic that governs this 'body literacy' is, in some respects, a very tacit, fundamental and unspoken one. [. . .] [C]ultural meanings have become so familiar to us, they operate without question. For example, the 'fat' woman (is presumed to be) lazy, she is out of control, she is a moral failure, she is unhealthy, she is an affront to normative feminine bodily

> aesthetics, she is a food addict, she cannot manage her desires, her level of intelligence is below average.[2]

All of these various cultural perceptions contribute to the way in which we read fat female bodies onstage and are examples of fat behavior. Fat behavior goes beyond the physical appearance of an individual; it is part of their identity.[3]

First I will look at several of Tennessee Williams's heroines whose fat behavior consumes the world around them. Serafina from the *The Rose Tattoo* (1951), Maxine from *The Night of the Iguana* (1961), and Leona from *Small Craft Warnings* (1972) all differ from Williams's better known heroines such as Blanche, Laura, and Alma in that they possess sexual agency and are not emotionally crushed by the end of the play. In fact, they generally accomplish their objectives even though they are portrayed as sexually voracious, exhibiting various excessive behaviors that threaten to devour the characters around them, not always literally, but emotionally or psychologically. Next I will look at the ways in which Edward Albee exploits the stereotype of the voracious woman in *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* (1962) with his characterization of the booze-swilling, "braying," promiscuous Martha. Lastly, I will look at several plays from Paula Vogel's canon that flip the paradigm established by Williams and Albee in different ways. In plays such as *How I Learned to Drive* (1997), *Hot and Throbbing* (1993), *Baltimore Waltz* (1990), and *The Oldest Profession* (1981), the female protagonists attempt to negotiate and frequently violate American cultural boundaries of body size and consumption. However, because their size or appetites threaten the patriarchal equilibrium, these characters are punished for their transgressions. Because they exceed

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[2] Samantha Murray, *The 'Fat' Female Body* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 13-14.
[3] Andrea Elizabeth Shaw also uses the term "fat behavior" with essentially the same meaning as above in her book, *The Embodiment of Disobedience* (New York: Lexington Books, 2006), 50.

their boundaries by eating too much (also associated with outspokenness) by being overweight or having excessive proportions, they meet with violence. Vogel's work expresses her feminist stance; her characters are victimized by society for exhibiting fat behaviors, in contrast to Williams's and Albee's women, who victimize others with their fat behavior.

Devouring Women: Tennessee's Tramps

I begin this discussion with a play that could potentially fit in the previous chapter because the character in question is, in fact, repeatedly described in the text as "plump" and even "fat," but unlike the previous fat texts, weight is not what drives the plot forward. Instead, it is Serafina's fat behavior in Tennessee Williams's *The Rose Tattoo* that creates the conflict of the play. And like Moore and McNally, Williams wrote the play with a specific actress in mind: the voluptuous, Italian-born Anna Magnani.[4] Williams wanted to create a character who could benefit from Magnani's zaftig appearance and passionate acting style. Serafina was the result, and she is characterized by excessive, obsessive behavior, or fat behavior.

The narrative of the three-act play, set "somewhere along the Gulf Coast between New Orleans and Mobile" in the fifties, follows the story of Serafina, a proud Sicilian seamstress living with her daughter in a tight-knit immigrant community. In the opening twilight scene, she is anticipating the return of her beloved husband, Rosario, a truck driver who bears a rose tattoo on his chest. She confides in her neighbor that she knows

[4] According to the Internet Movie Database, www.imdb.com (accessed November 11, 2008), Magnani's poor English skills prevented her from appearing in the Broadway production, which instead starred Maureen Stapleton, who won a Tony for her performance. Magnani won an Oscar for her portrayal of Serafina in the movie version of *The Rose Tattoo*.

she is pregnant with a son. In the stage directions, Williams describes Serafina as "a plump little Italian opera singer […]. Her voluptuous figure is sheathed in pale rose silk. […] She sits with plump dignity, she is wearing a girdle." She raves about her passion for her husband, eagerly awaiting his return, rhapsodizing that her "heart is too big to swallow" and declaring, "I am heavy with life, I am big, big, big with life!"[5] Following a visit from a mysterious woman who requests that Serafina make her a man's shirt in rose-colored silk, and an encounter between Serafina and the local "witch" who puts a curse on her, Serafina receives the news that her husband has been killed in an accident. Serafina and her daughter, Rosa, are grief stricken, and the trauma causes Serafina to miscarry.

Scene four jumps ahead three years to young Rosa's high school graduation day. It seems that, in her excessive grief, Serafina has barely left the house or cared for her appearance or hygiene since her husband's death. She has "let herself go" and is emotionally out of control. Her weight gain and her uncleanliness are physical manifestations of the disorientation of her spirit. In her book *Purity and Danger*, Mary Douglas explores cultural attitudes and fears about dirt and uncleanliness. She notes that, "[a]s we know it, dirt is essentially disorder. There is no such thing as absolute dirt: It exists in the eye of the beholder. [. . .] Dirt offends against order. Eliminating it is not a negative movement, but a positive effort to organize an environment."[6] As I discussed in chapter one, fat is frequently associated with filth and threatens to contaminate those around it. Indeed, I could substitute the word *fat* for *dirt* in the above quote. Serafina's

[5] Tennessee Williams, *The Rose Tattoo*, in *Three by Tennessee* (New York: Signet Classic, 1951; reprint, 1976.)
[6] Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concept of Pollution and Taboo* (New York: Routledge, 1966), 2.

condition at the top of scene four plays on these closely linked cultural fears of dirt and fat. They both invoke fear and represent disorder.

Serafina has taken her daughter Rosa's clothes to prevent her from going out to her graduation party and potentially seeing a young sailor she has met and become interested in. The neighbor-women arrive and are aghast that she has locked her daughter up naked, like an animal. They demand that Serafina give them the graduation dresses that they ordered for their own daughters. Miss York, Rosa's schoolteacher, enters and tries to convince Serafina to allow Rosa to come to graduation and also to clean herself up and come as well. Serafina tries to chase them all away, responding with "a long, animal howl of misery,"and as she nearly collapses in distress, the neighbor-women support "the heavy sagging bulk" of Serafina's grief-stricken body.[7] As the scene plays out, the neighbors tussle over the dresses, and Miss York tries to persuade Serafina to be reasonable about Rosa. Serafina's behavior is violent and irrational, and it is described in the text with various animal metaphors. Like a bull, she "plunges out into the front yard in her shocking dishabille, making wild gestures," even as her daughter begs her not to embarrass her further.[8] And her neighbor is forced to "take the bull by the horns" to finally retrieve the dresses from Serafina. She glares at her tormenters "savagely" and beats her own forehead in grief. Eventually, Rosa escapes to her graduation with Miss York, but not before calling her mother "disgusting."

Rosa's remark seems to snap Serafina to her senses, and in the next scene she frantically tries to put herself together to go to graduation. Still muttering savagely, she grabs a hat and puts it over her dirty hair. She then tries to put on a girdle, and then a

[7] Williams, *The Rose Tattoo*, 160-61.
[8] Ibid, 163.

gown, neither of which will fit because she has presumably gained weight. After hurling the offensive garments away, she quickly heads into the back room and emerges wearing a purple dress, just as two more customers, Flora and Bessie, enter. They have come to collect a shirt. Serafina tries to put them off in order to arrive at graduation in time, but they are determined. While they wait, they discuss their sex lives and call out the window to passing men, for which Serafina chides them. Flora exacts her revenge:

> FLORA. (*acidly*) Well, ex-cuse me! (*She whispers maliciously to Bessie*.) It sure is a pleasant surprise to see you wearing a dress, Serafina, but the surprise would be twice as pleasant if it were the right size. (*To Bessie, loudly*) She used to have a sweet figure, a little bit plump but attractive, but setting there at that sewing machine for three years in a kimona and not stepping out of the house has naturally given her hips![9]

Serafina defends her figure, but the women respond with further cattiness. Flora and Bessie insist that she is jealous of their popularity with men, and Serafina retorts, "When I think of men I think about my husband. We had love every night of the week. We never skipped one, from the night we married till the night he was killed […]." [10] The more they goad her, the more Serafina emphasizes the sacredness of her relationship with her husband and insists that she *knows* what lovemaking is and they do not. Eventually the women, offended by her excessive pride, cruelly reveal to Serafina that they knew (indeed the whole town knew) her husband was unfaithful. This effectively reduces Serafina to an animal state again, and Flora callously remarks, "Let her howl her head off," at which point Serafina attacks them with a broom and they leave.

Serafina becomes obsessed with discovering the truth and tries to persuade their priest to reveal her husband's confessions. She pursues the priest so vigorously and shamelessly despite his denial of her request that he tells her that she is "not a respectable

[9] Ibid., 170.
[10] Ibid., 171

woman." When Serafina debases herself and agrees with him, he goes on to say, "No, you are not a woman, you are an animal!"[11] Again, Serafina agrees with his assessment and nearly attacks the priest before townspeople escort him to safety.

Serafina's characterization in these three scenes relies on many of the stereotypes associated with fat women and manifests in fat behavior. For example, her obsessive grief for her husband suggests someone imbalanced, or unable to control herself. During the scene in which she argues with the neighbor-women about Rosa's graduation, Williams's stage directions suggest that she is a cornered animal. She howls, screeches, plunges, and crouches at various points in the scene, and they grapple with her as if she were a wild bull. This crazed behavior is associated with her weight gain and her poor hygiene, which is well established in these scenes. Even her somewhat implausible insistence that she and her husband made love every night is a kind of fat behavior. Many might consider it excessive to have sex every day, and certainly telling virtual strangers about this behavior is overly familiar. Serafina has no boundaries.

Serafina's excessive grief is the dramaturgical device that creates imbalance in the world of the play. The mores of the culture in which she was brought up require that Serafina play the role of the dutiful Catholic widow who denies her sensuality and zest for life and dons black to mourn her husband indefinitely. But as Williams characterizes her, this dictum is in such conflict with her sensual nature that it manifests in her excessive conduct. Her erratic behavior costs herself and everyone around her, especially her daughter, Rosa. The arrival in the second act of Alvaro, another handsome fruit truck driver, begins Serafina's journey back to normalcy, when he begins courting her. He too is prone to excessive emotional outbursts; upon his entrance in front of Serafina's house,

[11] Ibid., 199-200.

he attacks a traveling salesman who taunted him with racial insults when he passed him on the road. He then cries after the man leaves, even though he won the fight. Serafina recognizes his grief and cannot help but cry along with him. As she tends to his wounds and his ripped shirt, she sees aspects of her dead husband in him and takes this as a sign. Serafina puts extreme faith not only in her religious beliefs but also in superstitions. This is a fat behavior in that she views her life as beyond her control; in this case she sees it in the control of vaguely defined universal forces. In other words, she does not take responsibility for her actions, which is another quality consistently attributed to fat people. Alvaro has a beautiful body like her husband, but a clownish face and demeanor. Nonetheless, Serafina is intrigued, and a courtship begins. They share a bottle of spumanti, and Alvaro tells her about himself. When she laughs heartily as the cork pops from the wine, the following conversation ensues,

> ALVARO. –I like a woman who laughs with all her heart.
>
> SERAFINA. And a woman that cries with all her heart?
>
> ALVARO. I like everything that a woman does with all her heart. [12]

He is attracted to the very behavior that has ostracized her from her daughter and her community. As she tells him her story, he begins to fall in love with her and declares that he is looking for someone. "—I don't care if she's a little too plump or not such a stylish dresser," he says, which is clearly directed at Serafina's unkempt appearance. Alvaro, whose family name, Mangiacavallo, means "eat a horse," is the first character who is not frightened by her passion. As his name suggests, Mangiacavallo is so big and garrulous

[12] Ibid., 208.

that he could almost literally "eat a horse."[13] This is the man who is prepared to woo Serafina—a woman whose repressed passions turn her into an animal. Only his appetite is big enough to consume the animal she has become. In naming him Mangiacavallo, and characterizing Serafina's ardor as all-consuming, Williams seems to equate passion with consumption. By the end of the scene, she has agreed to a date, and she has given him the rose-colored silk shirt ordered by the mysterious woman in the opening scene.

Act three begins with a comic scene of Serafina wearing a fancy dress and a girdle that is too tight as she waits for Alvaro's arrival. Just as she has decided to remove the girdle and is "grunting" her way out of it, Alvaro arrives. He gives her chocolate, and when she proclaims that she is too fat, he says, "You are not fat, you are just pleasing and plump," and the stage directions read: "*He reaches over to pinch the creamy flesh of her upper arm.*"[14] After a few false starts and a charade acted loudly for the neighbors to insinuate that he is leaving for the night, Serafina and Alvaro go to bed together. Rosa arrives home, and following a somewhat comic mistaken identity scene in the dark, discovers to her shock and horror that Alvaro has spent the night with her mother. Rosa then confronts Serafina with her hypocrisy. Rosa is planning to run away to be with her sailor boyfriend, and witnessing her mother's indiscretion solidifies her decision. However, the night with Alvaro has calmed Serafina, and despite harsh words from her daughter, she at least sends her off with her blessing and a graduation present. The play ends with Serafina calling Alvaro, whom she had chased from the house in embarrassment, back to her. She shouts, "Vengo, vengo, amore," as she walks out to

[13] Within Serafina's immigrant community, Mangiacavallo's name would be understood for its full meaning. Indeed, part of his altercation earlier stemmed from the driver insulting his name.
[14] Ibid., 226.

greet him and he emerges from his hiding spot.[15] Order is restored to the world of the play because Serafina has found a man who can slake her extreme passion. The arc of Serafina's character suggests that while she may always have been prone to plumpness and excessive behavior, the loss of her first husband—and the sexual satisfaction with him—turns her into a fat, dirty woman who acts like an animal. She gets fatter when she is not being fed sexually, suggesting that she substitutes food for sex. But the fact that Alvaro is finally able to woo her hints that her appetites can be satisfied with the passionate love of a man.

Ten years after *The Rose Tattoo*, Tennessee Williams created another ravenous woman with Maxine Faulk in *The Night of the Iguana*, which opened on Broadway in 1961.[16] Maxine is not necessarily the central character in this play, but she might be described as the antagonist. Her fat behavior is an obstacle to the hero's goal of redemption and well-being. The play takes place in the summer of 1940 at a secluded "rustic, and very bohemian" hotel atop a steep hill that overlooks the ocean in Costa Verde, Mexico.[17] Maxine, who is recently widowed, is the hotel owner. She is described in the stage directions for the opening scene as a "stout, swarthy woman in her middle forties—affable and rapaciously lusty. She is wearing a pair of levis and a blouse that is half unbuttoned."[18] Maxine displays a variety of fat behaviors. She is bawdy, prone to cursing, sexually aggressive, and drinks heavily throughout the play. Her heavy drinking is a metaphor for her sexual appetite, which is depicted as all-consuming. As owner of

[15] Ibid., 253.
[16] Tennessee Williams, "The Night of the Iguana," in *Three by Tennessee*, (New York: Signet Classic, 1961, reprint 1976).
[17] Ibid., 256.
[18] Ibid., 9.

the hotel, she also violates gender stereotypes in the way she barks orders at the Mexicans who serve her.

The inciting incident of the play is the arrival of Maxine's old friend Reverend Shannon, a defrocked priest who is now a tour guide, leading tour buses of church ladies and civic groups on extended getaways along the Mexican jungle coast. When he arrives at Maxine's hotel, he is drunk and in the midst of a nervous breakdown (a variation on others he has had before). Shannon has more or less taken his tour group hostage and climbs up to the hotel with the bus key. Much to the consternation of his ladies, Shannon refuses to leave, insisting that Maxine's hotel is a superior accommodation along the tour route. The conflict of the play centers on Shannon's struggle with his inner demons—what he calls "spooks"—and his quest to recover his dignity. At the hotel he is torn between two forces: his old friend Maxine, who is painted as a destructive agent tempting him toward total ruin and dependence on her, and Hannah, a slender guest at the hotel who encourages him to sober up and regain his humanity, which he feels he has lost. Hannah is a sketch artist and earns her (very modest) living sketching people's portraits at resorts. Williams connects her artistic vision and her spiritual vision by characterizing her as someone who is able to see into people's souls. Hannah is the opposite of prurient. She is patient, kind, modest, and uninterested in sexual contact. Despite her lack of sexual experience, she sympathizes with Shannon's struggles (he has a proclivity for sex with minors as well as a problem with alcohol). She contrasts sharply with Maxine, who is depicted as sexually rapacious and dangerous.

Just as Williams characterizes Serafina with animal metaphors in *The Rose Tattoo,* Maxine is also frequently animalized in the text. For example, her laugh is

described as follows: “Maxine always laughs with a single harsh, loud bark, opening her mouth like a seal expecting a fish to be thrown to it.”[19] She laughs frequently, often sarcastically, throughout the play, and the stage directions always emphasize that it is a “bark.” Also like Serafina, Maxine is very much driven by her sexual appetite. She has recently been widowed, and she sees Shannon as a potential replacement husband. In the first scene Shannon, in the throes of his breakdown, struggles into the hotel, hoping for solace from his griping tourists, and is shocked by Maxine’s overtly unbuttoned, sexual appearance:

> MAXINE. Well! Lemme look at you!
>
> SHANNON. Don’t look at me, get dressed!
>
> MAXINE. Gee, you look like you had it!
>
> SHANNON. You look like you have been having it, too. Get dressed!
>
> MAXINE. Hell, I am dressed. I never dress in September. Don’t you know I never dress in September?
>
> SHANNON. Well, just, just—button your shirt up.[20]

Maxine, who is literally falling out of her clothes, immediately tells him that her husband, Fred, is dead and makes a point to inform Shannon that they had not had sex in years, which seems to have rendered him dead to her before he actually died. The suggestion is that Maxine cannot be contained by her clothes and that she excessively prioritizes sex. Like Serafina, she exceeds social boundaries by blurting out all of this personal information. Later in the play we find out that (at her husband’s request), she threw his body into the ocean for the fish to eat, rather than bury him properly. While this shocking action may have been a very respectful “burial at sea,” something cavalier about

[19] Ibid., 9.
[20] Ibid., 10.

Maxine's attitude, paints her as subhuman—it is as if she has consumed him with her lusty appetite and discarded him when he failed to satisfy. Maxine spends the rest of the play trying to convince Shannon that they are a perfect pair of outcasts and that his best bet is to stay with her, enjoy rum-cocos and sex with her, and hide out from society, which he is not suited to be a part of.

Shannon's unhappy tourists eventually make their way up the hill to the hotel and are offended by Maxine's appearance and rough talk (as well as suspicious that Maxine will give their unruly guide a kick-back). The leader of the tourist insurrection, Miss Fellowes, heads into the hotel office to use the phone. For his part, Shannon is truly offended by, or perhaps fearful of, Maxine's sensuality:

> SHANNON. Why did you have to…?
>
> MAXINE. Huh?
>
> SHANNON. Come out looking like this. For you it's funny but for me it's…
>
> MAXINE. This is how I *look*. What's wrong with how I *look*?
>
> SHANNON. I told you to button your shirt. Are you so proud of your boobs that you won't button your shirt up? –Go into the office and see if she is calling Blake Tours to get me fired.[21]

Clearly, Maxine's overt sensuality cannot be contained and is a menace to Shannon's delicately balanced psyche. During act two, lusty Maxine and angelic Hannah engage in a power struggle for Shannon's attention. Shannon has affection for Maxine but sees her hedonistic behavior as a threat. Unlike Hannah, she encourages him to forgo drying up and have a drink, believing he will feel better for it. This is a kind of gender stereotype role reversal, wherein the man is trying to stay sober enough to maintain his wits and

[21] Ibid., 20.

avoid being taken advantage of by the woman, who is plying him with alcohol as part of her seduction. Williams subtly codes Maxine as fat, if not literally then with fat behavior, through Shannon's interaction with her. Maxine's appetite for sex and alcohol threatens to consume Shannon's last scrap of sanity and dignity. Significantly, each time Maxine is too forward with Shannon, he responds defensively, either by insulting her weight or comparing her to an animal. Williams equates her aggressive sexual nature with animal behavior and fat—an outward sign of excess. Maxine encourages Shannon to have a drink and he deflects her:

> SHANNON. Maxine honey, whoever told you that you look good in tight pants was not a sincere friend of yours.[22]

Later, as Maxine tries to distract Shannon from Hannah (again, by offering him a drink), he refuses her with another insult about her size, although, just as Serafina defended her full figure, Maxine spins the insult into an opportunity to extol her sexual virtues:

> SHANNON. Maxine, your ass—excuse me Miss Jelkes—your hips, Maxine, are too fat for this verandah.
>
> MAXINE. Hah! Mexicans like 'em, if I can judge by the pokes and pinches I get in the busses to town. And so do the Germans. Ev'ry time I go near Herr Fahrenkoph he gives me a pinch or goose.[23]

Indeed, Maxine is unabashed about her sexuality. Williams's stage directions pointedly describe her gaze as salacious and hint that, in addition to pursuing Shannon, she is interested in the handsome Mexican boys who inhabit her hotel.

Later, in act three, Maxine begins a different seduction tactic. She tries to convince Shannon that he is a better match for her than her deceased husband was. She

[22] Ibid., 65.
[23] Ibid., 74.

animalizes herself when she describes the lack of physical and emotional intimacy between them in contrast to the connection she and Shannon have:

MAXINE. Yeah, well, Fred and me'd reached the point of just grunting.

SHANNON. Maybe he thought you'd turned into a pig, Maxine. [24]

Thus, Shannon articulates the animal metaphor that the text hints at throughout. Despite the insult, Maxine tries to demonstrate that they have a history together and a connection beyond the sexual. She does so by prodding him and reminding him that she is aware of the various childhood traumas and transgressions in his past that have led to his breakdown. Instead of proving that she understands him, this line of reasoning terrorizes Shannon. When a replacement tour guide shows up in the middle of their conversation, Shannon snaps completely. He has to be restrained to return the bus key and retaliates by urinating on the tourists' luggage. Maxine ends up having to tie him to the hammock for his own protection. Only Hannah can reason with him.

Eventually, through Hannah's gentle coaching and their philosophical conversations, Shannon is able to stabilize emotionally. Shannon further contrasts Hannah with voluptuous, passionate Maxine by referring to her as "Miss Thin-Standing-Up-Female-Buddha." Hannah is able to offer him hope for the human spirit and frees him from the hammock. He in turn, frees the iguana who has been tied to the porch—a captive that the (savage) Mexicans and Maxine intended to slaughter and eat. This act of grace toward the trapped iguana, precipitated by Hannah, frees Shannon emotionally. Hannah says goodbye, and the play concludes with a somewhat revitalized Shannon agreeing to a moonlit swim with Maxine and taking a drink of her rum.

[24] Ibid., 85.

Although Maxine is not explicitly described as fat in the text, there are several lines that hint she is curvy or "big," and many of her character traits fall into fat behavior. The text makes clear that she is a sexual predator and that she frequently violates social boundaries. Not only is she unabashedly the boss of her Mexican staff, but she drinks, swears, and is overly frank with everyone. Her lasciviousness and amoral outlook are a complicating factor in Shannon's quest for beauty and human decency. In the original Broadway cast, Maxine was played by Bette Davis, who was fifty-three at the time. Although Davis would not be considered fat or even big by most standards, her beauty was arguably unconventional because of her extreme features. Her mouth and especially her eyes were oversize indeed, and the persona she established for herself in Hollywood was that of a dominating, larger-than-life woman. The voluptuous Ava Gardner played the role alongside Richard Burton for the movie version. In a 1996 revival, Vincent Canby of the *New York Times* criticized Marsha Mason's interpretation of Maxine, stating:

> The kindest thing to say about Ms. Mason is that she is miscast as the robust, tough-talking Maxine. Being light of weight as a theater presence, she has to push hard to suggest an edgy, hard drinking, unsentimental earth mother, someone with a fondness for beach boys, two at a time.[25]

Note that the reviewer uses "light of weight" as a metaphor to express Mason's inadequacies. Mason does have a very full face, and at age fifty-four, when she played the role, she was thicker than she was at thirty-five when she starred in her breakout movie *The Goodbye Girl*. But according to Canby, she did not carry the weight to play the rapacious Maxine. On the other hand, I would argue that even beyond the aesthetic of

[25] Vincent Canby, "Tennessee Williams in Deep Complexity," *New York Times*, March 22, 1996, http://nytimes.com/ (accessed November 26, 2008).

body size, there is a fat identity that is established by Williams, which is embodied in characters such as Maxine and Serafina and enhanced when a big actress plays the part.

The last ravenous woman from Williams's canon I will cover is Leona Dawson from *Small Craft Warnings*, which premiered off-Broadway in 1972.[26] By all accounts this production failed, and the play has seldom been revived.[27] *Small Craft Warnings* was written in the latter half of Williams's career and deviates from his successful playwriting formula of the late fifties and early sixties. The play, which takes place in a bar, is somewhat experimental in style, with characters directly addressing the audience. It does not have a strong linear plot, although all the characters are fully drawn psychological portraits of lost souls who inhabit this same seaside bar. The fat identity of Leona is more blatant than the aforementioned roles of Serafina and Maxine, as she is described in the text as fat. She also embodies much of the fat behavior I have discussed. Helena Carroll, who was a large woman by contemporary standards, originated the role of Leona Dawson, who is the force that drives the play forward. Both the stage directions and other characters call her fat, and her obstreperous fat behavior disturbs the equilibrium of the world of the play and sets the evening in motion. Without Leona, the other characters would have their usual night of liquor-induced calm and stasis. Leona's entrance is described in the stage directions as follows:

> The door bursts open. Leona enters like a small bull making his charge into the ring. Leona, a large, ungainly woman, is wearing white clam-digger slacks [. . .] a sailor's hat which she occasionally whips off her head to slap something with. [28]

[26] Tennessee Williams, *Small Craft Warnings* (New York: New Directions Books, 1972).
[27] Most recently it was revived in the fall of 2008 in New York City by the White Horse Theater Company, to which I belong. I sat in on the casting sessions and several performances. Indeed, the director chose a fairly fat (terrific) actress named Linda Nelson to play the role. During the casting sessions it did seem as if her large body somehow gave her an edge to portray the commanding, bullying, loud-mouthed hairdresser Leona.
[28] Williams, *Small Craft Warnings*, 16.

Leona's first line is a threat directed at Bill, the gigolo who has been living with her for free in exchange for sexual favors. Leona is having a bad night because it is the anniversary of her brother's death. She has cooked a ceremonial meal for herself and Bill and has been drinking during the process. Bill sneaked out to the bar during one of her weeping jags about her lost brother. Within moments of Leona's entrance, Bill begins flirting with Violet, a waiflike prostitute who subsequently begins to grope him under the table. Leona catches her, and one of the driving through-lines for the rest of the play is the power struggle between brawny Leona and shrinking Violet for Bill's attention. Leona also wants everyone in the bar to share in her grief and possibly comfort her on the anniversary of her brother's death, and she keeps playing a violin sonata on the jukebox.

Arguably, *Small Craft Warnings* is not a plot-driven play but more of a portrait of eight lonely people who are stuck in their lives and have only the bar—Monk's Place—in common. Leona is the disruptive force in this otherwise stagnant world. She picks fights, some of them physical, with literally everyone in the bar at some point. She drinks to excess throughout the play. Her first argument is with Violet over the groping incident. When everyone else in the bar sides with Violet and begins to ignore Leona, Leona changes tactics and turns her attention to a gay couple, Quentin and Bobby, who have just entered the bar. Like Serafina and Maxine, she is overly familiar, ignoring boundaries of social politeness. She has never met these men but is immediately inappropriately personal with them.

> LEONA. […]There's some kind of tension between you. What is it? Is it guilt feelings? Embarrassment with guilt feelings?
>
> ……..

QUENTIN. Don't you think you're being a little presumptuous?

LEONA. Naw, I know the gay scene. I learned it from my kid brother. He came out early, younger than this boy here. I know the gay scene and I know the language of it and I know how full of sickness and sadness; it's so full of sadness and sickness, I could be almost glad that my little brother died before he had time to be infected. […] Now what went wrong between you before you come in here, you can tell me and maybe I can advise you. I'm practically what they call a faggot's moll. [29]

Surprisingly, they do tell her their story despite her inappropriate behavior. On the other hand, the alliance between the gay couple and Leona is another example of the subtle connection in plays and various cultural texts between gay and fat identity that I mentioned in chapter two and will explore further in chapter four. When the gay couple leaves, she moves on to pick a fight with the bartender, who will not serve her any more alcohol because she is a mean drunk. He suggests that Bill (the gigolo) take Leona home.

LEONA. Christ, do you think I'd let him come near me?! Or my trailer?! Tonight?! [*She slaps the bar several times with her sailor cap, turning to the right and the left as if to ward off assailants, her great bosom heaving, a jungle-look in her eye.*][30]

Williams's stage directions emphasize not only her size but her animal quality. In another instance, Leona tries to prevent the "Doc" (who is drunk and no longer has a license) from leaving the bar to deliver a baby. She sits on his doctor's bag. The stage directions read: *"She is then warily approached from three or four sides by Monk, Doc, Bill, and Steve as trainers approaching an angry 'big cat.'"*[31] And during a later altercation between Leona and the police, Bill says: "No man can hold that woman when she goes ape. Gimme a dime, I'm gonna call the Star of the Sea psycho ward." [32]

[29] Ibid.,40-41.
[30] Ibid., 57.
[31] Ibid., 37.
[32] Ibid., 63.

Small Craft Warnings is one of Williams's later plays, and Leona is perhaps a culmination of the devouring heroines that precede her in his canon. However, arguably, her disruptiveness is not entirely negative in this piece. She is more pragmatic and proactive than any of the other characters in the bar, who allow their lives to slip away in booze-induced sadness and helplessness. Her demanding presence, her excessive drinking, and her grief over her brother's death shake up the seaside bar for the night, and the result is that Bill the gigolo decides to move on, Violet finds a new home at the bar with Monk, and Leona decides to pack up her camper and head to a new town.

These three Williams heroines all demonstrate various types of fat behavior. All of them are characterized by their excessive emotional outbursts and overly aggressive behavior, sexually, emotionally, and otherwise. They generally do not assume personal responsibility for their actions, and they often emotionally harm those around them with their insensitive, immoderate behavior. Dramaturgically speaking, their fat behavior is one of the driving forces of Williams's plot in each case. Perhaps as a result of Williams's "fat" characterizations, frequently the actresses who received the best critical reviews in the roles of Serafina, Maxine, and Leona have been fat or large actresses by contemporary standards.

Albee's Ultimate Maneater

The next play in my series of ravenous women is perhaps the best example of a playwright relying on cultural assumptions to depict an all-consuming, uncontrollable woman with ravenous appetites: Martha in Edward Albee's *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*, which has engaged audiences since its Broadway debut in 1962 when it starred

Uta Hagen and Arthur Hill. More than the aforementioned Williams plays, *Virginia Woolf* has withstood the test of time and enjoyed long-running success, as demonstrated by multiple regional and Broadway revivals, including one on Broadway in 1976 that was directed by Albee himself, starring Colleen Dewhurst and Ben Gazzara. The play was also made into a successful film directed by Mike Nichols and starring Elizabeth Taylor and Richard Burton. It has seen a hearty life in regional and community theatre productions. Most recently, the 2005 Broadway production starring Bill Irwin and Kathleen Turner was well received critically, and the run was extended. *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* has become a sort of middlebrow theatrical staple that continues to have widespread appeal to American audiences. Certainly there are a multitude of reasons for the play's continued popularity, most obviously the craft and mastery of Albee's playwriting and the compelling characters he created. George and Martha's complex and cruel relationship continues to resonate with twenty-first-century audiences.

Perhaps one reason the play retains such power and interest, and is reproduced more often than other plays in this chapter, is that Albee successfully taps into cultural fears and assumptions about male authority and female power in creating the characters and dynamics of the memorable couples. The antiheroine of the play is Martha, whom Albee describes as "a large, boisterous woman, 52, looking somewhat younger. Ample, but not fleshy." This character description is often taken quite literally in the casting process, and we must assume that even if Albee himself does not see Martha's physical appearance as integral to the character's identity, most casting directors do. The play revolves around the combative relationship between Martha and George and their mutually antagonistic behavior. However, the suggestion is that Martha's dominance over

George creates an imbalance in the relationship that is intolerable for both. For the most part, George is painted as the long-suffering husband who only truly bares his fangs when Martha repeatedly attacks and humiliates him. His strategy is sophisticated and verbally eloquent. On the other hand, Martha's aggressiveness is characterized as a pathological behavior inextricably linked with her "large/ample" body, as demonstrated by her voracious appetite for power, sex, and alcohol.

Like her predecessors in this chapter, Martha is frequently characterized throughout the play as a monster, and her bold manner is likened to a variety of animal behaviors. Her overt sexuality is depicted as immodest, unnatural, and even castrating. Martha's body and personality are sharply contrasted with those of Honey—the foil—who in some ways serves as a model of a culturally assimilated wife.

Albee employs the same device of animal metaphors to illustrate Martha's subhuman behavior even more overtly than Williams does with his ravenous women. George constantly compares Martha to various animals and monsters, from donkeys and geese to a cyclops. The play begins as Martha and George are returning from a faculty get-together, and in the opening moments we hear Martha's laughter before we see her. Already the typical male/female roles are reversed when her voice dominates the space and George demurely shushes her. Within the first two pages of the script, as they rehash the evening's events, they argue about whether or not she "brays."[33] Martha, who is politically savvy at these academic functions, berates George for his passive behavior at the faculty get-together.

[33] It is worth mentioning that in the movie version of this scene, Martha enters their much disheveled house and proceeds directly to the refrigerator. During this first sequence, after standing with the fridge door open, she grabs a chicken leg and eats it with gusto, all the while arguing with George with her mouth full of food. When she is finished, she throws the bone back in the fridge.

MARTHA. You didn't *do* anything; you never *mix*. You just sit around and *talk.*

GEORGE. What do you want me to do? Do you want me to act like you? Do you want me to go around all night *braying* at everybody, the way you do?

MARTHA. (*Braying*) I DON'T BRAY!

GEORGE. (*Softly*) All right…you don't bray. [34]

Just as Williams establishes the predatory relationship between Maxine Faulk and her victim Shannon in *Iguana,* in this opening sequence of *Virginia Woolf,* Albee quickly establishes another inverted power relationship, where the woman insists on controlling. Through George's witty responses to Martha's boisterous demands, Albee hints to the audience that she is the one who should be viewed as outrageous. As they await their guests, George reminds her to keep her clothes on and refrain from pulling her skirt over her head. He then quickly adds, "your heads, I should say." In addition to describing her as a monster, here we see Albee reference the stereotype that a woman who dominates verbally also has an uncontrollable sexual appetite, which is frequently linked to her appetite for food. I will return to that theme later in this chapter with some of Paula Vogel's characters. Within the opening sequence, prior to Nick and Honey's entrance, Albee finds one more opportunity to animalize Martha.

She and George are locked in a Mexican stand-off regarding who will open the door while Nick and Honey knock and wait politely outside. Martha has already asserted her power over George by insisting he make her a drink (a harbinger of her voracious alcohol consumption throughout the play), and declaring she will talk about whatever she wants despite George's admonitions. George finally breaks down, sarcastically uttering:

[34] Edward Albee, *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* (New York: Signet Publishing, 1962; reprint, 1983), 7.

> GEORGE. All right, love…whatever love wants. Isn't it nice the way some people have manners, though, even in this day and age? Isn't it nice that some people won't just come breaking into other people's houses even if they do hear some sub-human monster yowling at 'em from inside?[35]

And, as if to accent George's point, just as he flings open the door to let them in, Martha shouts "SCREW YOU!" for all the world to hear. The result is extremely comedic, and the combative couple's witty banter is a hallmark of the play's success. But it also illustrates George's inability to modify Martha's monstrous behavior. She cannot be controlled or contained.

Although the character description does not precisely call for an overweight actress or fat actress, the role of Martha has traditionally been played by women who can embody her larger-than-life character, and audiences seem to equate Albee's "boisterous, ample" Martha with an actress who is overweight or at least outside of the contemporary normative cultural aesthetic for an attractive female figure. (It was the film version of this play that inspired Liz Taylor to gain weight, which was openly part of the movie's promotion. It arguably increased her credibility as a "serious" actress, and she won an Oscar for her portrayal.) When Martha is played by a large or overweight actress, the casting taps into a well of cultural prejudices toward fat women as untamed and unsocialized. Certainly the way in which Albee stereotypes Martha's insatiable thirst for alcohol and sex harks back to an ancient trope of the powerful woman as an all-consuming monster.

In her book *Unbearable Weight*, Susan Bordo investigates the longstanding cultural intertwining of the female body with women's uncontrollable appetite for nourishment, sex, and power. She reminds us:

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[35] Ibid.,19.

> Mythological, artistic, polemical, and scientific discourses from many cultures and eras certainly suggest the symbolic potency of female hunger as a cultural metaphor for unleashed female power and desire, from the blood-craving Kali (who in one representation is show eating her own entrails) to the *Malleus Malificarum* ("for the sake of fulfilling the mouth of the womb, witches consort even with the devil.") [. . .] Female hunger as sexuality is represented by Western culture in misogynist images permeated with terror and loathing. [. . .] In the figure of the man eater the metaphor of the devouring woman reveals its deep psychological underpinnings. Eating is not really a metaphor for the sexual act; rather the sexual act, when initiated and desired by a woman, is imagined as itself an act of eating, of incorporation and destruction of the object of desire.[36]

Whether intentionally or not, Albee's Martha and Williams's Serafina, Maxine, and Leona are crafted by appealing to these cultural fears. It is no coincidence that these roles, especially Martha, have become associated with large or "overweight" actresses, because their size embodies the fat behavior associated with these stereotypes and prejudices.

In addition to characterizing Martha as sub-human via language, Albee demonstrates her monstrousness through her insatiable appetite. She "consumes" everything from ice to George's ego to sex to alcohol. Throughout the play, Martha swills copious amounts of alcohol, which only seem to sharpen her cruel wit. Early in the play, she boorishly tries to force George to give her a "sloppy kiss," and when he refuses, she demands another drink, suggesting a correlation between the kiss and the booze, as if they are interchangeable objects for consumption in Martha's eyes. If she cannot get into George's mouth, she will substitute the mouth of the glass. Her ability to drink straight liquor throughout the night and retain her wit (she tells George, "Look, sweetheart, I can drink you under any goddamn table […]"[37]) is contrasted to Honey's ladylike lack of tolerance for alcohol. Martha drinks like a man, and this too is a kind of fat behavior. As

[36] Susan Bordo, *Unbearable Weight: Feminism, Western Culture, and the Body* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), 116-17.
[37] Albee, *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* , 16.

he fixes their drinks, pointedly serving Martha her "rubbing alcohol," George reminisces about their early courting days, when she drank "real ladylike little drinkies."[38] In fact, as everyone else tries to keep up with Martha's boozing, Honey ends up getting sick in the bathroom, and Nick is eventually rendered impotent. George seems less affected, but Martha clearly retains her wits and her sexual appetite in a most unladylike way.

Later in the play, she again forces herself on George, and when he acquiesces and kisses her, she puts his hand on her breast. He refuses her and openly humiliates her for her "blue games in front of the guests."[39] Martha retaliates by seducing Nick, and when he fails to satisfy, her she verbally chews him up:

> MARTHA. (*Her glass to her mouth*) You're certainly a flop in some departments [. . .]
>
> NICK. I'm sorry you're disappointed.
>
> MARTHA. (*Braying*) I didn't say I was disappointed! Stupid!
>
> NICK. You should try me sometime when we haven't been drinking for ten hours, and maybe….
>
> MARTHA. (*Still braying*) I wasn't talking about your potential; I was talking about your goddamn performance.[40]

Not even a younger man can satisfy Martha's appetite.

Albee further establishes Martha as excessive in all her behavior by setting up Honey as a foil in terms of her physical size and more demure behavior. Honey may be as controlling as Martha, but her tactics are passive-aggressive. The men seem to appreciate this arguably more feminine version of manipulation. Martha describes her as "slim hipped" and throughout the play Honey's slim hips are openly discussed. In their first

[38] Ibid., 24.
[39] Ibid., 59.
[40] Ibid., 188.

private conversation, George and Nick compare their wives' ages and weight. George declares, "Martha is a hundred and eight…years *old*. She weighs somewhat more than that."[41] Later, out of nowhere, he blurts out: "Your wife doesn't have any hips….has she…does she?" As Nick reveals their story, Honey's slim hips become a symbol of her frailty and subservience, and George seems to long for a slim-hipped wife who embodies all the retiring qualities that Honey possesses. When Honey disappears into the bathroom to vomit, Nick says, "She …really shouldn't drink. She's frail. Uh, slim hipped, as you'd have it. [. . .] She gets sick quite easily." To which George ruefully replies, "Martha hasn't been sick a day in her life."[42] Martha's strapping constitution is negatively contrasted with Honey's sickliness, which seems to mark her as the more feminine of the two, although neither has proved fertile. Honey has "hysterical pregnancies," while Martha has "no pregnancies at all." Although both women are flawed in this regard, the inability to conceive on Martha's part is somehow painted as unnatural, subversive, even monstrous, when juxtaposed against Honey's hysteria, which is more feminine.

Naomi Wolf's *Beauty Myth* points out that the focus on the smallness of women's bodies has grown in the United States at the same time women's civil rights have arguably been increasing. She argues that "a cultural fixation on female thinness is not an obsession about female beauty but an obsession about female obedience."[43] It seems that Williams and Albee subscribe to this logic and suggest through their characters that the larger a woman's size, the less obedient she is by nature. If she can defy the national aesthetic with her physical form, audiences will assume that her

[41] Ibid., 35.
[42] Ibid., 90.
[43] Naomi Wolf, *The Beauty Myth: How Images of Beauty Are Used Against Women* (New York: Harper Perennial, 2002), 187.

behavior is equally subversive. Kathleen LeBesco points out the perceptual link between fat and rebellious behavior but repositions the traditional negativity associated with fat behavior into a positive. She views the "revolting body" as a political possibility when she asserts:

> [F]at people are widely represented in popular culture and interpersonal interactions as revolting—they are agents of abhorrence and disgust. But if we think about "revolting" in a different way, we can recognize fat as neither simply an aesthetic state nor a medical condition, but a political situation. If we think of revolting in terms of overthrowing authority, rebelling, protesting, and rejecting, then corpulence carries a whole new weight as a subversive practice [. . .].[44]

Certainly Martha's behavior, like that of Williams's Leona, does much to illustrate this culturally dictated supposition of fat behavior as "revolting" but with the negative connotations I have described throughout the chapter rather than the liberating qualities that Lebesco suggests.

Martha has failed to assimilate the cultural imperative that women contain themselves in terms of body size and outspokenness, while Honey (whose name implies her sweet submissiveness) does a better job of embodying the ideal American wife. Although it is eventually revealed that Honey is just as flawed and manipulative as Martha, her outward behavior is more culturally appropriate. She takes up very little space and rarely asserts herself except at her most intoxicated moments. Her dainty politeness, her deferential worship of her husband, her childish demeanor, and her inability to hold her liquor mark her as sufficiently obedient in stark contrast to Martha's loud-mouthed, irascible behavior. Even Martha's laugh is out of line. However, I am inclined to deconstruct Honey's vomiting and suggest that her body is actually rebelling

[44] Kathleen LeBesco and Jana Evans Braziel, ed., *Bodies out of Bounds: Fatness and Transgression* (Burbank: University of California Press, 2002), 1-2.

against these societal restraints. Unlike Martha, Honey is incapable of rebelling outwardly against her social role, but she resists passive-aggressively, which manifests physically in vomiting and false pregnancies.[45]

Critics of the 2005 Broadway revival could not resist discussion of Kathleen Turner's bodily appearance. The opening line of Ben Brantley's glowing *New York Times* review is "Which are you betting on? The body or the brain?" Among other praises he offers about her performance is her "lack of vanity."[46] In a subsequent article, Brantley tries to identify why *Virginia Woolf* was arguably more successful than the two nearly simultaneous Broadway revivals of Williams's plays, and he connects the success of the revival to Turner's appearance. He writes:

> Blanche, Amanda, and Martha have all been around the block a few times and on progressively unsteady feet. Yet of the three actresses playing them, only Ms. Turner looks as if she has been there, done that and paid the price. [. . .] Although Blanche and Amanda have suffered from hard times and bitter betrayals, Ms. Lange and Ms. Richardson have the faces (and bodies) of women who have known only passing acquaintance with worry. [47]

Brantley goes on to describe Turner's "boxy, unflattering suit that makes her look as frumpy as any middle-class, middle-aged professor's wife who doesn't think a lot about clothes." In other words, aside from Turner's acting skills, he seems to credit her successful interpretation of the role to her fifty-year-old appearance. He seems to suggest that Lange and Richardson were too attractive (i.e. slender and botoxxed) to effectively

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[45] In her article "The Body and Reproduction of Femininity," Susan Bordo makes a compelling argument for female associated disorders such as hysteria, anorexia, and agoraphobia as being involuntary responses to the patriarchal order through which women's bodies/minds pathologically resist subordination despite their outward attempts to comply. Honey's medical mishaps could potentially fall into this category. (In *Writing on the Body: Female Embodiment and Feminist Theory*; Conboy, Medina, and Stanbury eds., New York, Columbia Press, 1997).

[46] Ben Brantley, "Marriage as Blood Sport: A No Win Game," *New York Times*, March 21, 2005, http://nytimes.com/ (accessed October 10, 2005).

[47] Ben Brantley, "How the Divas Did It," *New York Times*, May 20, 2005, http://nytimes.com/ (accessed October 10, 2005).

portray heroines who have lived hard lives, while Turner's chunky appearance gave her the "worried" look that enhanced her interpretation. For a movie actress, Turner's appearance has changed significantly over her career. Her weight gain has garnered much attention in the press, like that of so many Hollywood actresses, but instead of becoming a marketing tool for a diet product, Turner, in this case at least, has parlayed her mature, nonsurgically enhanced body into an asset for playing stage roles that call for sexually aggressive, domineering women.[48]

With these characters created between 1951 and 1962, Williams and Albee solidify a kind of fat identity exemplified, if not literally when the texts call for a fat/big actress, then more symbolically, through depicting characters who exhibit fat behavior. Williams and Albee rely on the cultural construction of a fat woman as all-consuming and out of control. Serafina, Maxine, Leona, and Martha all display excessive qualities and destructive behaviors that consume the world around them. They love too passionately, like Serafina, or pursue sex immodestly, like Maxine and Martha. They all drink or eat too much and bully the men around them. As a general rule, the most successful portrayals of these roles have been by actresses who were overweight or somehow oversized or less attractive by contemporary cultural standards.

Breaking Boundaries: Paula Vogel's Hungry Women

This last grouping of plays from Paula Vogel's canon—the most recent plays in my discussion—represent a slightly different take on the idea of ravenous women. Although her characters are not necessarily described as fat or animalized the way

[48] Turner was also well reviewed for her portrayal of the aging seductress Mrs. Robinson in the stage production of *The Graduate* in 2002. Significantly, she also had a recurring role in the popular TV show *Friends* as Chandler's *dad*, who had had a sex-change operation and was now his lascivious mother.

Albee's and Williams's women are, they have their own version of fat behavior that frequently precipitates violence toward them. Many of her characters exceed physical or behavioral boundaries of what is culturally acceptable for women, and this creates or adds to the conflict within these plays. However, just as Neil LaBute's *Fat Pig*, the most recent play of the previous chapter, works *against* the fat stereotypes depicted in the earlier plays, the characters in Vogel's plays also in some ways refute the fat identity invoked by Williams and Albee. Some of the characters exhibit the fat behaviors I have discussed, but more significantly, all are *treated* as fat (in terms of negative responses) by the other characters. Vogel seems to object to the complicity Albee and Williams assume with the audience when they use fat to create antagonistic characters who victimize those around them with their fat behavior. Vogel inverts that established paradigm and creates protagonists who eat too much, are outspoken, or exceed their physical boundaries, and are themselves victimized by the other characters in the play. In other words, audiences recognize the fat behavior of Serafina, Maxine, Leona, and Martha as negative. On the other hand, Vogel's feminist take establishes her hungry women as sympathetic protagonists. The audience is meant to be on their side and to be disturbed when they are physically or emotionally brutalized.

At first glance, Paula Vogel's canon does not seem to be particularly body-conscious. Yet a closer look at many of her plays will reveal a surprising attention to physicality—both to women's bodies and to their consumption, or lack thereof. Female characters frequently discuss food in specific and sometimes erotic terms. And Vogel often calls attention to a character's appearance by way of pointing out a "flaw." Structurally speaking, Vogel's plays do not always fall neatly into the models of

American realism. Yet, her attention to creating characters with psychological truth, and the ways in which these characters express uniquely feminine details of body consciousness, creates a level of realism and pathos that audiences identify with. However, although Vogel is a highly regarded playwright, none of the plays I will discuss has been on Broadway, in contrast to the aforementioned Williams and Albee plays, of which only one did *not* see one or several Broadway productions. This suggests Vogel's primary audience is off-Broadway (nonprofit) theatre goers, and thus the play is part of a more restricted field of cultural production than Broadway.

In addition to embodying the sociopolitical values that are at the heart of Vogel's themes, woven into her complex tapestry of form and content, many of her female protagonists navigate the minefield of body loathing and food obsession that is associated with being an American woman. Vogel's characters attempt to negotiate and frequently violate American cultural boundaries of body size and consumption and are victimized by society for their transgressions. By looking at a cross-section of Vogel's plays, including *How I Learned to Drive* (1997), *Hot 'n' Throbbing* (1993), *Baltimore Waltz* (1990), and *The Oldest Profession* (1981), I will demonstrate how women's bodies become a site of danger when they exceed culturally acceptable boundaries of size. I will also examine the relationship between women's appetite for food and their sexual appetite.

The most recent of these plays, *How I Learned to Drive*, details the coming of age of L'il Bit under the specter of her pedophiliac uncle's care. The play was originally published in a two-play collection entitled *The Mammary Plays*, suggesting the

importance of breasts as an underpinning to those works.[49] Even L'il Bit's name points to the significance of body proportion in the character's trajectory. She was dubbed L'il Bit moments after she was born. Her mother, whose nickname is "The Titless Wonder," lovingly describes the moment when she discovered her infant lacked a penis stating that she "whipped your diapers down and parted your chubby little legs—and right there between your legs there was—just a little bit."[50] It is a nickname L'il Bit comes to hate as a teenager. However, her pre-pubescent physical status shields her from male attention and sexual violence that come to her only when her body matures. Indeed, her abundant breasts become a literal and metaphorical focal point of the play. It is true that large breasts are highly valued erotic signifiers in our culture (as opposed to fat elsewhere on the body), but in L'il Bit's case, her large breasts exceed normative boundaries of the female body (at least according to local standards) and thus expose her to physical and emotional danger.

Clearly L'il Bit's "assets" are a source of pride and admiration for her family:

L'IL BIT. 1969. A typical family dinner.

FEMALE GREEK CHORUS (As Mother). Look Grandma. L'il Bit's getting to be as big in the bust as you are.

L'IL BIT. Mother! Could we please change the subject? [. . .] (*To the audience*) This is how it always starts. My grandfather, Big Papa, will chime in next with—

MALE GREEK CHORUS (As Grandfather). Yup. If L'il Bit gets any bigger, we're gonna haveta buy her a wheelbarrow to carry in front of her—

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[49] *The Minneola Twins*, the other half of this collection, is a satirical piece that pits Myrna the "good twin" with large breasts against Myra the "evil twin," who is identical except for her small breasts. In some ways this works against my theory wherein larger bodies are victimized and smaller bodies are rewarded or at least shielded from male violence. At the same time, that the "evil twin" is small breasted reveals a flip side of the patriarchal aesthetics that dominate women's bodies in our culture.

[50] Paula Vogel, *How I Learned to Drive*, in *The Mammary Plays* (New York: Theatre Communications Group, 1998.)

L'IL BIT.—Damn it— [. . .]

MALE GREEK CHORUS (As Grandfather). –Or we could write to Kate Smith. Ask her for somma her used brassieres she don't want anymore—she could maybe give to L'il Bit here—

L'IL BIT.—I can't stand it. I can't.

PECK. Now, honey, that's just their way—

FEMALE GREEK CHORUS (As Mother). I tell you, Grandma, L'il Bit's at that age. She's sensitive, you can't say boo— [. . .]

MALE GREEK CHORUS (As Grandfather).Well, she'd better stop being so sensitive. 'Cause five minutes before L'il Bit turns the corner, her tits turn first.[51]

Grandfather goes on to suggest that a college education is wasted on her because her breasts are all the credentials she will need. In this conversation, her Uncle Peck plays the hero, sensitive to L'il Bit's dignity, and sides with her against Grandfather's barrage of misogynistic comments. When L'il Bit storms out in a huff, Peck follows her at Aunt Mary's urging. Here we begin to see that Peck has also noticed L'il Bit's breasts, with much more nefarious consequences for L'il Bit than embarrassment. Significantly, one of reasons that L'il Bit is attracted to Peck is his interest in her mind, but when he inadvertently uses language that objectifies her, she pulls away.

Later we see L'il Bit victimized by her peers—both boys and girls—for her abundant breasts. She describes her boobs as "alien life-forces" that will eventually devour her and envisions them as radio transmitters that send out signals to mesmerize men. Like the Sirens, her breasts lure hapless men to dash themselves on the "rocks" of her chest. However, ultimately it is L'il Bit herself who is broken by these mammary-rocks as the object of Peck's concupiscence.

[51] Ibid., 15-16.

I am not arguing that Peck's predatory behavior would be different toward L'il Bit if she happened to be flat-chested. Indeed, larger breasts suggest a mature woman's body, which would seem to go against Peck's proclivity for young girls. Yet at the same time they give her the perfect Virgin /Whore appearance that pop icons such as Britney Spears and Lindsay Lohan have popularized—essentially a child with a woman's body. Certainly, it is not only L'il Bit's breasts that make her desirable to Peck. But Vogel deliberately includes this detail not only as a signifier of the slippage between girlhood and womanhood, but also, I suggest, as a sign that on a certain level, L'il Bit's large, real breasts lack ladylike containment. These protuberances enter the room before her and have a personality of their own. In other words, they take up too much space in the same way a fat woman's body does. L'il Bit's breasts exceed spatial boundaries of the body, which, in Vogel's world, mark her for unwanted attention or violence. However, unlike Williams's and Albee's characters, excessive size does not necessarily denote consumerism but a threat to patriarchal order, which must be contained. Vogel employs feminist and Brechtian dramaturgy in order to turn a humanistic mirror on this world where women are violated because of their size and appetites.

In her article "Letting Ourselves Go," Cecelia Hartley summarizes the feminine ideal and the importance of the production of "docile bodies" in American culture:

> Modern American standards require that the ideal feminine body be kept small. A woman is taught early to contain herself, to keep her arms and legs close to her body and take up as little space as possible. This model of femininity suggests that real women are thin, nearly invisible. The women idealized as perfect these days are little more than waifs. The average fashion model today weighs 23 percent less than the average woman; a generation ago the gap was only 8 percent. Not surprisingly, those women who claim more than their share of territory are regarded with suspicion. [. . .] Fat oppression carries the less-than-subtle message that women are forbidden to take up space (by being large of body) or resources (by eating food ad libitum). [. . .] Men are under no

> such size restrictions and are allowed—often encouraged—to take up as much space as they can get away with. But when a woman's stature or girth approaches or exceeds that of a man, she becomes something freakish. By becoming large, whether with fat tissue or muscle mass, she implicitly violates the sexual roles that place her in subordination to the man.[52]

Her breasts cannot be contained. Because of L'il Bit's youth, she does not have a sense of ownership of her breasts yet; they victimize her. (The play depicts L'il Bit primarily between the ages of eleven and eighteen. Her first sexual encounter with Peck occurs when she is twelve, and she has fully developed breasts by the age of thirteen.) But she lives in a world where the more womanly one's appearance is (e.g. full hips and breasts, rounder curves), the more imperiled one is at the hands of misogynistic or cultural violence. Indeed, a similar theme emerges in *Hot 'N' Throbbing*.

The Woman in *Hot 'N' Throbbing* also fails to contain her body, but her crime is even greater than L'il Bit's. According to the text, she is actually overweight, which is presumably something she can control but does not. Thus, the consequences the Woman faces for violating American cultural boundaries of body size are even direr than those L'il Bit endures. The character never directly addresses the issue of her weight, but Vogel is careful to include details that are intrinsic to understanding her as an American woman with a "weight problem." The Woman is described in the list of characters as an "on-again, off-again member of Weight Watchers."[53] Early in the play, her fourteen-year-old daughter demonstrates that she has already internalized the importance of weight control as a beauty standard. She actually teases the Woman (her mom) in response to her parental concern about the appropriateness of her outfit:

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[52] Cecelia Hartley, "Letting Ourselves Go: Making Room for the Fat Body in Feminist Scholarship," in *Bodies Out of Bounds: Fatness and Transgression*, eds Jana Evans Braziel and Kathleen LeBesco (Berkely: University of California Press, 2001) 62.

[53] Paula Vogel, *Hot 'N' Throbbing*, in *Baltimore Waltz and Other Plays* (New York: Theatre Communications Group, 1996.)

WOMAN. Those pants are too tight. Did you spray paint them on?

GIRL. Betcha wish you had my thighs, huh Ma?

WOMAN. We are not discussing the subject of my thighs. You are not leaving this house dressed like that. [54]

It is obvious from this brief exchange that the Woman's thighs *have* been a topic of conversation, which is only too typical for any woman raised in this country.[55]

Hartley asserts that "the idealized female body has been culturally encoded to mark a woman as physically passive, taking up little space, and non-self-nurturing. To the extent the fat body has been vilified as marking a woman who refuses to accept that prescribed construction, a place must be made in feminist scholarship for theorizing the fat body in ways that acknowledge the power of her refusal."[56] The Woman's refusal or failure to comply with the Man's (or culture's) standard of thin beauty marks her as, if not openly defiant, then subversive. There may be power in her refusal, as Hartley asserts, but in homogenized American culture, she is courting social opprobrium with her figure. The Woman is not only overweight, but she writes erotica, which is also outside the sphere of ideal feminine behavior. In this way, she exhibits unruly behavior, which correlates to her unruly body size. The fact that she has the audacity to shoot her (overweight) husband in the butt further points to her failure to adhere to societal constraints. She is completely *out of control,* as all fat people are. Her failure to tame her body is manifested in her feisty behavior and is deeply threatening to the Man.

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[54] Ibid., 238.

[55] A *Glamour* study (February 1984) that has been replicated many times polled 33,000 women, and 75 percent considered themselves too fat, while only 25 percent were actually above Metropolitan Life Insurance Standards and 30 percent were actually below. Other studies have shown that women would prefer to be mean or stupid rather than be perceived as overweight. One need only glance at the header to virtually every woman's magazine at the average newsstand to guess that many American women are either obsessed with their weight or constantly barraged with media that say they should be.

[56] Hartley, "Letting Ourselves Go," 71.

Later in the play, another brief exchange hints that the Man (her ex-husband, who has a history of abusive behavior) has likely used the Woman's weight as a way to manipulate, control, and crush her self-esteem. He baits the Woman by commenting on her size:

> MAN. You're looking good. Filling out a little bit?
>
> WOMAN. I've quit smoking. Or I'm trying to—
>
> MAN. It looks good on you…really…[57]

This exchange begins the downward spiral that will ultimately end in violence. He continues to bait and tease her by telling her that her business card, which features a rhinoceros in a g-string, "looks a little like you—*before* Weight Watchers." He systematically dismantles her esteem by going on to insult everything about her work. He wears her down to the point of agreeing to have sex with him. Despite brief intrusions by both the children, they are about to get to business when she reveals that she keeps condoms in the house to "be prepared." Something inside the Man snaps.

The Woman not only fails to contain her big body, but her possession of condoms suggests that she does not curb her sexual desires. Ironically, her willingness to engage in sex with the Man, her ex-husband and the father of her children, points to her inability to control her appetite. Thus she has violated culturally ascribed boundaries of both size and consumption. As the Man attacks her he says (through the mouthpiece of The Voice, one of the Brechtian techniques Vogel employs):

> THE VOICE. I'm beating you to teach you a lesson. Understand? And I'll stop when I feel like it. Bitch. What makes you think with your big fat butt and your cow thighs, that you're worth eighteen bucks? Huh? What man would pay for that?[58]

[57] Vogel, *Hot 'N' Throbbing*, 356.
[58] Ibid., 292.

He directly associates her weight with her insubordination toward him. The manipulation of a woman's self-esteem is a typical spousal abuse pattern, but Vogel opts to make the Woman's weight a focal point. Even though it is the condoms that set off the man, he doesn't insult her with such "common" pejoratives as whore, slut, etc.; rather he berates her for being fat. Her oversized body marks her as uncontrollable, possibly even powerful, and the Man takes back control by strangling her with his belt. The Woman's suffering exceeds L'il Bit's in correlation with their relative infractions of cultural boundaries of body size. L'il Bit was merely naturally busty and lives to tell her sad tale, while the Woman was guilty of the ultimate infraction—being overweight. Her "deliberate" violation of societal codes invites the violence that she receives. In both cases, their abundant bodies cross over spatial boundaries prescribed for the ideal woman in American culture.

The Baltimore Waltz and *The Oldest Profession* depict characters violating cultural boundaries in a different way, living another kind of fat identity. But they too are eventually crushed for their transgressions. Their body size is not necessarily the issue, but their physical and emotional appetites, or their fat behavior, which is inevitably linked to sexual voraciousness. Susan Bordo calls the models of contemporary slenderness a "metaphor for the correct management of desire."

> [T]hroughout dominant Western religious and philosophical traditions, the capacity for self-management is decisively coded as male. By contrast, all bodily spontaneities—hunger, sexuality, the emotions—seen as needful of containment and control have been culturally constructed and coded as female. The management of specifically female desire, therefore, is in phallocentric cultures a doubly freighted problem. Women's desires are by their very nature excessive, irrational, threatening to erupt and challenge the patriarchal order.[59]

[59] Bordo, *Unbearable Weight: Feminism, Western Culture, and the Body*. 205-6.

The character of Anna in Vogel's *The Baltimore Waltz* perfectly illustrates the connection between a woman's hunger and her sexual desire. Anna, a first-grade teacher, has lived a very modest humdrum life until she and her brother Carl travel to Europe to find a cure for her A.T.D. (Acquired Toilet Disease), which we come to find out is only a fantasy of what might have happened. It is significant that Anna only indulges her hunger and her sexual desires in this alternate reality. Through brief, hilarious episodic scenes, Vogel traces the siblings' progress through major European cities. They arrive in Paris early in the trip, and Anna experiences European cuisine for the first time. She is spiritually transported because she has spent her life controlling her appetite and eating bland, convenient, pseudo-"healthy" prepackaged food, which is the hallmark of the American diet. The Garçon lusciously narrates (with a hint of satire) Anna's experience with French cuisine:

> GARÇON (*With thick Peter Sellers French*). It was a simple bistro affair by French standards. He had le veau Prince Orloff, she le boeuf à la mode—a simple dish of haricots verts and médoc to accompany it all. He barely touched his meal. She mopped the sauces with the bread. As their meal progressed, Anna thought of the lunches she packed back home. For the past ten years, hunched over in the faculty room at McCormick Elementary, this is what Anna ate: on Mondays, pressed chip chicken sandwiches on white; on Tuesdays, soggy tuna sandwiches; on Wednesdays, Velveeta cheese and baloney; on Thursdays, drier pressed chicken on now stale white bread; on Fridays, Velveeta and Tuna. She always had a small wax envelope of carrot sticks or celery, and a can of Diet Pepsi. Anna, as she ate in the bistro, wept. What could she know of love?
>
> CARL. Why are you weeping?
>
> ANNA. It's just so wonderful.
>
> CARL. You're a goose.
>
> ANNA. I've wasted over thirty years on convenience foods.

(*The Garçon approaches the table*)

GARÇON. Is everything all right?

ANNA. Oh god. Yes…yes—it's wonderful.

CARL. My sister would like to see the dessert tray.

(*Anna breaks out in tears again. [. . .]*)[60]

Anna relates to the food with a lover's passion and responds to the Garçon's inquiry breathlessly—even erotically. This scene marks the awakening of her insatiable appetite, and it is no coincidence that in the next scene she is in bed with the Garçon. In fact, this sensual epiphany unleashes Anna's promiscuous behavior, which eventually begins to alienate her brother Carl. At each new location, she picks up a man to have sex with. By indulging her appetite for food, she has released her sexual beast within, and her appetite is boundless. She is Kali threatening to devour the world. [61]

Although Anna is not described as fat in the text, the character's fixation on food and sex constitute her fat behavior, and she lives a kind of fat identity. Casting in the original and subsequent productions seems to reflect this implied fatness and has often leaned toward large actresses. The role was originated by Cherry Jones (recall that this "big-boned" actress also played Josie in *Moon for the Misbegotten*) and, more recently, Kristen Johnston was fairly well reviewed as Anna in the 2004 Signature Theater revival. Johnston is extremely tall and large-featured for an actress.[62] Charles Isherwood was less

[60] Paula Vogel, *The Baltimore Waltz* in *The Baltimore Waltz and Other Plays* (New York: Theatre Communications Group, 1996), 20-1.

[61] Refer back to the Susan Bordo quote earlier in this chapter, which discusses the trope of female hunger as female sexuality that is often represented in Western Culture in misogynistic images permeated with terror and loathing. This dates back to ancient cultures and extends to contemporary rock lyrics such as Hall and Oates, "Oh, oh here she comes, watch out boys she'll chew you up."

[62] Johnston is arguably "fat" by Hollywood standards. But a recent article in the *L.A. Times* in which she discusses how a burst ulcer caused her to lose sixty pounds, and the tabloids assumed she was trying to get her career back on track, suggest that indeed the actress is perceived within the industry as overweight.

impressed with her performance despite her size. He called her a "blunt instrument, wielding her larger-than-life presence for maximum comic effect," which he felt was inappropriate. [63] Elyse Sommer of *Curtain Up* compared Johnston's performance favorably to Cherry Jones's and described her as "imposingly tall" and "robust."[64]

The awakening of Anna's appetite is certainly not the centerpiece of *The Baltimore Waltz*, but Vogel does include explicit details about the kinds on "non-foods" Anna has previously limited herself to, and there is no denying the connection between her licentious behavior and her discovery of good food. If we consider starvation a sort of insidious cultural violence inflicted on women, then Anna has been victimized and forced to contain herself for fear of losing control. Indeed, once she allows herself to enjoy food (in her alternate reality), she does "lose control" and engage in sexual activity that would be considered appropriate for a man but out of bounds for a woman. Arguably she is "punished" for her transgressive behavior, first by Carl's jealousy, which manifests in some cruel taunts, and then by Carl's death, which snaps her back to stark reality. Here she is asked on a date by Carl's doctor but refuses, having returned to her controlled reality. Yet in Anna and Carl's fantastic parallel universe, perhaps if she had never—to use the fat metaphor—"let herself go," she could have saved Carl.

Like Anna, Vera, Ursula, and Edna in *The Oldest Profession* also have very complicated relationships with food. Vogel describes this as a pattern play derived from the simplest of models—a traditional nursery song: "There are five blackbirds sitting on a

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Micahel Ordona, "Kristen Johnston Steals the Scene," http://www.latimes.com/entertainment/news/movies/la-et-performance8-2009jan08,0,1423636.story (accessed February 27, 2009).

[63] Charles Isherwood, "Death-Defying Fantasy Fueled by Love When AIDS Was a Nameless Intruder," *New York Times*, December 6, 2004, http://newyorktimes.com/ (accessed December 7, 2008).

[64] Elyse Sommer, "Review: Baltimore Waltz," December 12, 2004, http://www.curtainup.com/baltimorewaltz.html (accessed December 1, 2008).

fence fly away blackbird. There are four blackbirds sitting on a fence, fly away blackbird." etc.[65] The play tells the story of five elderly prostitutes struggling for survival in New York City shortly after the election of Ronald Reagan. It opens with Vera's lengthy homage to her last meal:

> VERA. […] and so last night I thought a bit of fish would be nice for supper—not too heavy, not too light—so I bought just the nicest bit of fish at Joe's—fresh, pink—much nicer than the fish store up at 89th street; their fish isn't fresh at all; […] lemon sole it was, very good and tender. I do so love a nice bit of lemon sole. I melted some unsalted butter in the skillet, and chopped up oh, about this much scallion, and then I just sautéed it on each side until it flaked with a fork and then just squeezed lemon and parsley over it—and I tell you, it melted in my mouth. Just melted. [66]

This speech opens the play in a fun, casual way and provides the set-up for a "fish joke" in reference to women's genitalia. It also provides an important window into Vera's character. Like Anna, she describes the whole experience in a sensual manner. She revels in using her bare hands to measure the ingredients. And it is in most rapturous terms that she tells her colleagues "it melted in my mouth." It is the stuff "locker-room talk" is made of, except it is about food. It is no surprise that Vera turns out to be the most sensitive of the women, the one who seems to like her job the most (with the possible exception of Edna). It is also Vera who gets the most emotionally involved with her clients, going to visit them when they are incapacitated, and attending their funerals, even going so far as to reach into the casket for one last fondle. Like her fat predecessors, Vera is emotionally excessive relative to her peers in the sex industry. Ursula, the most businesslike of the bunch, is constantly criticizing Vera for spending too much time with

[65] Beth Whitaker, ed., "Finding the Happy Day." Interview with Paula Vogel in *The Signature Edition*, Vol. 7, No. 1. (New York: 2004).
[66] Vogel, "The Baltimore Waltz," 131.

her clients, one of whom she "likes to cuddle with," another whom she "holds when he cries."

Throughout the play, Vera returns to food as her touchstone. After the first blackout, lights rise on Vera passionately describing the raspberries she shared with Lillian, who has just passed away. The speech is a continuation of her lengthy celebration of berries that closed the previous scene. After the third blackout, which marks the loss of Ursula, Vera and Edna share some chocolate. They pause, allowing the chocolate to melt in their mouths, genuinely enjoying the sensual experience of the food despite their troubles.

Edna also embodies the connection between sensuality and emotional attachment to food. She is the most raucous of the four prostitutes and makes no bones about enjoying her sex and her meals. One of Edna's biggest complaints when they strike to protest Ursula's management is that she is being forced to rush her lunch—an *hour* just is not enough. That she requires more than an hour to properly digest suggests something about her enjoyment of food and reverence for a meal. Like Vera, Edna is also the most likely to affectionately describe an encounter with a customer with sensual detail:

> EDNA. […] and I rub the bristles on his face and say 'shave this mug!' And then he rubs his beard on my face and I scream. And sometimes he says 'Edna you've got to marry me' […] he's my good-time papa that's what I call him. I like to sit on his knee and put my hands under his shirt. I like his smell—[67]

Here again we find a correlation between a character's appetite for food and sex. Like Vera, Edna unabashedly delights in food. It is a cornerstone of their friendship.

After the fourth blackout, lights come up on Vera desperately trying to engage Edna's interest in food. She shrugs off Vera's attention, having lost the joie de vivre that

[67] Ibid., 170.

made food and sex pleasurable. Furthermore, it is the lost reverence for personal, elegant food preparation and the emphasis on tasteless convenience food that kills Edna's "food libido."

> VERA. How about if I go get something nice and light at the corner deli—what about a BLT on toasted rye, the way you like it?
>
> EDNA. (*In a trance*) I don't know, take that BLT. You look at it and see a nice BLT, the way I used to. But now it's all different. [. . .] there's a factory that's designed to make the bacon package somewhere; machines that do nothing else but cut the cardboard. And then there's the rye…someone is in a factory right now who's sole job is taking care of those little seeds…thousands of loaves on the conveyor belt being sliced and wrapped, loaded into big, greasy trucks… thousands and thousands just to make that one BLT.
>
> VERA. (*Alarmed*) Edna!!
>
> EDNA. I'm not hungry.
>
> VERA. Look, I care. What if I made something from scratch…nothing out of a can.[68]

In the monologue that follows, Vera's description of cooking with her mother is a seduction, a las- ditch effort to engage Edna in her old pleasures of sensuality. Tragically, Vera has correctly identified the loss of Edna's appetite as the harbinger of her death, and after the last blackout, lights come up on Vera alone.[69]

Ursula, on the other hand, embodies the ultimate in detachment—or so we think—until after her death. She is the most controlling, least sentimental, and most driven of the women. She might even be described as "masculine" in her highly disciplined self-management in contrast to the stereotype of women (not just fat women, but any woman) as hypersensitive and more emotionally volatile. She gets annoyed when

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[68]Ibid., 171.

[69] In the 2004 production at the Signature Theatre in New York, the actress playing Vera sits quietly for a moment before foraging in a garbage can to eat unwanted crusts of food. The irony that the most sensual consumer of them all is reduced to eating scraps of garbage is heartbreaking and also stands as a warning to women who allow their appetites to rule their judgment.

they discuss food or show any emotional attachment to their clients. Yet we discover after her death that she has been hoarding bags of sugar. Sugar was the mysterious commodity more "solid than gold, more stable than oil." The woman who took no sensual pleasure in life and had no cravings either for food or sex secretly stockpiled bags of sugar, shamefully hiding and forcibly containing her appetite for sweets. Vera or Edna would have baked with or eaten the sugar, but in order to maintain self-control and emotional detachment, Ursula methodically piled containers of this "forbidden fruit" in her room. She kept it near, but never allowed herself to actually indulge in the sweetness, perhaps for fear of becoming as voraciously out of control as Vera or Edna.

I am not suggesting that Vogel's plays (or Williams's or Albee's plays for that matter) are *primarily* about women's bodies and/or the complexities of female consumption. However, tucked in among weightier themes of incest, sexual abuse, domestic violence, political interrogation, and AIDS are undeniable allusions to American prejudice against women's bodies. Vogel's characters consistently violate spatial boundaries of appropriate body size or wrestle with hunger, either willfully containing or indulging their appetites, with no small consequences. Frequently, we see a direct correlation between a character's sexual desire and her appetite for food. Those who "let themselves go" either by gaining weight or slaking their desires for food and sex inevitably meet with tragedy. The message in Vogel's plays seems to be that in order to ensure personal and emotional safety, women must remain within the boundaries of socially acceptable size and culturally mandated appetite.

Conclusion

This chapter explores eight texts written between 1951 and 1997, all of which engage cultural constructions of the (fat) woman as violating social and spatial boundaries or as out of control—a ravenous consumer with no restrictions. The earlier characters created by Williams and Albee are frequently "maneaters." They are sexually aggressive, outspoken, and hard drinkers, among other fat behaviors. They are aggressors who disrupt the world of the play and threaten (sometimes quite literally) the characters around them. The fat behaviors of Vogel's characters are arguably more subtle, and in the case of L'il Bit, have to do more with her proportions than her actions. But, in each case, Vogel's women exceed accepted cultural boundaries of size or behavior, which results in violence directed back at them. They are victims. Vogel rejects the stereotypes invoked by her male predecessors and aims to expose the misogyny inherent in the assumptions made by them and the audience when fat behavior is equated with destructive consumerism. For me, these examples suggest a lived fat identity—a societally imposed construct based on assumptions about women's bodies. Body type becomes a code, or a semaphore, for a certain kind of behavior.

CH IV: Black Fat and Queer Fat

As a counterpoint to exploring texts written by white playwrights about white women and geared toward a homogenous, white, heteronormative middle-class audience, this chapter examines plays, some of which were written by men and women of color and some that were written by queer artists, that feature women of color or lesbian characters.[1] In this chapter, I argue that in various modes of representation there is a connection between fat and racial or sexual otherness. In addition to asking how white-middle class American audiences read a big black body versus a big white body in representation, I theorize about the link between fat and racial or sexual difference as depicted in cultural texts. Many feminists have critiqued medical discourse dating back to the seventeenth century as well as persistent cultural assumptions and representations in media that label the black female as more primitive and therefore more sexualized. On one hand, the accepted cultural aesthetic for a black woman's body allows for a much fuller figure than those of white women. Indeed, Americans are inculcated with the stereotype of the big fat black woman as a beloved mother figure, full of sassy remarks and motherly wisdom, or as powerful and domineering, but either way commanding respect. A domineering fat white woman in representation, however, is more frequently an object of ridicule and shame. At the same time, both big black women and fat white women are similarly sexualized in representation. Fat, like race, is something worn on the outside. It is immediately visible to the spectator. This chapter explores the complex

[1] With the possible exception of *The Secretaries*, which nevertheless has gone on to see college productions and off-off Broadway revivals (including most recently in May of 2009 at the 78th Street Theatre Lab), these plays were written with the same homogenous, white, middle-/upper-middle-class commercial audience in mind, and their content capitalizes on assumptions made by this audience about fat, race, and class.

interplay between fatness and racial or sexual otherness through plays including August Wilson's *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom* (1984); Suzan-Lori Parks's *Venus* (1995); the musical *Hairspray* (2002); Frank Marcus's *The Killing of Sister George* (1965), which exploits the stereotype of the fat lesbian, and finally, *The Secretaries* (1994), which explodes cultural stereotypes surrounding women and bodyweight through the satirical lens of the queer feminist playwrights who are known as the Five Lesbian Brothers.[2]

First I will explore the overlap between cultural assumptions surrounding fat white women and fat black women in representation, and then I will look at the subtle alliance between fat bodies and queer (gay) bodies in representation. Before discussing the plays, I will briefly position the black female body as well as the fat black female body in contemporary cultural representations. Both share with their fat white sisters a position outside white heteronormative notions of normalcy and beauty. In his essay "Black Bodies, White Bodies: Toward an Iconography of Female Sexuality in Late Nineteenth-Century Art, Medicine, and Literature," Sander Gilman explores the ways in which the black female body became an "icon for deviant sexuality." He illustrates through nineteenth-century paintings, lithographs, and ultimately scientific discourse of that era how black female bodies were sexualized and understood as animal-like in their sexual appetites. He notes that these narratives were created in order to position black sexuality (and beauty) as antithetical to the white European woman. One of Gilman's primary examples, the exploitation of Saartjie Baartman, the African indentured servant who was displayed throughout Europe as an oddity, perfectly illustrates European

[2] I am using the term queer as it has been established in the academy by theorists such as Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick and Judith Butler. "Queer" is a political position of identity that rejects the homo/heterosexual binary and proudly embraces variant sexualities and gender positions. For the purposes of this chapter, my examples are primarily lesbians, but gay men are also sometimes included in the queer/fat dynamic I am exploring.

attitudes and fascination toward the black female body. Baartman's body had the common attributes of the African Khoi tribe, which included large buttocks or steatopygia, as well as extended outer labia, which were referred to in European medical discourse as "the Hottentot apron." Indeed, Baartman was known as "The Venus Hottenot" and was displayed by her owners in freak shows and even occasionally at wealthy dinner parties where men (and sometimes women) were invited to stare at her "extreme buttocks" and, for additional fees, to touch or poke her. She was not the only African slave in Europe to be exhibited in this manner during this era. Gilman notes that Victorians essentially conflated the protruding female black buttocks with what they regarded as the anomalies of a black woman's genitalia. They also closely associated the black body with prostitution and prostitutes who, according to many nineteenth-century scientific publications, generally exhibited a "peculiar plumpness."[3] The Victorian amalgam of the black woman's exotic, round body with that of plump prostitutes' bodies furthered the assumption of unbridled sexual appetite for both categories of women. The fascination with the (fat) black woman's non-European physical characteristics, as well as the commodification and sexualization of her person, laid the groundwork for the ways in which contemporary white America continues to view the black female body as primitive and sexually voracious. Indeed, as feminist theorist bell hooks points out, many black female entertainers such as Tina Turner and Diana Ross have capitalized on this stereotype, deliberately marketing themselves as "sexual savages" as part of their

[3] Sander L. Gilman, "Black Bodies, White Bodies: Toward an Iconography of Female Sexuality in Late Nineteenth Century Art, Medicine, and Literature," in *The Feminism and Visual Culture Reader*, ed. Amelia Jones (New York: Routledge, 2003), 50.

successful promotion.[4] The presumption of black women's rapacious, possibly deviant sexuality aligns them with fat white women, who are also assumed to have insatiable sexual appetites, as their fat appearance suggests an inability to control their lust not only for food but also for sex. In this way, fatness and blackness intersect in the American cultural landscape.

In her book *The Embodiment of Disobedience: Fat Black Women's Unruly Political Bodies* (2006), Andrea Elizabeth Shaw expands on this idea.

> This assessment of fatness and blackness as highly sexualized concomitantly supports a Western Patriarchal ideal of chastity and restraint as behavioral demonstrations of beauty. Within the parameters of western hegemonic culture, black and fat women are incapable of sexual modesty because their very bodies, sexually active or not, are poignant sexual signifiers, permanently situating women who bear these features as sexually uninhibited, lacking sexual/bodily control and uncontrollable.[5]

According to Shaw's quote above, a woman who is fat and black is doubly marked as hypersexual, first by her black skin and then by her fat.

As I mentioned, another cultural stereotype that continues to dominate representations of fat black women in particular is the "Mammy" character as embodied by Hattie McDaniel in *Gone with the Wind* or in advertising by Aunt Jemima or the original Quaker Oats trademark. Shaw unpacks the various ways the "Mammy type" plays into cultural readings of fat black women. She notes that generally, when black women manage to fit into ideals of Western beauty, they mimic white physiology and

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[4] bell hooks, "Selling Hot Pussy: Representations of Black Female Sexuality in the Cultural Marketplace," in *Writing on the Body: Female Embodiment and Feminist Theory*, eds. Nadia Medina, Katie Conboy, Sarah Stanbury, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997) 113-28

[5] Andrea Elizabeth Shaw, *The Embodiment of Disobedience: Fat Black Women's Unruly Political Bodies* (New York: Lexington Books, 2006).

behavior, such as when the light-skinned, green-eyed, slender Vanessa Williams became the first black Miss America.[6] On the other hand, she notes that fat black women find acceptance through embracing a different cultural stereotype:

> [W]hite patriarchal embrace of Mammy's fictional and commercial image in the United States alternately masks and communicates an effort to elide blackness through exaggeration. The result is a formulated and unrepresentative staging of black womanhood that conforms to a white hegemonic ideal of an acquiescent, subordinate, and nondisruptive version of black femininity. [. . .] The fictional image of the large Mammy lumbering around the plantation great house, an image reproduced in films such as *Gone With the Wind* (1936), also serves the white patriarchy by helping to more firmly define patriarchal imperatives for white women. As a physical embodiment of features rejected by Western Beauty criteria, Mammy becomes a shadow against which white woman's beauty may be foregrounded. As a dominant image of the "other," Mammy helps sustain the rhizomic connection of economic, gendered and racial oppression by defining the opposite physical standards by which white female identity is formed. [7]

However, Shaw also goes on to point out the inherent contradiction in the fat black woman's body when she posits that at the same time, "Her fatness signals an infinite reserve of maternal dedication, suggesting an inability of black women to be oppressed since their supply of strength, love, and other emotional resources can never be depleted."[8]

Following Shaw's analysis above of fat black women's bodies simultaneously representing the antithesis of white feminine beauty and signifying infinite resources of power, I assert that arguably one of the greatest anxieties toward fat *white* women's bodies is that they are crossing race lines. A fat *white* woman's body contradicts conventional Western European ideals of beauty which, both Gilman and Shaw note, is

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[6] It is worth mentioning that Vanessa Williams was actually forced to give up her crown in 1984 following the unauthorized circulation of some nude photos she had posed for prior to her pageant days. She posed erotically with another woman simulating lesbian sex. Unfortunately for Williams, the photos corroborated American anxieties about black female sexuality that I discuss in this chapter.
[7] Shaw, *The Embodiment of Disobedience: Fat Black Women's Unruly Political Bodies*, 20.
[8] Ibid., 21.

precisely the threat that fat black bodies pose to white patriarchal hegemony. Furthermore, it follows from Gilman's and Shaw's arguments that within Western culture we have racialized fat and connect fat to the black or dark-skinned "other." Thus, fat white female bodies are linked to blackness and fat black (female) bodies in various modes of cultural representation. If, as Shaw asserts, the fatness of a black woman suggests an infinite reserve of strength and internal resources, it is not a far step to view the fat white woman's body as representing similar unbounded power. Both threaten the white male hegemonic equilibrium.

Big Black Butts

The fat black female posterior, in particular, continues to be fetishized, sexualized, and acknowledged as a contested site of cultural assumptions. Indeed, the fat black woman's big buttocks have become a provocative symbol through which to explore racial tension as exemplified by the title of August Wilson's *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom* ("Black Bottom" being the title of an early twentieth-century blues classic) and the subject matter of Suzan-Lori Parks's *Venus*. The big black (female) butt has a remarkable place in popular culture. Various cultural texts have appropriated the big black butt as a symbol of feminine black power and sexuality. Examples range from Granny Nanny, a nineteenth-century Jamaican folk hero who rescued slaves and led a rebellion against English colonists, who is mythologized in oral tradition as having stopped English bullets with her large buttocks, to rapper Sir Mix-A-Lot's 1993 double-Grammy-winning song, "Baby Got Back," which notoriously celebrates the black female derrière with the opening lyrics: "I like big butts and I cannot lie, [. . .]," and then goes on to rejoice in

black "bubble butts" and criticize small (white) butts as shown in *Cosmopolitan* magazine.[9]

With its provocative title, the first play in my discussion, August Wilson's *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom* (1984), capitalizes on the cultural fascination with big black butts. As I mentioned, "Black Bottom" is the name of an early American blues song that went through many incarnations of lyrics in which "black bottom" was a (depressed) geographic location as well as a body part, but the lyrics, popularized by Ma Rainey, one of the early recording icons of jazz, also refer to the black bottom as a dance that calls attention to said body part. It is not hard to imagine Rainey, whose performances were notorious for their overt sexuality, emphasizing her rotund figure as part of her routine.[10] The lyrics are loaded with double entendre and include suggestive lines such as:

> All the boys in the neighborhood
> They say your black bottom is really good
> Come on and show me your black bottom
> I want to learn that dance
> I want to see the dance you call your black bottom[11]

The play is part of Wilson's cycle of ten plays that aim to capture the African American experience in each decade of the twentieth century. Wilson bases his character on the real Gertrude "Ma" Rainey as an emblem of black exploitation and oppression in 1920s America.

The real Ma Rainey was a full-bodied performer who seemed to understand the power of spectacle as it related to her physical appearance and her stage persona. She was the first female blues singer to rise to fame and one of the earliest female blues recording

[9] Ibid., 9. See Shaw for Granny Nanny and http://www.azlyrics.com/lyrics/sirmixalot/babygotback.html for lyrics to "Baby Got Back" by Sir Mix-A-Lot (accessed June 15, 2009).
[10] Ibid., 108-12. See Shaw for more detailed discussion of Rainey's performance style.
[11] August Wilson, *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom* (New York: Plume, 1981), 86.

artists. She wore outlandish costumes that emphasized her large size and wore makeup that was intended to lighten her features but by many accounts actually made her look more yellowish under the lights and further enhanced her extreme appearance. Her songs were openly sexual and frequently about aggressive women with passionate emotions and appetites. In a sense, Ma Rainey's cultivated stage persona was one of the first to capitalize on white assumptions about the unbridled animal sexuality of black women. Her full figure and extravagant costumes were prominently featured in her promotional material. She became known as the "ugliest woman in show business." Harking back to Shaw's earlier quote about the connection between Western standards of beauty and patriarchal behavioral ideals of chastity and restraint, it is no surprise that the obstreperous, visually fat Rainey was given this nickname. Perhaps because of her willingness to embrace, indeed highlight, the "otherness" of her appearance as a fat black woman, Rainey was extremely successful, especially considering the racial oppressiveness of the era—the United States in the 1920s when African Americans still lived as second-class citizens under Jim Crow segregation.[12]

Wilson's Ma Rainey is not the protagonist of his play but functions more as the antagonist for Levee, the up-and-coming trumpet player in her band, who is dissatisfied with having his art and talent controlled by white men. The play takes place during the course of a day, as a band of musicians and Ma convene at a recording studio to make a record. Power struggles ensue between Ma and the musicians as to which songs to record and how. An undercurrent of dissatisfaction at the powerlessness of their position as oppressed black people in a white man's world runs through it all. For Levee, Ma represents the oppression of black musicians, because despite her popularity and talent,

[12] Shaw, *The Embodiment of Disobedience: Fat Black Women's Unruly Political Bodies*, 108-10.

she allows her white manager to control her career and recordings. However, as depicted by Wilson, Ma Rainey is not as docile as Levee believes her to be. Her rebellion is perhaps more subtle and passive-aggressive than Levee's, yet falls into the kind of truculent "fat behavior" I discussed in chapter three. She is domineering, bossy, and outspoken, refusing to be controlled by the men (black or white) around her.

Ma arrives late to the recording session with her entourage in tow. That a black woman in 1920s Chicago should have attendants immediately suggests her audacious self-importance. The entourage consists of her nephew Sylvester, who acts as her driver/body guard, and Dussie Mae, a young attractive girl whom we later come to find out is Ma's lover. And although fat behavior does not explicitly require a fat actress, in the case of Wilson's Ma Rainey, who is based on the actual person, the fat appearance of the actor is implicit and serves to underscore the fat behavior. The real Ma Rainey was reportedly bisexual, which identifies her with another fat behavior, that of sexual deviance and excessive sexual appetite. I will further explore this link between "deviant" sexuality and fatness later in this chapter. According to Wilson's stage directions she is "*a short, heavy woman. She is dressed in a full-length fur coat and a matching hat, an emerald green dress and several strands of pearls of varying lengths. [. . .] she carries herself in a royal fashion.*"[13] Ma is pursued by the police, who are threatening to charge her with assault and battery for knocking down a cabbie who refused to serve them because they are black. This bit of action establishes that Ma is big enough and brave enough to knock down a man and sets the tone for her unruly behavior. In fact, the only reason they were hailing a cab is because her car was hit by another motorist, and the police would not believe that Ma was the owner of the car, so they impounded it. Irvin,

[13] Wilson, *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*, 48.

her (white) manager, clears up the situation with the police, and Ma, who is upset and unsettled, immediately starts making further demands of him. She knows that she holds all the power in the relationship despite her race and gender because her voice is the commodity they need. The following exchange between Ma and Irvin demonstrates how her bossy actions belie the subjugation of her position as a black woman in early twentieth century America.

> IRWIN. [. . .] You just sit and relax a minute.
>
> MA RAINEY. I ain't for no sitting. I ain't never heard of such. Talking about taking me to jail. Irvin, call down there and see about my car.
>
> IRVIN. Okay, Ma…I'll take care of it. You just relax. (*Irvin exits with the coats.*)
>
> MA RAINEY. Why you all keep it so cold in here? Sturdyvant try and pinch every penny he can. You all wanna make some records, you better put some heat on in here or give me back my coat.
>
> IRVIN. (Entering) We got the heat turned up, Ma. It's warming up. It'll be warm in a minute.
>
> …….
>
> MA RAINEY. Irvin, call down there and see about my car. I want my car fixed today.[14]

For the remainder of the play, Ma exerts her power over Irvin and Sturdyvant, the (white) producer, especially, but also over members of the band with her various demands. She is unapologetically a diva. No one can make his money without Ma's voice interpreting the songs. First, she insists that her nephew, who stutters, record the introductory patter on the song. He is disastrous, and the studio clock is ticking, but she does not relent. Then she refuses to sing until she has a cola and sends Irvin scurrying off

[14] Ibid., 52-3.

to get one. Next she denies Levee, who suggests some progressive ideas about which songs to cover and how to change the rhythms to sound more contemporary. Ma flatly refuses. She will only do "Black Bottom" her way. The producers tolerate her outrageous behavior because they will eventually get what they want from her: a hit recording that will make them far more money than they will pay her for the day's work. Ma knows this as well and exacts what little recompense she can with her petty tyranny in the studio.

In his glowing review of the original 1984 Broadway production, Frank Rich gushed over the performance of Theresa Merritt, the large actress who played Ma Rainey, whom he describes as "despotic," "temperamental," and a "mountain of glitter." He goes on to say,

> Miss Merritt is Ma Rainey incarnate. A singing actress of both wit and power, she finds bitter humor in the character's distorted sense of self: when she barks her outrageous demands to her lackeys, we see a show business monster who's come a long way from her roots.[15]

In praising Merritt's performance, Rich automatically uses language that hints at cultural assumptions about fat behavior and animalizes the character, just as we have seen with other (fat) white characters. Rich's word choice implies cultural assumptions Americans associate with any fat woman—her emotions are out of control, enabling her to be despotic and temperamental, harking back to Martha (*Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*) and Serafina (*The Rose Tattoo*), respectively. According to Rich, Merritt as the oversize Rainey barks like Maxine (*The Night of the Iguana*) and is a monster like Martha (*Virginia Woolf*).

On the other hand, Ma's fat black body is not only associated with these negative stereotypes, but as Shaw points out, is also a signifier of sociopolitical resistance. Shaw

[15] Frank Rich, "Theater: Wilson's 'Ma Rainey' Opens," *New York Times*, October 12, 1984, http://newyorktimes.com, (accessed April 27, 2009).

argues that the fat black woman's body (symbolically) retaliates against the impact of colonization, challenging dominant aesthetic norms that are political mechanisms for control. According to Shaw, "[h]er fat black body resists both imperatives of whiteness and slenderness as an ideal state of embodiment. Her large size also insists that her presence be acknowledged since a pervasive effect of colonization has been the effacement of a black female presence [. . .]."[16] If we transfer this idea to *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom* and the character of Ma, we can view her body as a symbol of resistance, even though in many ways Wilson contrasts her with Levee as an example of acquiescence for allowing herself to be exploited. Therefore, while Levee may be correct that Ma is being taken advantage of by her white handlers, in her own way, Ma's body and flashy style actively resist her oppressors. She is well aware that in making the recording, Irvin and Sturdyvant want to separate her voice from her body and thus have a more contained commodity. Once they have captured her voice electronically, they will no longer require her person to make money. While she can, Ma embraces the power in her fat, black liveness. The semiotic meaning of Ma's fat black body is perhaps incidental to Wilson's intention in exploring American racism of the 1920s. But in creating the piece and dramatizing the character of Ma, Wilson harnesses the strength of her body as a symbol of resistance in his play about black oppression.

However, little more than a decade later, with her play *Venus* (1997), Suzan-Lori Parks directly uses that fat black female body to explore all of the issues of black female sexuality I have mentioned. Parks bases the character of Venus on Saartjie Baartman, but rather than depict her strictly biographically or with historical accuracy, she uses the gross exploitation of Baartman as an avenue to explore contemporary cultural attitudes

[16] Shaw, *The Embodiment of Disobedience: Fat Black Women's Unruly Political Bodies*, 9.

about racialized bodies. Through the character of Venus, Parks interrogates the persistent cultural representation of black women as promiscuous, sexually savage, and perpetually available, as well as the view of the black female body as somehow abnormal or sexually deviant because of its fullness. She particularly investigates white fascination with the fullness of black buttocks. The cover illustration of the TCG (Theatre Communications Group) text for the play, which is based on the many nineteenth-century drawings of Baartman, features an exaggerated profile silhouette of the "Venus Hottentot" nude, with huge buttocks and emphasizes that her body is the centerpiece of this play. Unlike Wilson's Ma Rainey, who reclaims some power and agency through her large size, Venus's excessive proportions serve only to further subjugate her.

Discussing *Venus* in her book *Black Feminism in Contemporary Drama*, Lisa M. Anderson points out that Suzan-Lori Parks "presents images or icons to us and then uncovers their origins, revealing them as problematic."[17] Venus's fat bottom is the symbol for all of the oppressive stereotypes and maltreatment heaped on black women in America throughout modern history. As Anderson says, "Parks probes the ways in which black women's sexuality has been represented as deviant; she also exposes the ways in which that perspective has led to both the iconization of black female sexuality in the image of the 'Venus Hottentot' and how the effects of that icon affect the lives of contemporary black women."[18]

The character of Venus is persuaded by "Brother" and "The Man" to travel from her native land to England, where she believes the streets will be paved with gold and she will be a dancer for a few years before making her fortune and retiring to her homeland a

[17] Lisa M. Anderson, *Black Feminism in Contemporary Drama* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2008), 53.
[18] Ibid., 65.

wealthy woman. Upon her arrival, she is betrayed and finds herself the central attraction in a freak show. She is treated cruelly and displayed by "The Mother-Showman"—a character Parks designates as female. The Mother-Showman essentially holds Venus captive and acts as her madam, displaying her alongside her "8 Human Wonders," which include other "freaks," such as a bearded lady, Siamese twins, and so on. That it is a woman who ends up pimping Venus is a commentary on the ways in which women are complicit in their own cultural oppression, which is a topic the Five Lesbian Brothers take up in *The Secretaries* (1994) and which I will discuss later in this chapter. Arguably, in this case, the white Mother-Showman sees herself as a superior to black Venus in the "chain of being" in keeping with commonly held Victorian views of science. However, Parks's dramaturgical style has such a contemporary feel and is so loaded with anachronisms that, despite the narrative being set in the nineteenth century, it is impossible not to view the play through a contemporary lens. The moment the Mother-Showman meets Venus, she knows she has found the ideal commodity to boost business. She practices her new pitch:

> THE MOTHER-SHOWMAN. With yr appreciative permission
> for separate admission
> we've got a new girl: #9
> "The Venus Hottentot"
> She bottoms out at the bottom of the ladder
> yr not a man—until you've hadder.
> But truly, folks, before she showed up our little show was in the red
> but her big bottoms friendsll surely put us safely in the black![19]

Using Parks's unique poetic dialogue, the Mother-Showman's speech above touches on many of the racist stereotypes I have mentioned and cleverly puns on the words "bottom"

[19] Suzan-Lori Parks, *Venus* (New York: Theatre Communications Group, 1997), 35.

and "black," highlighting the myriad of word associations and also the cultural interplay between "black" and "bottom."

Later, when Venus has an idea she might have worked enough to move on, the 8 Wonders remind her: "Lovely Venus, with yr looks, there's absolutely no escape."[20] In essence, Venus is a prisoner of her bodacious buttocks. She cannot escape the Victorian sexual fascination with her full figure. Because her body exceeds cultural boundaries, like Vogel's characters from chapter three, her body becomes a site of danger—a target for physical and cultural violence.

Parks complicates (and fictionalizes) the story of Venus in some ways, by depicting her as somewhat complicit in her exploitation. Parks creates the character of the Baron Docteur, whom Venus willingly goes with to escape the Mother-Showman. A grotesque romance ensues between Venus and the Baron Docteur, who seduces Venus with chocolates and is openly fascinated with her body. The Baron Docteur is a fictional stand-in for Georges Cuvier, the nineteenth-century surgeon who was dubbed "the father of comparative anatomy," with whom Baartman had no romantic relationship in real life. In fact, Cuvier was eventually responsible for dissecting Baartman after her death and displaying her brain and genitals in a glass jar.[21] In Parks's play, Venus believes she has sexual leverage over the Baron Docteur. She willingly has sex with him for chocolates and better living conditions than she had with the freak show. He impregnates her twice and performs abortions on her himself. Although she is no longer on public display, she is essentially a sex slave. The Baron Docteur's sexual obsession with Venus captures contemporary fascination with black female sexuality.

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[20] Ibid., 85.
[21] Sara L. Warner, "Suzan-Lori Parks's Drama of Disinterment: A Transnational Exploration of *Venus*," *Theatre Journal*, no. 2 (2008): 181-99.

Furthermore, the romance between the Baron Docteur and Venus also serves to weave through the play the theme of chocolate candy as an aphrodisiac, a symbol of sensual excess, and a metaphor for black women's bodies. The Docteur is constantly giving her chocolates in a heart-shaped box, echoing the heart-shape of her chocolate-colored buttocks. Eventually, misunderstanding that she is pregnant, he criticizes her for eating too many chocolates with the same "party line" of self-control commonly applied to fat people today,

> THE BARON DOCTEUR. [. . .] You eat too many chockluts you know.
> I give em to you by the truckload but
> You don't have to eat them all.
> Practice some restraint.[22]

Venus's lack of restraint extends to her sexuality because she enjoys making love with the Baron Docteur, in marked contrast to his proper Victorian wife, who is jealous of Venus but maintains the sexual prudishness of her era. Late in the play, just before her death, Venus gives a "brief history of chocolates," mentioning that women eat chocolate to soothe themselves emotionally and, significantly, that chocolate is a stimulant and a source of pleasure.[23] She is talking about the candy, but the double entendre is clear.

The fat black female body, or in the case of *Venus*, the buttocks in particular, are part of the canvas on which Wilson and Parks explore racial tension and discrimination in American culture. Both playwrights recognize the power of their fat heroines. They understand that, although fatness is not considered outside of beauty standards for black culture and indeed is frequently celebrated there, in hegemonic white culture, fatness highlights racial difference and contributes to prejudice and segregation. Consequently,

[22] Parks, *Venus*, 127.
[23] Ibid., 155-6.

as I asserted earlier, fat has a racial connotation that adds to the stigmatization of a fat *white* woman and associates her fatness with "racial otherness" in the same way that a black person is marked by his or her skin color.

Hairspray: Fat Black Miscegenation

Thus, in various cultural texts there is an alliance between blackness and fatness in representation. One movie-turned-musical-turned-musical-movie that illustrates this point is John Waters' *Hairspray*. For this discussion I will draw mainly from the musical *Hairspray* (2002), with book by Mark O'Donnell and Thomas Meehan. *Hairspray*, which enjoyed a successful eight-year run on Broadway and subsequent touring productions, tells the story of Tracy Turnblad, described in the text as a "high-spirited, irrepressible, chubby teen girl."[24] Tracy's fatness is central to the plot of *Hairspray* and is the subject of many jibes and jokes. However, despite the taunts, Tracy is a light-hearted, typically rebellious teen and seemingly oblivious that others judge her to be defective due to her size. Set in 1962 Baltimore, the musical opens with Tracy greeting the day enthusiastically and singing, "Woke up today feeling the way I always do/Hungry for something that I can't eat/Then I hear the beat [. . .]."[25] The opening lyrics call attention right away to Tracy's size when she describes herself as hungry, but she reverses it immediately by confiding that food is not what she is hungry for. Even so, this is in keeping with the persistent pathologizing of fat people in our culture, implying they are compelled to eat because they are trying to fill some emotional void in their life. The

[24] Mark O'Donnell and Thomas Meehan, *Hairspray* (New York: Applause Books, 2002), xv.
[25] Ibid., 3.

lyrics play with the stereotype and suggest that her hunger is not a symptom of her emotional maladjustment but could possible be a harbinger of her rebelliousness. Tracy's simplistic goals reflect her youth and are fairly typical, if somewhat ambitious, among her peers: She wants to get a spot as a dancer on the local *Corny Collins Show* (a dance program modeled after *American Bandstand*) and capture the heart of Link Larkin, the show's teen male dreamboat. And she honestly believes that both of these things are possible despite her chubby appearance.

The *Corny Collins Show* boasts the "Nicest Kids in Town," or as Corny declares in this song, "Nice white kids/Who like to lead the way/And once a month/We have our Negro Day!"[26] It is a segregated dance show produced and managed by Velma Von Tussle, who is a racist, villainous plotter, and, of course, thin. Aside from keeping blacks off the show, Velma's main concern is to make sure her own spoiled, conceited, pretty daughter Amber is the center of attention. In addition to being Link's girlfriend, Amber is angling to be "Miss Teenage Hairspray 1962." Looking at Amber on the TV, Tracy's mom, Edna, describes her as "a lovely slim girl," but Tracy is not intimidated because she knows she is a better dancer than Amber.[27]

When the opportunity to audition for the show comes along, Tracy skips school and goes to the audition. She is taunted by Velma, who sings, "Oh my god/How times

[26] Ibid., 9.

[27] Here I should mention that the character of Edna, who is enormously fat, has traditionally been played by a man in drag. It is actually a kind of double drag because it is a man dressed as a woman and disguised (or enhanced) as fat, which is a drag persona in itself. Drag Queen Divine originated the role in the movie, and Harvey Fierstein originated the role on Broadway. Interestingly, John Travolta, more traditionally known for straight macho roles, donned drag and padded up to play the role in the movie-musical remake (2007). That Tracy's fat mom is actually played by a man in drag potentially complicates my reading of this piece. For purposes of this chapter, however, I will rely on the story narrative, which treats Edna as a woman and more or less elides the drag component. However, the double drag is an example of the complex mixing of fat and queer that I will discuss at the end of the chapter.

have changed/This girl's either blind/ Or completely deranged."[28] Amber and the other members of the audition council eagerly jump in to insult Tracy for her size, telling her she is "too wide from the back" and so on. But Tracy's biggest faux pas is when she is asked by Velma if she would swim in an integrated pool, to which Tracy replies: "I sure would. I'm all for integration. It's the New Frontier." Velma sings gleefully to Tracy,

> VELMA. First impressions can be tough
> And when I saw you I knew it
> If your size weren't enough
> That last answer just blew it!
> And so my dear, so short and stout
> You'll never be "in"
>
> VELMA and COUNCIL MEMBERS. So we're kicking you out![29]

Thus, it is not only Tracy's fatness that results in her elimination but also her willingness to integrate.

The rest of the play follows Tracy's efforts to gain acceptance for herself on the dance show and then ultimately to achieve integration on the show. All the alliances she makes on her journey to a happy ending are with black characters or characters who are somehow aligned with the black community. They are all connected by their outsider status. Because her hairstyle is too big (another allusion to her overbearing size and personality—even her hair is too big), she is sent to detention, where she meets Seaweed and some other black kids. The black kids share dance moves with Tracy, and at the next high school dance, she is able to get herself discovered by Corny Collins himself and earn a slot on the show.

Her first day on the program, she manages to get Link Larkin—the heartthrob and Amber's (white) beau—to sing a song to her. Tracy joins in, and they serenade each other

[28] Meehan, *Hairspray*., 27.
[29] Ibid., 29.

and conclude the song with a kiss. Link's singing style is clearly inspired by Elvis Presley. Link's rhythm, vocal technique, and persona cross over stylistically into black music, just as Elvis was initially associated with "colored music" of the era and was regarded suspiciously by whites who were proponents of segregation.[30] Somehow it is not surprising that the "color blind" Link would also be blind to Tracy's fatness and finds himself attracted to her. His devotion to Tracy is sealed later during school gym class when Amber flattens her with a dodge ball, shouting, "Hey thunder thighs, dodge this!" and Link sides with Tracy. So does Seaweed, and he invites Link, Tracy, and her friend Penny to join him at a dance party in his (black) neighborhood, hosted by his mother, Motormouth Maybelle. Her name calls attention to the fat behaviors I discussed in chapter three: her inability to control her mouth, which results not only in her large size but her outspokenness.

They are discovered enjoying themselves at the all-black party by Amber, who shouts, "Link, what are you doing in this huge crowd of minorities?"[31] With this statement, Amber lumps the fatties in with the blacks. Moments later, Amber's mother, Velma, and Tracy's fat mother, Edna, show up. Velma insults Edna and Tracy with an interesting jibe:

> VELMA. I guess you two are living proof that the watermelon doesn't fall very far from the vine.[32]

[30] David Gates, "Finding Neverland," *Newsweek*, July 13, 2009. In comparing the careers of Michael Jackson and Elvis Presley, Gates reminds us that when Presley's records were first played on the radio in Memphis, the DJs "made a point of noting that he graduated from the city's all-white Humes High School, lest listeners mistake him for black." For me, Link's "Elvis Style" puts him in that same category occupied by Presley (and Jackson) of a "transracial" figure.
[31] Meehan, *Hairspray*, 67.
[32] Ibid., 69.

On one hand she is making a fat joke, substituting the visual of a large watermelon versus a small apple "falling far from the tree." On the other hand, the choice of watermelon as the substitute fruit also includes the double entendre of the racist stereotype of blacks eating watermelon. Could this be a deliberate choice on the part of the playwrights to overlay blackness on fatness?

After Amber and her mother leave, Tracy convinces Motormouth and the rest of her new friends to invade the all-white mother-daughter dance day on the *Corny Collins Show* and stage a kind of "dance-in." Edna initially hesitates to join in on the grounds that she is too fat to appear on TV. But Motormouth, who of course, is also black but wears a blonde wig, sings her song, "Big, Blonde, and Beautiful." This song celebrates female fatness with lyrics like:

> MOTORMOUTH. I offer big love
> With no apology
> How can I deny the world
> The most of me
> I am not afraid to throw my weight around [. . .]
> Because I'm big, blonde, and beautiful
> And Edna, girl
> You're lookin' so recruitable [. . .] [33]

With this song, Motormouth further mixes black identity with fat identity. She is fat and black but blonde, while Edna is big, blonde, and white. The song draws no line of separation between black and white but connects them both through their fatness. Later, when they all storm the set of the dance show, Motormouth announces: "Well, ladies, big is back! And as for black, it's beautiful."[34] Thus, she further blurs strict delineation

[33] Ibid., 74-5.
[34] Ibid., 77.

between big and black. For me, the blurring of lines between blackness and fatness results in a metaphorical fat/black miscegenation.

The protest march on the dance show lands Tracy and her cohorts in jail, but Link comes to break her out (and offer her his ring). Motormouth then convinces Tracy to give it one more try, and they all crash the show again as it is televising the Miss Hairspray Contest. Tracy wins the crown in a dance-off and smuggles all the black kids in to dance. Tracy has achieved integration for the blacks and "the fats." In traditional musical style, the play *Hairspray* ends in a big song and dance number with blacks, whites, and fatties all dancing joyously, celebrating the coming of a new age.

To further investigate how we "read" these black, fat, and queer characters on stage I will explore several theoretical frameworks including phenomenology, and Cultural Studies. Integrating concepts of the "intercorporeal gaze" and "perceptual practices," I point to tendencies and mind-sets of prevailing audience perceptions about not only race and homosexuality, but how they are inexorably linked to perceptions of the fat female body as well.

In her essay "Toward a Phenomenology of Racial Embodiment," Linda Martín Alcoff argues for the power of both visual and bodily perception when understanding bodies of knowledge, actual bodies of the flesh, and social bodies. She argues that bodies are read and positioned as "other" based on any visible "non-white" bodily markers, and in this way links blackness and fatness. She asserts that we cannot underestimate the power of the visible in forming "metaphysical and moral hierarchies" as well as "racialized categories of human beings."[35] Alcoff argues that,

[35] Linda Martín Alcoff, "Toward a Phenomenology of Racial Embodiment," in *Race*, ed. Robert Bernasconi (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2001), 268.

> In our own materialist society, where science trumps religion and where cultural rituals—whether religious, patriotic, or familial—must increasingly revolve around the exchange of material commodities in order to retain their significance, what is true is what is visible. Secular, commodity-driven society is dominated by the realm of the visible. In such a context, visible differences operate as powerful determinants over social interaction.[36]

Alcoff's framework above offers potent evidence as to why fat bodies are so stigmatized in American culture—a country where the illusion prevails that slenderness can be bought if one is "unwilling" to achieve it through the so-called natural means of diet and exercise. Even skin color and racial identity can be mitigated through cultured dress, customs, style, and gesture to emulate the prevalent (white) homogenous beauty aesthetic in the United States. Alcoff goes on to say that we perceive other bodies not just through the visual but with a culturally embedded knowledge of understanding, which we then embody ourselves.

> [T]he realm of visible, or what is taken as self-evidently visible (which is how the ideology of racism naturalizes racial designation), is recognized as a product of a specific perceptual practice, rather than the natural result of human sight.[37]

Thus, we perceive otherness not just through visibility politics but through perceptual practices that engender a kind of embodied recognition that is experiential and goes beyond human sight. This helps explain how fat bodies and black bodies are conflated as other in our cultural mind-set. If recognition is embedded in perceptual practice, which includes a phenomenological psychic realm of awareness, it also offers an explanation as to how queer bodies can be lumped in with fat and black bodies in American culture.

In her book *The 'Fat' Female Body*, Samantha Murray expands on this idea of the othered body and the ways in which we read it. She draws on Foucault's *Birth of the*

[36] Ibid., 268.
[37] Ibid., 268.

Clinic and his concept of the disciplinary gaze, as well as the essay "Mapping Embodied Deviance," by Jennifer Terry and Jaqueline Urla, in pointing out the "epistemological force of medical discourse" in reproducing bodies of knowledge.[38] She asserts that as a result of medical discourse propagated by the clinic, individuals in Western European cultures tend to operate under the "spectre" of the normal body, which is a white, heterosexual, (healthy) male body. This, of course, implies a V-shaped male figure with no fleshiness in the hips, buttocks, breasts, or stomach. Thus, men *and* women aspire to this normative body and are motivated by fear of deviance to position ourselves on the "normal" side of a normal/deviant binary. Furthermore, Murray asserts that not only are the responses of medical practitioners biased and gendered but they are biased and gendered at the perceptual level.[39] She argues that,

> The "clinical gaze" then, as a particular mode of perception, is inevitably intercorporeal: it does not simply function to constitute the 'other,' but is also fundamental to the reaffirmation of the 'self,' and the ideals on which the self is founded. [. . .] Within this repetitive deployment of medical knowledges and discourses of health in the form of a disciplinary gaze, discursive power and authority is effected. The policing of 'improper' bodies mobilizes medical narratives and imperatives beyond the walls of the clinic into everyday intersubjective spaces and corporeal exchanges that are always discursively mediated by the authority of medical expertise and the concurrent moral value attached to the maintenancing one's body to attain/maintain health and normativity.[40]

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[38] Samantha Murray, *The 'Fat' Female Body* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 34-7 See also Jennifer Terry and jaqueline Urla, "Mapping Embodied Deviance," in *Deviant Bodies*, eds. Jennifer Terry and Jaqueline Urla (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1995), 1-18.

[39] In fact, CNN reporter, Ginny Craves asserts in "The Surprising Reason Why Being Overweight Isn't Healthy," that fat discrimination by medical practitioners, particularly toward women, keeps oversize patients from getting optimum care. Patients' complaints are often dismissed by doctors as a symptom of being overweight and thus go undiagnosed until the condition has reached a more critical phase. Could this be why obesity is allegedly driving up the cost of health care? For example, breast, uterine, or bowel cancer are much more manageable at stage one than stage four. http://cnn.com. (Accessed January 23, 2010).

[40] Murray, *The 'Fat' Female Body*., 40-42.

In essence, Saartjie Baartman was victimized by this very dynamic, which Foucault maintains emerged in the nineteenth century, coinciding with her maltreatment at the hands of medical authorities. The black female body is already visibly on the wrong side of the normal/deviant binary, and as I have discussed, this deviance extends to her sexuality. The fat white female in contemporary culture is also visibly on the wrong side of this normal/deviant binary. While it is true that queer bodies are more able to "pass" as normal because they are not necessarily visually marked, Alcoff's assertion above suggests that we perceive queerness as otherness on an intuitive level that is rooted in all our senses, not just the visual.[41] Thus, I would argue that, while queer bodies may be less visually deviant by these standards, using Murray's concept of the intercorporeal gaze and Alcoff's concept of perceiving other bodies, a queer body is easily categorized alongside a fat body or a black body as deviant from heteronormative aesthetics.[42]

Fat Bodies, Queer Bodies, Deviant Bodies

Thus, there is an organic connection among fat, black, and queer as cultural signifiers of otherness. This phenomenon is frequently depicted semiotically in representation in various cultural texts. Tracy Turnblad's alliance with the black characters in *Hairspray* is one example, and I will explore the link between fat white women and black bodies further in chapter five during my discussion of fat actress Kirstie Alley. Furthermore, as I pointed out in some of the plays from earlier chapters, we frequently see an implicit association with fat and gay characters, such as Vicky and

[41] We have all seen productions where the (closeted) leading man or woman exhibits all the appropriate heteronormative behavior, but he or she simply lacks chemistry with the opposite sex and, on an intuitive level, we know these actors as queer.

[42] Again, by queer bodies I mean those who occupy a position outside of heteronormative sexuality, including lesbians, gay men, bisexuals, and transgendered individuals.

James in *My Fat Friend*, or Maggie and Jerry, the gay cop in *Fat Chance*. And in *Ma Rainey*, Wilson is sure to include the character of Dussie Mae, Ma's lesbian lover. This is based on biographical fact, of course, but it is remarkable that the playwright opts to make that detail explicit in the narrative, which otherwise has nothing to do with Ma being lesbian. Andrea Elizabeth Shaw reminds us of the implied connection between black female bodies and deviant sexuality.

> [T]he fat black woman's sexuality is sometimes positioned in tandem with culture's other sexual issues and beyond the scope of her individual behavior. As a result her "freakishness" is resituated from the site of her body onto the site of the popular body politic and becomes a reflection of her culture's sexual taboos. Her body is a venue of expression of cultural anxieties related to bodily transgression, particularly those that are sexual [. . .].[43]

Certainly homosexual behavior can be lumped into these cultural anxieties, and a fat black lesbian would be the ultimate transgressor.

Shaw's quote above helps position the last two plays in my discussion, which engage cultural assumptions about lesbians. If a fat black woman's body sometimes becomes a repository for various cultural sexual taboos, then her sexual "otherness" can be linked to the otherness of homosexuality regardless of race. Judith Butler offers further explanation for how queer is othered in our culture:

> This very concept of sex-as-matter, sex-as-instrument-of-cultural-signification, however, is a discursive formation that acts as a naturalized foundation for the nature/culture distinction and the strategies of domination that distinction supports. The binary relation between culture and nature promotes a relationship of hierarchy in which culture freely 'imposes' meaning on nature, and, hence, renders it into an 'Other' to be appropriated to its own limitless uses, safeguarding the ideality of the structure of the signification on the model of domination.[44]

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[43] Shaw, *The Embodiment of Disobedience: Fat Black Women's Unruly Political Bodies*, 72.
[44] Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble:Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (London: Routledge, 1999), 47-48.

Queer bodies remain on the wrong side of contemporary American cultural binaries, and although they may not be visually marked like black and fat bodies, they share with fat bodies the implicit cultural assumption that their otherness is somehow a choice. Both queer and fat bodies experience varying degrees of stigmatization.

My next example, *The Killing of Sister George* (1965), by Frank Marcus, exemplifies the overlay of cultural anxiety toward fatness and deviant sexuality—in this case lesbianism and sadomasochism. *The Killing of Sister George* not only makes use of negative stereotypes of fat women and lesbians but also the cultural binary of the normative body or the normal/deviant binary that relegates fat, black, and queer to the deviant side of the equation. The play originally opened in London in 1965 and transferred to Broadway in 1966, where it ran for 205 performances.[45] Beryl Reid won a Tony award for her portrayal of George, and she reprised the role in the 1968 movie version of the play. The movie was given an X-rating for portraying lesbians kissing both on the mouth and each other's breasts. Most reviews following the initial release of the play and the movie found the piece remarkable for its so-called frank portrayal of lesbians.

To a present-day reader, the play panders somewhat offensively to the worst stereotypes of lesbians and fat women, indeed including the assumption that all lesbians are fat. It was marketed in the sixties as a black comedy commenting on the British national pastime of watching soap operas.[46] Sister George, whose real name is June

[45] According to Internet Movie Database, www. imdb.com (accessed June 30, 2009).
[46] Because the play was set in England and originally intended for a British audience, Marcus was commenting on the British obsession with their popular soap operas. However, Americans are not far removed in this cultural stereotype, and the play transferred easily to Broadway.

Buckridge, is described in the text as a "rotund, middle-aged woman."[47] She is a strident, aggressive, cigar-smoking butch lesbian who earns a living as an actress on a BBC soap opera and lives with her childlike lover, Alice (whom she calls Childie). At her insistence, everyone, including Childie, calls her Sister George, which is her character's name on the show. Her insistence on being addressed as her character in real life hints at an emotional instability and an inability to separate fiction from reality. This pathological behavior conjures up assumptions about fat women that I have discussed in previous chapters. The fictional character of Sister George is the exact opposite of June's real-life personality. Sister George is a benevolent Mother Teresa-type nursing nun who travels around the British countryside on her motor scooter delivering blessings and medicine to the inhabitants of the fictional country village Applehurst. In a way, June Buckridge and her stage persona, Sister George, embody the two sides of the normal/deviant binary I discussed earlier. Sister George adapts the "acceptable" interpretation of her fatness by being a nurturing Mammy-type, an asexual figure. But June is firmly on the deviant side of the divide, not only as a fat lesbian but as one who engages in sexual practices involving fetishes.

In the opening scene, Sister George arrives home from work in a panic because she has overheard that ratings are dipping and they are going to kill off her character. The narrative of the play traces her eventual breakdown as she tries to resist the inevitable firing and keep her young lover, who is being courted by the same BBC executive who is trying to get her ousted—Mrs. Mercy Croft.

Marcus's Sister George is not only a fat lesbian, but she is also a sexual sadist. Thus, she is a "triple-threat" of social deviance. Not only do her fat body and her

[47] Frank Marcus, *The Killing of Sister George* (New York: Bantam Books, 1969), 1.

homosexuality resist heteronormative standards of beauty and sexuality, but her sadomasochistic predilections solidify her as aberrant. Not only is Sister George into S & M, but she is the "top"—the dominant—over the slender "girl-woman" Childie. Arguably, a female submissive, even in a lesbian relationship, would be marginally closer to social mores of feminine behavior. Sister George's "top" status is made clear in the second scene of the play, when she punishes Childie for yelling at her by demanding that she kneel at her feet and eat the butt of her cigar. The play is peppered with similar exchanges, where George unexpectedly, often in an irrational fit of jealousy, wields her dominance cruelly over Childie, who submits. Her moods are so mercurial that the sadomasochistic exchanges often seem ill-timed, and it is not clear whether Childie is a willing participant in the role-playing or genuinely fearing for her emotional and physical well-being. Indeed, when she leaves George for Mrs. Mercy, she claims that George beats her, although we never see this enacted onstage.

Like characters I discuss in chapter three, Sister George exhibits a myriad of fat behaviors that characterize her as out of control, consuming, and emotionally destructive to those around her. The text is loaded with instances (as dictated by the playwright) of Sister George shouting and bullying people as well as swearing, drinking heavily, and even physically attacking others. George's emotional abuse of Childie, under the guise of role-playing, frequently brings Childie to tears. George has a physical altercation similar to Ma Rainey's when, in a drunken stupor, she attacks unwitting passengers (novitiate nuns!) in a taxi. This behavior is part of what gets her sacked, in addition to her falling ratings and tantrums on the set. Mrs. Mercy stops in to discuss the incident.

> MRS. MERCY. You boarded this taxi in a state of advanced inebriation and—(*consulting the paper*)—proceeded to assault the two nuns,

subjecting them to actual physical violence![48]

Although Sister George makes public amends for her violent behavior, apologizing to the convent and offering a donation, she can do nothing to change the course of things at the station, and she is indeed written out of the soap opera by the middle of the second act.

Mrs. Mercy stops by to inform her that her character, Sister George, will be on her motorbike on her way to help an ailing boy when she will have a "collision with a ten-ton truck." She also adds that her death will coincide with Road Safety Week, and they believe the loss of such a beloved character will boost ratings. June, speaking in the first person of herself as Sister George, tells her, "I've never ridden carelessly."[49] When Mrs. Mercy insists it must be so, June/George goes on to ask questions about how she will be buried. Again, we see her eerily unable to separate herself from the character she plays. She exits with a bottle of gin to console herself, and Mrs. Mercy uses this as an opportunity to move in on Childie. As a final insult, on the day of Sister George's funeral, Mrs. Mercy pops by once again and cruelly "comforts" George/June by assuring her there's a role for her on their new children's show—playing Clarabelle the Cow.

The character of Sister George embodies all the irony that the playwright can conjure to help him make a social commentary on our obsession with fictional characters represented in mass-media programming. She is a selfish, sadomasochistic lesbian who impersonates a nun who is the pinnacle of generosity and kindness. She is a sexual deviant playing a character who is sexually chaste. Yet both are social extremes, and I suggest that the playwright deploys lesbianism and fatness as an illustration of the absurdity of this character in order to highlight the foolishness of viewers who believe in,

[48] Ibid., 32.
[49] Ibid., 78.

or are engaged by, soap opera characters. In his review of the play, Walter Kerr accused Marcus of "moral blackmail." In the following passage, Kerr unpacks the tone of superiority Marcus assumes with this black comedy that he finds distasteful.

> One of the matters that causes him (Marcus) deep, malicious concern is the cessation of real life that takes place throughout England at 11:15 A.M. (Mondays through Fridays) when housewives stop work and make themselves willing slaves of the national network. For a few moments drudgery is outlawed and devotion begins. More than devotion. Belief begins [. . .] Whenever a radio-serial character dies, real flowers are sent, and even the studio executives wear black. We live in a society where the synthetic is more life like than genuine flesh and blood.[50]

It is telling that Marcus illustrates his point through the irony of the absolute disparity between June Buckridge's queer, fat, deviant behavior and that of her virtuous character, Sister George.

Five Lesbians Flipping the Stereotypes: The Secretaries

The last play I will discuss briefly is *The Secretaries* (1994). The play was written collectively by the Five Lesbian Brothers, a feminist troupe comprised of performance artists/writers Maureen Angelos, Babs Davy, Dominique Dibbell, Peg Healey, and Lisa Kron, to be performed by the Brothers themselves. The text was originally performed at the WOW Café and has gone on to be reproduced off-off Broadway, regionally, and at colleges by other female performers. On the one hand, this play is an awkward fit for this chapter because the playwrights are deliberately engaging cultural stereotypes and assumptions as a means of social commentary, whereas in the aforementioned plays, with the possible exception of *Venus*, it seems that the playwrights engage fatness and

[50] Walter Kerr, "Theater: 'The Killing of Sister George' Arrives," *New York Times*, October 6, 1966, http://www.nytimes.com/ (Accessed April 10, 2009).

queerness almost incidentally as a means to unfold their larger narratives. On the other hand, *The Secretaries* is an apt conclusion to this chapter because of its activist stance and self-awareness. Like Paula Vogel deconstructing stereotypes in the previous chapter, The Brothers try to shine a light on the insidiousness of texts that disempower (fat) women through misogynist representations. The Brothers operate squarely in the spirit of queer theatre tradition, which rejects heteronormativity and cultural oppression of those who fall outside of hegemonic standards. *The Secretaries* (1994) offers an interesting counterpoint to the earlier plays because it looks at fat and lesbian characters from the perspective of a feminist queer lens. Using satire and irony, The Brothers deploy lesbianism and fatness in a very self-aware way in order to poke fun at the assumptions Marcus makes in *Sister George*.

In her introduction to The Brothers TCG collection of plays, feminist scholar Peggy Phelan describes their work as follows:

> They demonstrated how quotation from stereotypes, popular culture and accepted "truisms" can generate both great comedy and alternative political and performance tradition. When The Brothers raid accepted habits of mind—from television sitcoms to slapstick theatre—they increase the sources of lesbian history exponentially.
>
> The Brothers' work explores the possibilities of addressing theatre history's own relationship to what we might call lesbian epistemology, those cultural habits of the mind that produce knowledge unknowingly.[51]

Their work in general, and especially in *The Secretaries*, responds to the implicit cultural assumptions about lesbians being fat, overbearing sexual deviants.

The play takes place "in and around the town of Big Bone, Oregon. Sometime before Windows 95."[52] Using the backdrop of a secretarial pool at a lumber mill, *The*

[51] Babs Davy, Maureen Angelos, Dominique Dibbell, Peg Healy, Lisa Kron, *The Five Lesbian Brothers/Four Plays* (New York: Theatre Communication Group, 2000), Introduction, xiv.
[52] Ibid., 123.

Secretaries follows the induction of the "new girl," Patty, into the secret lives of her secretarial colleagues, Dawn, Ashley, Susan, and Peaches. The veteran secretaries initiate Patty, into their world wherein they are models of feminine, secretarial perfection for twenty-eight days, catering to the male bosses around them at the mill and maintaining perfect attitudes and perfect figures (with the exception of Peaches), until they get their periods, at which point they engage in a food orgy and ritualistically murder a lumberjack. The play parodies a multitude of misogynist assumptions about women's homosocial group behavior including (but not limited to) the idea that women enjoy playing Twister at slumber parties clad in skimpy lingerie, that all women are all secretly femme lesbians who spontaneously engage in "girl-on-girl" action, that all lesbians are sexually voracious and want to turn straight women gay, that women happily subsist on Slim-Fast diet drinks, and that women in groups tend to menstruate simultaneously and instantly become murderous. However, *The Secretaries* does not only target patriarchal suppression of women by men but also the policing of women by women, whereby women oppress one another.

In their interview-style introduction to *The Secretaries*, The Brothers note that they were trying to interrogate sexism as well as confront issues of "body image and woman's cruelty to woman." Lisa Kron, who at the time was the "fattest" of The Brothers states:[53]

> The play examines the ways in which women are enforcers of sexism. The rules that are enforced involve weight, food, sexuality.[54]

[53] In my view, Lisa Kron was and is not fat, but her appearance was slightly heavier than the other Brothers who, (according to production stills) were quite trim and athletic looking at the time. She played the compulsive-eating fat character of Peaches. Indeed, Kron seems to self-identify as fat; in her autobiographical solo play, *Well*, she frequently makes fat jokes at her own expense.
[54] Babs Davy, *The Five Lesbian Brothers/Four Plays*, 118.

The world of *The Secretaries* comically demonstrates this dynamic. For example, Susan, who is described in the stage directions as the office manager and "cult leader," insists that all of the secretaries under her management photocopy their breasts and bottoms for her scrutiny. She monitors everyone's appearance from what they are wearing to what they are eating and how often they go to the gym. In fact, they all monitor one another's eating and exercising habits. Ashley, who is described in the stage directions as bulimic, is very happy to live on her Slim-Fast shakes alone, and they all encourage Patty, the new girl, to shun solid food and stick to the liquid diet. Peaches is the only one who cannot adhere to the all-liquid diet. At one point, Susan uses the photocopies of Peaches' body to try to humiliate her into losing weight.

On the other hand, Peaches is their star at "kill night," when the secretaries murder their lumberjack. It is not a surprise that the fat girl is the best at slaughtering the man and enjoys the murder ritual, which culminates in eating ice cream and pizza while covered in their victim's blood. Unfortunately, Peaches eventually comes under fire from the big boss, Mr. Kembunkscher, for being a size fourteen (no one is allowed to be over a size twelve). She enlists a reluctant Patty to slap her every time she catches her eating solid food. Many comic moments follow with Peaches attempting to sneak food and Patty slapping her.

However, Peaches quickly becomes frustrated with this dynamic, particularly since Patty does not have to stick to a liquid diet to maintain her slenderness. In the exchange that follows, we see the secretaries turn on one another for all of their various transgressions against the absurd patriarchal code to which they rigidly try to adhere. (At this point, Patty has violated both the "solid food" rule and the rule of abstinence imposed

by Susan, because she has had sex with a male lumberjack.) Peaches responds to Mr. Kembunkscher's request for a report over the intercom:

> PEACHES. I'm having my lunch, you fat pig. You know, lunch? What people eat to live. I'm eating my lunch, you dumb fuck. Leave me alone.
>
> DAWN. Oh, shut up Peaches!
>
> PEACHES. Don't tell me to shut up! I starve myself and look at me, I'm fat. Patty eats whatever she wants whenever she wants to. She eats dinner! She eats dinner!
>
> PATTY. I'm sorry.
>
> PEACHES. Yeah, you're sorry and I'm fat.
>
> ASHLEY. Stop saying that word!!!
>
> PEACHES. FAT! FAT! FAT! How do you like that, you stupid anorexic?
>
> . . . . . .
>
> PATTY. The report!
>
> PEACHES. Oh fuck Kembunkscher, Patty! You fuck everybody anyway.
>
> ASHLEY. (*To Peaches*) If you don't shut your fat trap this minute, I am going to come over there and shut it for you, you whore!
>
> PEACHES. *(Referring to Patty)* I don't think I'm really the whore in this room, but you can call me that if you like.[55]

This is just one of several exchanges in *The Secretaries* that cleverly satirize the ways in which women undermine themselves, especially when it comes to issues of body size, eating, and sexual freedom.

Dawn is the only lesbian in the group. Her character satirizes homophobic fears about queers "passing"; she is a femme-lesbian who passes for straight. Her character engages another cultural anxiety about the rapaciousness of lesbian sexuality. Dawn

[55] Ibid., 175-6.

embodies another stereotype about the hypersexuality of queers, because she is constantly trying to seduce everyone. She persistently hits on Patty until she finally tricks her into going to a hotel with her. Patty engages in an experimental fling with her but makes it clear the next day that she prefers men. Nonetheless, Susan (the cult leader) harshly enforces the rule of abstinence she has imposed on all the secretaries. When she finds out (because Ashley tattles on them) that Dawn has seduced Patty, she pretends to seduce Dawn in order to discipline her; she acts as if she is going to perform oral sex on Dawn but bites her labia instead. The image of Susan emerging from beneath Dawn's skirt, wiping blood off her mouth conjures a multitude of cultural taboos and stereotypes, from lesbian sodomy to women's sexuality as dangerous and (literally) consuming.

In essence, the world The Five Lesbian Brothers create in *The Secretaries* is a parodic version of Foucault's Panopticon. Foucault asserts in *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* that discipline in the form of various social institutions and cultural practices (re)makes the individual in the model of the perfect citizen—or what he calls "docile bodies." The Panopticon is a model for an ideal prison, the salient disciplinary features of which would include very structured, boring, repetitive work (like that of a secretary) for the prisoner, as well as the prisoner being housed in a physical structure that placed her under constant surveillance but disallowed her from knowing when she was being observed. Foucault contends that prisoners exposed to this kind of discipline will eventually police themselves.[56] The secretaries are living in a Panopticon where they can never escape the disciplinary gaze because it comes from within themselves and

[56]Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. Alan Sheridan, 2nd ed. (New York: Vintage Books, 1995), 195-228.

those around them. These five women willingly, indeed emphatically, enforce patriarchal standards of beauty, weight, and sexuality among themselves.

Conclusion: A Tangled Web of Otherness

I have tried to, if not draw a direct line, then trace a web of connections among fat, race, and queer sexuality as they intersect in these play texts. Novid Parsi, a gay Iranian performing artist and playwright, illustrates my point when he describes his frustrating casting experiences as an actor in regional theatre in Texas: "Me, the Jewish girl, the Turkish girl, the black girl, the fat girl, the faggot: we made up a sort of family, a non-Von Trapp family [. . .]." He goes on to describe himself as a "sexually, ethnically othered body onstage: a public spectacle."[57] Parsi discusses at length the various outsider roles he and his cohorts were relegated to in their homogenous white casting pool. Fatness and blackness are visible markers of outsider status in our culture. Examples like *Ma Rainey* and *Venus* demonstrate that onstage these visible marks of otherness can suggest either a character's subjugation or empowerment, and sometimes both simultaneously. I have discussed how both a fat female body and a black body are linked with sexual rapaciousness and even sexual deviance, which then links them to queer bodies as those who are outside the normal/deviant binary. Fatness and blackness are immediately visible to the spectator and associated with a myriad of cultural prejudices. Queerness, while not necessarily visible, is connected to fat not only because both are positioned outside heteronormative standards, but by the common cultural assumption, that both being queer and being fat are a choice, while one's race, of course, is not.

[57] Robin Bernstein, *Cast Out: Queer Lives in Theater*, ed. Jill Dolan and David Roman, Triangulations (Ann Arbor MI: University of Michigan Press, 2006), 160-61.

Regardless of this question of agency, I assert there is a complex interplay that connects fat bodies, queer bodies, and black bodies in various forms of representation.

CH V: Fat Performances

The previous chapters explore the ways in which playwrights use fat dramaturgically, either as a plot point or, more subtly, when fat behavior enhances a character or fat behavior drives the plot forward in some way. With plays such as *Moon for the Misbegotten*, *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*, and *The Rose Tattoo*, I have demonstrated instances in which the playwright did not always explicitly call for a fat actress in the character description, but the roles have traditionally been played by big, if not fat, actresses who were outside the normative standards of slender beauty because of implicit cultural assumptions about fat inherent in the texts. Thus, casting has turned to "outsize" actresses who, according to cultural stereotypes, embody the qualities the playwright is suggesting with the character. Talented actresses such as Colleen Dewhurst, Maureen Stapleton, Cherry Jones, and Kathleen Turner who, because of their size, fall outside the heteronormative paradigm or the normal/deviant binary that I have discussed, have sometimes benefited from this casting dynamic.

Performing Bodies: Subverting Stereotypes vs. Retaining the Status Quo

This chapter explores fat or oversize performers who deliberately use their bodies to exploit cultural stereotypes about fat. Here, I am investigating the ways in which the performers themselves use their bodies to reinforce or reject stereotypes of fatness. Unlike in the previous chapters, in this section I will be focusing more on performances or critical reception to performances as the starting point, rather than texts. In some cases, such as with Margaret Cho's *The Sensuous Woman*, there is no text. The fat performances

I will be exploring fall roughly into two categories. Performances in the first category assume an activist stance and attempt to subvert patriarchal power structures with their performing bodies, such as the solo performance of Claudia Shear in *Blown Sideways Through Life* (1995) or that of comedian and performer Cho in *The Sensuous Woman* (2007).[1] Cho and Shear endeavor to use their embodied performances of their fat identity as political weapons, seeking to subvert or upend fat stereotypes. The second category looks at fat performances that capitalize on cultural assumptions about fat. Roseanne Barr's early stand-up performances and her successful series *Roseanne* (1988-97) fall into this category as does Kirstie Alley's self-produced, short-lived Showtime TV series, *Fat Actress* (2005). With Alley's performance, we see a fat woman embrace fat typecasting and pander to cultural fears of obesity. Alley's self-deprecating humor turns to self-loathing, and she deliberately embodies all the negative assumptions about overweight women in her attempt to generate publicity and revitalize her career. She reinforces cultural assumptions about fat behavior. Alley's performance of her own fatness, which relies on the most grotesque stereotypes of obesity, results in what I call "fat-face minstrelsy."

This is the first chapter in which I will discuss at length any cultural texts outside of live theatre. Some of the performances are crafted for theatre, some for the venue of stand-up comedy (still live), and finally, with Roseanne and Kirstie Alley, the medium of television. However, what connects all these fat performances, regardless of whether they are live or televised, fat-positive, or fat-loathing, is that the women are all performing a version of themselves. None of these performers endeavors to embody a character outside

[1] Cho's performance I saw live and my exploration of Shear's performance is based on the text and reviews, although she did eventually record the show in 1995 for cable TV.

her own persona. Instead, the actresses create characters based on themselves. Not surprisingly, the shows were all initially self-produced. For me, they represent a provocative cross-section of fat performances that are representative of an evolution of cultural perceptions and reactions to the fat woman in representation.[2]

Before discussing the performances, I should add that all of these performers willingly participate in a representational economy of visibility politics. Indeed, my premise here is to explore potential for empowerment through increased visibility of the fat female. This is counter to Peggy Phelan, who advocates in her foundational book *Unmarked* for removal of oneself from the politics of visibility as a position of power. She argues that to be seen is to "be seized," which is automatically to be part of the patriarchal economy of representation that turns difference into sameness.[3] She reminds us that, "[T]he process of self-identity is a leap into a narrative that employs seeing as a way of knowing." She also reminds us that, "[R]eading the body as a sign of identity is the way men regulate the bodies of women," and therefore sees the removal of oneself from the "visibility trap" as having greater potential for empowering women.[4] She asserts that women cannot be impartially represented because the moment they are seen, they are subject to the "male gaze" and a whole patriarchal system of knowledge and assumptions. However, I am arguing that fat white women, who are "invisible" in terms

[2] Here I should note that, in terms of performing the 'self,' these performers take a page from a rich tradition of feminist solo autobiographical performance that evolved in the late sixties and early seventies. However, none of them except perhaps Cho, self-identify as feminist. As Marvin Carlson writes," [T]he most elaborately developed area of identity performance, both in theory and in practice, has involved performance by women […]." He goes on to state, "[O]ne of the first manifestations of feminist performances, and still an important approach, utilized specifically autobiographical material, […] with a consciousness of the political and social dimensions of such material." Marvin Carlson, *Performance* (New York: Routledge, 1996) 157-62. Female performance artists such as Yvonne Rainer, Carolee Schneeman, Rachel Rosenthal, and Deb Margolin are just a few examples of those who paved the way for performance of the self as a feminist performance strategy.

[3] Peggy Phelan, *Unmarked: The Politics of Performance* (London, Routledge, 1993), 5.

[4] Ibid., 10.

of the heteronormative economy of representation, can find power in visibility. These performers are all deliberately using their bodies within the representational economy of visibility and seek empowerment through being seen—or at least challenging the notion that the "relationship between cultural representation and identity is linear."[5]

Claudia Shear's Dangerous Curves

In chapter four, I demonstrated the complex web of interconnectivity among race identity, gender identity, and fat identity in representation. In her foundational text *Gender Trouble*, theorist Judith Butler reminds us that the production of identity is deeply connected to the "heterosexual matrix" and the "grid of cultural intelligibility through which bodies, genders, and desires are naturalized."[6] David Savran concludes in *Taking It Like a Man* that "gendered identity, on account of its contingency, is of all identifications the one most subject to intensive social pressures, the most anxiety ridden, the most consistently imbricated in social, political, and economic negotiations, and thus the most sensitive to the barometer of culture."[7] I suggest that we could include body type as another identity paradigm analogous to Savran's and Butler's because it is also deeply subject to cultural pressure. In this first section, my aim is to explore the ways in which performer Claudia Shear's "invisible-conspicuous" body inverts the hegemonic power matrix, wherein thin is equated with power and status, by examining her performance in *Blown Sideways Through Life* (1995).

[5] Ibid., 7.
[6] Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble:Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (London: Routledge, 1999), 194.
[7] David Savran, Taking It Like A Man: White Masculinity, Masochism, and Contemporary American Culture (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1998), 8.

Indeed, the following quote from the show expresses many of the prejudices and stereotypes I have discussed in previous chapters.

> Being Fat is the absolute nadir of the misfit. You're a misfit because nothing fits. You don't fit in. You're not fit. You're fat. Fat doesn't have the poetic cachet of alcohol, the whiff of danger in the drug of choice. You're just fat.
> Being fat is so un-American, so unattractive, unerotic, unfashionable, undisciplined, unthinkable, uncool. It makes you invisible. It makes you conspicuous.[8]

Shear's remark about fat being un-American also harks back to J. Eric Oliver's argument that I outlined in chapter one. His premise is that the "ideology that underscores [fat] prejudice is an ethos of individualism and self reliance."[9] He reminds us that fat people violate some of the fundamental tenets of American political culture, including the belief that individuals are responsible for their own welfare, that Americans are obliged to work at improving themselves, and that laissez-faire capitalism, entrepreneurship, and the free market guarantee that hard work is all that is required to achieve one's goals. He also notes that this cultural assumption is part of what colors contemporary attitudes toward the poor in America as well. The unspoken assumption is that fat people could lose weight and poor people could become middle class if they only helped themselves. Shear's autobiographical performance in *Blown Sideways Through Life* depicts her as in breach of both of these American values; not only is she fat, but she is poor. We will see that the specter of anti-Americanism haunts the performances of some of the other fat performers I will discuss later in this chapter.

When Claudia Shear wrote and performed *Blown Sideways Through Life* as a vehicle for herself, she claimed that one of her main objectives was to get an agent. In the words of *New York Times* critic Frank Rich, "Claudia Shear is a Brooklyn-born woman of uncertain

[8] Claudia Shear, *Blown Sideways through Life* (New York: Dial Press, 1995), 41.
[9] J. Eric Oliver, *Fat Politics: The Real Story Behind America's Obesity Epidemic* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 72-3.

age (the late 30's perhaps?) who personifies two middle-class nightmares. She is fat, and she cannot keep a job."[10] Rich's harsh words would aptly describe any unfortunate, overweight, jobless American, but when these words are applied to an aspiring actress, the situation goes from "middle-class nightmare" to disastrous. That Shear had to write, perform, and essentially produce her own material just to be seen onstage speaks to the dearth of opportunities for actresses whose bodies do not fit within the culturally acceptable range of slenderness. Fortunately for Shear, audience response was overwhelmingly positive, and the show was a success, making its way from the New York Theatre Workshop to a commercial run at the Cherry Lane Theatre, where it ran for 221 performances and garnered her an Obie.[11] The success of this show helped pave the way for more career opportunities for Shear, including another successful play, *Dirty Blonde*, which is about another fat actress, Mae West.

The text of *Blown Sideways Through Life* and Shear's performing body are commentaries on the cultural construction of the feminine body and its subsequent production of identity and power. They simultaneously deconstruct and uphold normative cultural reproductions of American women. Although *Blown Sideways* was well received, critics and reviewers often covertly revealed a discomfort with the performance by encoding their reviews with language that suggested hostility or disdain. For example, Rich's review is entitled "Fat and 64 Jobs Later, Misfit Finally Finds a Niche on the Stage." Not only is Shear "fat" (as opposed to voluptuous or some less loaded adjective), but she is a "misfit"

[10] Frank Rich, "Fat and 64 Jobs Later, Misfit Finally Finds a Niche Onstage," *New York Times*, September 22, 1993. The review is favorable, but it is remarkable that Rich makes a point to inaccurately guess her age (she was, in fact, 31 at the time) highlighting his focus on her physical characteristics.
[11] See Lortel Archives Internet Off-Broadway Database http://www.lortel.org/LLA_archive/index.cfm?search_by=people&keyword=name&first=Claudia%20&last=Shear&middle (accessed September 26, 2009).

who finally finds a place in the world—onstage, which, of course, is not reality. In a sense, the implication is that she has no place in the real world. Granted, Rich (or the editor who created the headline) is playing off of Shear's own words of self-description. However, by choosing to headline the review with the words "fat" and "misfit," he (or she) is reinforcing exactly the kind of "weightism" that Shear is defying simply by performing as her "fat self." As with his review of *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*, Rich consciously or unconsciously gravitates toward language that highlights cultural assumptions about fat and emphasizes the correlation between fat and misfit. His word choice reinforces the otherness of fat that I discussed in chapter four.

Rich was not the only reviewer who seemed troubled by Shear's size. When the play moved to Broadway in 1995, another reviewer described Shear as "hefty and lusty" and commented that "as a performer she is quite the egoist. Is she narrating or boasting, exposing her life or canonizing it? Settle down, you want to say. (At moments you want to scream it.)"[12] This suggests the reviewer's discomfort with a fat woman assuming a place of power center stage and demanding to be heard. The choice of the adjective "lusty" is particularly suspect, as the text contains virtually no references to her romantic life or sexual appetite. It is true that the descriptor "lusty" could be referencing Shear's energy and enthusiasm, but the reviewer's phrasing could also allude to the fat stereotype I have discussed in previous chapters of fat women as sexually rapacious. Shear also called her own lighting and sound cues from the stage, another unsettling performance of empowerment. Could reviewers' aversion to Shear be directed not only toward her explicit

[12]Margo Jefferson, "Self-Portraits on Stage: Perspective Is Crucial," *New York Times*, July 30, 1995. http://nytimes.com/ (accessed September 26, 2009).

performing body but to the underlying threat of a heavy or fat female body as empowered, figuratively breaking the mold of hegemonic dictates for a culturally assimilated woman?

According to a *Newsweek* interview, Shear was 5'3" and "200-plus pounds" when she conceived the show, but "she's much thinner now," interviewer Marc Peyser is quick to point out, as if to assure the reader/spectator that he or she will not be overwhelmed by Shear's monstrous presence.[13] The picture accompanying the article shows Shear reclining, looking zaftig but attractive in my view, and certainly not the grotesque form viewers would instinctively associate with a woman of more than two hundred pounds. Regardless of her actual weight, according to standards I have discussed in chapter one, Shear's body is widely considered outside of normal or socially acceptable boundaries. She is too large to be accepted by most middle-class white audiences as normal or average. In her own words, she is "unattractive, unerotic, unfashionable, undisciplined."[14] Psychologist Margo Main emphasizes the discrimination and prejudice faced by fat women when she reminds us of the negative attitudes toward fat that I discussed in the first chapter. She writes:

> [O]besity is still considered sinful, a rejection of the highly valued ethics of self-denial and self-control, particularly for women. For this reason, weightism has become a "politically correct" form of prejudice, potentially more powerful and pervasive than racism, sexism, or ageism. In this day and age, a lean body is a symbol of health and power; being fat or even average size is considered inferior. According to a recent study, over half the females between ages 18 and 25 would prefer to be run over by a truck than to be fat, and two thirds would choose to be mean or stupid rather than fat.[15]

I suggest that that the text of *Blown Sideways* illustrates this cultural truth of disempowerment through Shear's dramatization of her personal experiences of weightism and losing job after job. However, at the same time, her live performing body subverts this

[13] Marc Peyser, "The Ultimate Working Girl," *Newsweek*, November 8, 1993.
[14] Shear, *Blown Sideways*, 41.
[15] Margo Maine, *Body Wars: Making Peace with Women's Bodies, an Activist's Guide* (Carlsbad, CA: Gűrze Books, 2000), 19.

social code that oppresses fat women by taking center stage and telling her story. Shear uses the medium of theatre and solo performance to make her voice heard to an audience of people who might otherwise have overlooked or ignored her because of her outward appearance.

If we consider the incredible shrinking woman of the twenty-first century that I describe in chapter one as "disappearing," and thus conforming to a patriarchal hierarchy or compensating for economic and social gains, then a fat female body is a direct challenge to the cultural status quo. The ideal woman is supposed to disappear, almost literally, by being the smallest, skinniest person in the room. She should take up as little space as possible, not only by being slender but also by assuming appropriately feminine, space-saving body language, such as keeping her legs crossed. If a woman is so undisciplined or subversive as to fail to meet these requirements then she can figuratively disappear by keeping her mouth shut and apologizing for her body size. Shear's non-normative performing body poses a threat because the space-claiming bodies of fat women enact a performance of power that threatens existing hegemonic power structures. Thus, Shear's solo performance is openly defiant, representing her complete failure to disappear.

In her discussion of the formation of gender identities, Judith Butler touches on the political and cultural inscriptions on the human body. Butler draws on Mary Douglas's argument in *Purity and Danger* when she asserts that "[a]ny discourse that establishes the boundaries of the body serves the purpose of instating and naturalizing certain taboos regarding appropriate limits, postures, and modes of exchange that define what it is that constitutes bodies."[16] The pop-culture visual vocabulary relentlessly disseminated in all media forms is such a discourse. The boundaries of the appropriate American female body

[16] Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 166.

are limited to very particular criteria as I discussed in chapter one of this dissertation. Butler goes on to point out that "what constitutes the limit of the body is never merely material, but that the surface, the skin, is systematically signified by taboos and anticipated transgressions:[. . .] the boundaries of the body become the limits of the socially hegemonic."[17] If, as Butler suggests, gender is a cultural construct established by repetition and reproduction, so too is the ideal female form a result of perpetual visual bombardment of young, excessively slender, primarily white women. Shear crosses bodily boundaries with her atypical, unfamiliar body. She violates the limits of the "socially hegemonic" by writing a text that gives voice to a person who falls outside cultural standards and by displaying her "transgressive" body in performance.

Shear describes her fat body both as "invisible" and "conspicuous." Because her size violates normative boundaries, she effectively performs power by taking up more space than is usually allotted for women. Her "invisible-conspicuous" body is highly visible and embodies the threat of the overbearing female body as literally and figuratively insatiable. As I mention in chapter one, historically, certain fields of psychoanalysis, as well as tales from Western mythology, have characterized the female body, and the vagina in particular, as insatiably desirous and a threat to the penis. Referring back to Susan Bordo's argument in *Unbearable Weight*, in which she discusses the conflation of female appetite for sex and food with destruction, a fat woman is the pinnacle of danger. Thus, Shear's fat figure represents the unquenchable female appetite—a threat to the American man on sexual and economic levels.

In *Blown Sideways*, this performance of power is executed not only through the visual of Shear's subversive nontraditional body portrayed as heroine of the narrative, but

[17] Ibid., 166-7.

also in the text itself. Frank Rich's observation is significant: "She is fat, *and she cannot keep a job*." For Rich, this is an obvious cause and effect scenario. Fat people, especially fat white women, are incapable of keeping jobs. Why? Because it is the nature of a fat body, an unruly body, an untidy body, a body that refuses to conform to society's boundaries to be an insubordinate worker. Indeed, Shear's narrative of sixty-four jobs seems sufficient evidence for such a claim. By chronicling her experiences in the job market, Shear illustrates a prejudice against fat women, or perhaps more accurately a correlation between fat women and their perceived insubordination.

Shear's inability to hold a job is linked throughout the text to her bad attitude. I hypothesize that her "bad attitude" might, at least in some part, be a reflection of her employers' fat prejudices, and more specifically, their fears surrounding her powerful, consuming body. Shear begins her show by detailing some of the typical instructions she received from her employers:

> And they tell me, "Chill on the conversation."
> "Don't stand over there!"
> "Be nice to the customers!"
> "Put your book away! NO reading allowed!" [. . .]
> "Watch your mouth!"
> "No eating!" [. . .]
> And then, later, I hear, "Uh, there's been complaints about your attitude."
> "You were heard whistling in the elevator…."
> "You talk too much. . . ."
> "Your laugh is too loud. . . ."
> "You have to do what we tell you to do. No arguments!" [. . .][18]

Note that several critiques from her employers are explicitly directed toward her mouth, her eating and reading habits, and her attitude, all of which might be construed as semiotic signifiers for her rabid consumption and innate social deviance as reflected by her size. In every case, the comments Shear received from her employers suggest their discomfort with

[18] Shear, *Blown Sideways*, 2-4.

any behavior they associated with her personal initiative. Such benign gestures as whistling or laughing loudly, which could be seen as attributes of an upbeat individual welcome in the workplace, are vilified and held up as justification for firing her:

> And finally:
> "Listen, we're going to have to let you go. . . ."
> "Well, it's my way or the highway."
> "You're fired!"
> And every time I say, "All right, all right, all right."
> But sometimes, sometimes I say, "FUCK YOU!"[19]

With this parting shot, Shear realizes all of her employers' fears and delivers exactly the kind of unruly behavior they have associated with her on sight. A fat woman cannot be contained or controlled and is a threat to an ordered work environment.[20] Most likely Shear is exaggerating the number of jobs from which she was fired, and she may be underplaying her own culpability for the sake of her narrative, yet she certainly capitalizes on a cultural truth. This stereotype of unruliness can be seen in performances of other actresses with fat body types, such as Roseanne, Rosie O'Donnell, Kathy Bates, or Camryn Manheim. In various cultural texts, there is a correlation between big women and unruly behavior.

The question remains as to how much of their behavior is actually boisterous. Is it possible that the same behavior from a slender woman would not be interpreted as disruptive? A space-taking or unruly body automatically threatens the harmony of American cultural power structures. Without ever speaking, an overweight woman is actively subversive. Later in the text, Shear describes her attempts to contain her personality in order to please her employers:

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[19] Ibid.,4.

[20] David Lempert, reports in "Women's Increasing Wage Penalties From Being Overweight and Obese," found in *The Atlantic*, March 2008 that there is growing prejudice toward fat white women in the job-market as found by the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics. In 1981 a woman with the hypothetical "overweight" body-mass in the 75th percentile (about 165 pounds for a 5'4" woman) could expect to earn 4.29 percent less than her slimmer colleagues. In 2000 that same woman could expect to earn 7.47 percent less.

> You always have to say yes to get a job. Never have a personality, a life, a light, an opinion. And just yes isn't good enough. You have to smile at some cocksucker in a cheap suit engorged with the power to hire and fire. And if you don't, it means you have a bad attitude.
> A bad attitude?
> He can't imagine my attitude.
> What I really want to do is grab him by his swirly tie and scream [. . .][21]

She is all too aware of the consequences of voicing an opinion—even the same opinion that were it given by a man, or a slender woman, would not be deemed as threatening or offensive. Her refusal to censor herself or "disappear" has disastrous results for her in the workplace.

By the end of the text, after years of being fired or quitting, Shear is quite experienced at losing a job. In the following passage she manages to assert her power and make the best of it. She describes a job she enjoyed (albeit briefly) as a brunch chef at a resort on Fire Island:

> Everyone I worked with made me laugh until I snorted like a hog. I had so much fun. Until I got fired by the asshole who ran the kitchen.
> By this point I was so adept at being fired (I mean I'd been fired a lot more than this guy had ever fired anyone) that he was more nervous than I was. So I told him I couldn't leave until the end of the week. He consented in an awkward moment of guilt. Four days, three nights. Luxurious beach resort.[22]

She doesn't detail in what way her job performance was unsatisfactory to her boss. From the above passage, we can only assume that her crime was laughing so hard that she "snorted like a hog." Her word choice is no coincidence, although it is impossible to determine from the text alone whether "hog" comes out of her own self-loathing promoted by society's relentless criticism of overweight people or whether it reflects her boss's perception of her overweight body. Perhaps both. In any case, Shear is yet again deemed unsuitable for employment. If we consider Shear's invisible-conspicuous body as a site of

[21] Shear, *Blown Sideways*.,18.
[22] Ibid.,78.

power, we can deduce that at least part of Shear's difficulties holding a job stem from the threat of unspoken power represented by her fat body.

Shear's play and her performance of herself touch on significant issues in the formation of identity through heteronormative tropes. By exploring her own experience in the workplace, she illustrates prejudice and fear directed toward her ominously consuming physical form with its implicit unruly behavior, illuminating cultural assumptions about the subversive nature of overweight women. Shear refused to be enslaved by her overweight figure as the mass media would have her be, and in this way, both her performing body and her text were groundbreaking.

Putting Her Body Where Her Mouth Is: Margaret Cho's Sensual Woman

Another performer who has used her embodied performance to subvert popular representations of idealized beauty is Margaret Cho. I begin my discussion of Cho's activist performance by positioning her work as a stand-up comedian and political activist, as well as by offering a selection of some of the criticism aimed at her by her detractors. Margaret Cho is perhaps best known for her stand-up comedy. Although she does not exclusively identify her material as feminist, at the heart of her subversive comedy are many feminist concerns. Many of her routines question patriarchal right-wing government and social policies that oppress women and minorities. Undeniably, she is a comic for social change, and she is particularly active in promoting lesbian, gay, bisexual, transexual (LGBT) acceptance and equality. The quotes I have assembled below are excerpts taken from Cho's blog. She posted the emails she received after making some anti-Bush administration jokes during her comedy spot at the

MOVEON.Org Awards in 2004. Not only does Cho's hate mail expose racism, bigotry, and weightism, but it also demonstrates the cultural belief that being considered fat is anti-American, or at the very least, being fat is connected to liberal points of view in the minds of certain right-wing factions. Nearly every email (and I have culled out a small fraction of the material) attacks Cho for being ugly, fat, or a pig (in addition to all the other vitriol). I hesitate to add that by 2004, Cho, who has indeed struggled with her weight, had rebounded from an eating disorder activated by her producer's requests during her TV series, and was at the lower end of her weight spectrum when she made this appearance.[23] Significantly, many of the emails also abuse her for being a dyke, which reinforces the queer-fat connection that I discuss in chapter four. Somehow in the minds of her detractors, Cho's race, her "fatness," and her queerness are inextricably connected and are part and parcel of her liberal politics.[24]

For me, these disgusting emails are an apt starting point to frame Cho's mission in creating *The Sensuous Woman*. Because her detractors targeted her fatness—linking her political views to her actual body—it seems appropriate that Cho eventually created a piece in which her unruly body spoke louder than her comedic rhetoric.

> Here is a suggestion for your "show," wear a tent shaped piece of Plexiglas on your head and bill yourself as the "BIG FAT ASSED HUMAN CHINESE BUFFET."
>
> WHY ARE YOU SO UGLY?
>
> Shut up, lose weight and take a bath.

[23] In her performance, *I'm the One that I Want* (2000), Cho details how her producers requested her to lose weight because her Korean face was too round for the camera. She went on such a radical diet that she landed in the hospital with kidney failure. She also chronicles years of dieting, bulimic food and exercise behavior and poor health that followed this incident in her life.

[24] Cho is married to a man but self-identifies as queer. She is extremely active in promoting LGBT interests, and is a darling of gay fans. She also openly discusses her bisexual activities as part of her comedy.

> I find you to be a disgusting, misguided PIG!
>
> GOOK CUNT, You fat ass slant eyed WHORE. YOU SUCK LIBERAL COCK
>
> right wingers unite to fight liberal fat bitches like you!!!!
>
> This may shock you, but you are a NOBODY. You're an obese, Oriental […] lesbian—THAT is your claim to fame.
>
> Fat Cunt Chinese women. Bush is the best!
>
> Way to go you fat slope whore. Go back to Korea you obese pig.
>
> slut and a lard ass. Please take Rosie O'donnel back home with u, I'm sure yall will have a lot of fun together eating sushi and having dildo fights.
>
> go home u slant fat bitch
>
> insecure, arrogant, butt-ugly, obnoxious, potty-mouthed, uneducated, fat liberal who makes fun of God and christians all the time.
>
> Harro ms cho: […] we grive u new klorian name, u = wan fat ho u arsso Femernazi
>
> Put the cheeseburger down, pull Clinton's dick out of your mouth, and wise up. Because the people who adore you have AIDS for a REASON.[25]

Notice also some of the other fat associations in these slurs, such as lack of cleanliness ("take a bath") and linking her fatness and subversive behavior to the AIDS epidemic, just as journalist Gregory Critzer did in his op-ed article about the obesity epidemic, quoted in chapter one.

[25] I originally found these on Cho's blog: http://www.margaretcho.com/ (accessed May 18, 2008). She posted the hate mail on her blog as it came to her, including email addresses, in hopes that her fans would engage and deter the attacks. I tried to access the emails again on her site as of July 21, 2009, and it looks as though they have been removed or archived. However, they can still be found at the following link if you care to read some of the most horrifying, racist hate mail you can imagine: http://www.apj.us/20040114CroMag.html#20040115. The site also chronicles how a transcript from Cho's comedy routine in 2004 was inaccurately edited and posted by Matt Drudge on a right-wing website called freerepublic.com, resulting in the onslaught of hate mail.

Cho's past performances have frequently focused on her own struggles with her weight, and a central component of her routines was comically indicting the diet and beauty industry and openly discussing the horrors of her own experience as a Korean-American entertainer trying to fulfill unrealistic standards of American slenderness and beauty. In *The Sensuous Woman*, Cho embodies her political comedy in a new way by stepping out of her traditional mode of stand-up and using live theatre and a burlesque format to interrogate assumptions about female beauty as well as gender and sexuality. In a series of burlesque numbers with song, dance, comedy monologue, and strip, Cho and her company played with stereotypes and defied media-generated images of beauty and sexuality. Cho declared that "feeling beautiful is a political act," and among other skits, used her own "imperfect" body in erotic dance. Her company of performers featured a diversity of body types performing in comic and erotic skits. Like Shear, Cho used her unruly body to upend patriarchal power structures.

The piece began with ten minutes of Cho's topical scathing stand-up. When I saw the show in October 2007 at the Zipper Factory in New York City, Cho's monologue centered on Britney Spears's recent lackluster performance at the MTV Video Music Awards and the subsequent media frenzy to denounce Spears and particularly to critique her body. This provided perfect fodder for Cho's theme. She ranted "leave Britney ALONE!"[26] Cho went on to attack the media, who delighted in calling Britney fat, pointing out the insanity of beauty standards for slenderness as depicted in the mass media.

[26] This joke was a wink to the YouTube phenomenon in which budding performance artist Chris Crocker recorded himself passionately begging the camera for the same thing. The video went viral for several weeks in September 2007.

The show basically unfolded in traditional burlesque style and was composed of dance routines juxtaposed with comedy sketches and song, with Cho providing the patter between some numbers and performing as a dancer in several segments. As Cho told the audience in the opening monologue, her mission with *The Sensuous Woman* was to celebrate the beauty and sexuality in all types of bodies and all sexual proclivities. Cho, who as I mentioned has very publicly struggled with her weight throughout her career, eventually abandoned dieting forever and has made it her battle cry to accept her own figure just as it is and to encourage her audiences to do the same. Her decision to accept her own body and promote diversity (including fat bodies) is truly an act of political defiance in the context of the ways in which her detractors align her fatness with civil disobedience and anti-Americanism. In my view, *The Sensuous Woman* fell short of its huge ambitions by mixing issues of body diversity for women in American culture with questions of sexual diversity. However, the show did relentlessly destabilize heteronormative assumptions about body size and sexuality.

Cho's performing body is the centerpiece of *The Sensuous Woman*, but the varied body types and performance styles represented in the piece reject American beauty standards as they are disseminated in contemporary popular culture. As Shear initially did with *Blown Sideways*, Cho, who is the central performer, self-produced *The Sensuous Woman* and gathered a supporting cast of atypical body types and gender representations to participate in a show that aimed to break down the normal/deviant binary of beauty and sexuality. For example, the first performer following Cho's standup was Selene Luna, a 3'10" little person who started her number in a baby carriage. She then performed a traditional burlesque routine, stripping down to panties and pasties. Luna's

small adult body performing all of the traditional classic burlesque moves had a destabilizing effect. Luna did not mock or comment on her non-heteronormative appearance but performed her sensual dance in all erotic seriousness.

Cho herself performed several traditional burlesque numbers, including "Chairman Mee-Oow," in which she entered dressed in a Red Army uniform and danced to stereotypically Asian music complete with gongs. She eventually stripped down to pasties and twirled not only her tassels but streamers, and eventually the Communist flag, while displaying her body. Here, Cho's nearly nude body, which is covered in tattoos, defies the standard of the white, toned, silicone-breasted, slim hipped exotic dancer in commercialized pornography and strip clubs. While Cho is not fat (by my standards, anyway), there is not a significant difference between the size of her waist and her hips. She has a rather long, straight trunk, smallish breasts, and a rather flat behind. Her atypical figure is further highlighted by the tattoos covering most of her back and a significant part of her arms and legs. Her unruly body and her joy in dancing naked made her political statement—her answer to the cruel vitriol spewed at her during the course of her career.

Another opaque number that aimed to deconstruct assumptions about gender and sexuality involved Cho and a male performer in brightly colored full-body stockings that covered all but their faces and compressed their sexual characteristics. Not exactly dancing, the two struck a myriad of sexual poses to the tune of "Me So Horny." In the past, this is a tune that Cho has called offensively racist, citing the refrain, "me so horny, me love you long time," which not only mocks Asians but exploits the stereotype of the hypersexualized yet childlike Asian girl. But in this scenario, the two simply moved

through a series of graphic sexual positions, pausing briefly in each tableau. The two assumed no particular gender roles in their various poses but configured themselves in every variation of copulation and oral stimulation and thus broke the mold of the male/female binary. If we consider Judith Butler's assertion that "the 'unity' of gender is the effect of regulatory practices that seek to render gender identity uniform through compulsory heterosexuality," then this strange little number playfully destabilized binary gender assumptions by deconstructing all the motions and gestures of sexual interplay.[27]

Certainly Cho's tattooed figure embodied rebellion against contemporary homogenized standards of the white, slender, disciplined, erotic woman. However, Dirty Martini's burlesque number perhaps even more effectively captured *The Sensuous Woman*'s mission to celebrate female bodies in all shapes and indict oppressive beauty standards. Dirty Martini, a fat, fleshy woman with an established following, has found her niche in burlesque. In this case, clad in red, white, and blue stars and spangles, she performed a traditional burlesque strip down to pasties and a g-string to the tune of Dolly Parton singing "Proud to Be an American." As part of the dance sequence, she first pulled a lengthy string of dollar bills from her mouth and then another chain from between the folds of her ample butt cheeks, all the while gyrating her hips seductively. It was a uniquely effective metaphor commenting on American consumerism, highlighted by her large size. She performed her routine with a wink and a nod to the audience as far as the song and the political jibe, but not in apology for her fat figure. She concluded her number with the ubiquitous tassel twirl, spinning her large, somewhat pendulous breasts while waving sparklers. The audacity of a fat woman dancing erotically without apology is in itself a political statement in our culture. But add to it Dolly's patriotic anthem,

[27] Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 42.

which saw many remakes following 9/11 and was used, not ironically, in commercials selling American-made pick-up trucks, and Dirty Martini's performance flies in the face of a multitude of American values. Interestingly, her politically challenging fat performance also evokes the anti-Americanism that is frequently associated with fat. When I saw the show, two men next to me got up and left following her performance.[28]

Feminist scholar Jill Dolan explores the possibilities for female performers to use their nude bodies within the mission of feminism. She points out that the relationship between female erotic performer and male spectator-as-masochist, who pays to be teased by the performer he cannot have, relies on a power structure based on economics:

> Spectators pay to see the image of the stripper as commodity; they buy control over the gaze. Whether they position themselves as sadists or masochists, their power lies in controlling the illusion that the stripper is performing for them.[29]

Dolan notes that in some cases, feminist performers, such as Karen Finley have used their naked bodies to "disarm desire." By presenting her body as foul and defamed, covering it with various substances, Finley interrupts male consumption of her nude body. In other words, Finley may be naked, but she does not "give them their money's worth." Dirty Martini's erotic dance fails to honor the exchange Dolan describes above in a different sort of way. Dirty Martini presents herself for consumption but because her figure is so unexpected in an erotic context, she violates the performer-spectator contract. Perhaps this is why the men left following her performance. Dolan also notes that female artists who have presented their nude bodies in the vein of cultural feminist performance, such as Carolee Schneeman of "interior scroll" fame or Hannah Wilke had bodies that were

[28] Certainly they could have left for many reasons, but my personal perception based on a few negative remarks I overheard from them while she was performing, is that they were especially offended by her fatness and also by her send-up of patriotism. I have also seen men jeer at Dirty Martini at The Slipper Room, a downtown burlesque performance venue.

[29] Jill Dolan, *The Feminist Spectator as Critic* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1991), 65.

considered beautiful by cultural standards, which in some ways legitimized their nudity. Although Dolan categorizes Finley's work as more in the vein of material feminism, I would include Finley in that circle of "legitimized nudity" because although she smears herself with food such as yams or chocolate representing feces, she has a great body by contemporary cultural standards of beauty.[30] Finley may present herself as already consumed, but by virtue of her slim, firm, well-proportioned figure she is still participating to some degree in the patriarchal economy of visibility rather than disrupting it.[31] However, Dirty Martini's fat body does potentially disrupt this economy, although her goal and that of *The Sensuous Woman* is quite the opposite. In fact, both Cho and Dirty Martini reverse Finley's paradigm by attempting to incite desire from their spectators rather than thwart it with bodies that defy cultural expectations for beauty. Nonetheless, by failing to adhere to the standard, their bodies subvert the male gaze even as they dance to invite it.

Another performer Cho included, who, in my view, gave one of the more provocative feminist performances in *The Sensuous Woman*, was Ryan Heffington: a man. For me, his performing body highlighted the cultural truth that the beauty ideal of the (sexualized) female figure as proliferated by the media is more readily achieved and performed by a biologically male person than by a woman. His routine was a kind of stripper-drag that supports Samantha Murray's assertion in chapter four that the only "normal" or healthy body is that of a straight, white heterosexual male. Sporting long hair, stiletto boots, and an eighties style one-piece leopard unitard, Heffington emerged

[30] Dolan writes, "[A]lthough Finley bases her work in the body, her content is not the biologically ordained capabilities idealized in cultural performance art. She focuses on the circulation of sexual power assumed by a woman who will not be socialized as sexually submissive according to her assigned gender role." Ibid., 66.
[31] In fact, Finley appeared nude in *Playboy* (July 1999).

from the back of the house to the driving musical strains of the eighties pop favorite "Dirty Diana." The follow spot took a moment to find him, and when it did, as I watched him gyrate like a pole dancer at a strip club, I believed I was looking at a woman. As he danced closer, I realized that he was a man—no effort to conceal the bulge under the leotard—and he had a mustache and goatee, as well as visible body hair. Nonetheless, as the performance continued and he performed classic female stripper moves, which are notoriously athletic and powerful, I had to remind myself repeatedly that I was watching a man.[32] My confusion underscores how the so-called erotica of contemporary striptease is in some ways better fulfilled with a man's body than a woman's. It also points to the homoerotic aesthetic inherent in contemporary representations of the ideally sexualized woman. Heffington's slender, muscular figure is exactly the kind of shape (minus large fake breasts) that we expect to see grinding against the poles, performing leaps, jumps, push-ups, rolls, and kicks.[33] When he gave us the classic "behind shot," his lean, toned male buttocks accurately replicated contemporary striptease scenarios as performed by dancers at high-end clubs geared toward white middle-class male-dominated, but not exclusively male audiences, or as reproduced in various popular cultural texts, such as the film *Striptease* (1996), featuring the impossibly toned (and airbrushed) Demi Moore, or any of the numerous dancers featured weekly in the strip-club background in series such as *The Sopranos* or *The Wire.* Heffington's lean, muscular body—genetically male—has all the attributes that women (who are biologically programmed to have more body fat) strive for in order to emulate popular sex symbols. Of all the performers in *The Sensuous*

[32] Liepe-Levinson, *Stripshow: Performances of Gender and Desire*, 96-100.
[33] Ibid., 98-100. Liepe-Levinson also discusses the regular practices of excessive exercise, tanning, hair removal, and plastic surgery that many striptease performers engage in as part of maintaining a competitive edge in the field.

Woman, Heffington, a man, had the most culturally acceptable body as a model of female sexuality. For me, this was a powerful commentary on how extreme the standards of heteronormative beauty have become in the twenty-first century.

Heffington's performance also corroborates Judith Butler's notion that gender is performative and culturally constructed. Although he exposed enough of his male attributes for us to understand that, biologically, he was a man, his parody was entirely gendered as female. Cho's final number also riffed on this theme. This time she performed a flirtatious fan dance to the strains of Wagner's *Liebestod* from *Tristan und Isolde*. She coyly concealed her body even as she gracefully swept around the stage, hinting that she was completely naked behind the fans. When the final strains of the music boomed out, she reached the climax of her routine and dropped the fans to proudly reveal her naked body. However, what was concealed beneath the fans was a surprise. Her own female genitals were concealed by a prosthetic flaccid penis. This choice can be read in a number of ways. Is it a parody of erotic performance suggesting that what men really desire are women with penises? Does it hint that on some level Cho has internalized misogyny so deeply that a woman's genitals can be improved by a penis? Perhaps this was a nod or a challenge to her large fan constituency of gay men. This penis literally functioned as Cho's fig leaf, concealing her own sexual organs. However, I am inclined to see it as Cho's attempt to further destabilize our notions of beauty and sexual identity. With this comical gesture, she rallies for social change, suggesting a new frontier in which there is a blending of genders and the male/female binary is destroyed.

In *The Sensuous Woman*, Cho and her cohorts embodied political protest rather than spoke it. She challenged cultural assumptions about sexuality, beauty, gender, and

power simply by joyfully dancing nude, leaving her racist, weightist, right-wing critics with no forum or mode of communication to silence her.

As I mentioned, many of these so-called fat performers have only been able to achieve success performing roles based on their comic persona of themselves. However, as of this writing, Margaret Cho is making another foray into the world of playing a fictional character. She will be appearing as Teri Lee, the loyal secretary to the fat heroine, on a new Lifetime television series called *Drop Dead Diva*. The premise of the program is that a skinny pretty girl dies, and her soul somehow ends up inhabiting the body of a smart, fat lawyer, Brooke Elliott. The formerly skinny girl must "reconcile her beauty queen ways with her brilliant new mind."[34] It is possible that the "fat friendly" material of the show, and the fact that Cho is playing a minor role, may afford her more success with a character outside of herself. However, historically it seems that female performers with unruly bodies have better success playing characters based on themselves, such as Roseanne Barr/Arnold, whom I will discuss next.

Rowdy, Rude Roseanne: Pioneering Unruly Behavior

Chronologically, the success of stand-up comedian-turned-sitcom-star-turned talk-show-host Roseanne Barr came largely before the aforementioned performers.[35] However, I see Roseanne as an intermediary figure in the evolution. Her career trajectory and her embodied performance of herself fall somewhere between the autobiographical performances of Shear's one-woman show, Cho's stand-up shtick, and Kirstie Alley's

[34] http://www.mylifetime.com/on-tv/shows/drop-dead-diva/cast (accessed on July 27, 2009).
[35] Another point of future research might be the talk-show format as one of the few acceptable arenas for oversize (or queer—as with Ellen DeGeneres) bodies, most famously Oprah, but also Ricki Lake, Rosie O'Donnell (fat and queer), and Roseanne.

faux "reality" series based on herself.[36] Roseanne got her start in the early eighties as a stand-up comedian who rejected the label "housewife" or "homemaker" for her preferred moniker: "domestic goddess." She strategically positioned herself within her comedy as an overweight, blue-collar housewife. Her comedy was aimed at a working-class female audience, and she shrewdly embraced her fatness as part of her identity, knowing that many working-class women in America look like her and could relate to her circumstances. She joked that she sold "Stubby Kay Cosmetics" (as opposed to Mary Kay), and that a fat mom was a better mom than a skinny mom because a depressed fat mom (and she does suggest that her fatness is a reflection of her stay-at-home depression) will share pudding, Oreos, and marshmallows with her kids and let them enjoy a "sugar high" and subsequent sugar crash, while a skinny mom will insist her kids go outside and run off their youthful energy.[37]

Roseanne knew her audience and marketed herself as lower class. J. Eric Oliver reminds us of the very real inverse statistical relationship between economic wealth and higher education and fat in America:

> [F]at prejudice is so intertwined with class and racial prejudice because America's poor and minorities are much fatter on average than its middle-class whites. [. . .] Body sizes also vary consistently by education and income—27

[36] Aside from her appearance in the ABC series *All American Girl*, based on her life as a Korean American, which ran for about 19 episodes in 1994, http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0108693/ (accessed July 27, 2009), Cho also had her own VH1 "reality show" called the *Margaret Cho Show*, which ran for about eight episodes in 2008, http://www.vh1.com/shows/the_cho_show/episodes.jhtml (accessed on July 27, 2009). *All American Girl* was marginally more successful but was canceled in part because Cho could not lose enough weight to satisfy the network.

[37] You can watch some of Roseanne's early comic routines online:
http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bqqThuH_qGI&feature=related (accessed July 27, 2009).
http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UIBNO5y66xA&NR=1 (accessed July 27, 2009).

> percent of high school dropouts are obese compared to only 16 percent of college graduates; people below the poverty line are 15 percent more likely to be obese than those not in poverty.[38]

Roseanne's autobiographical stand-up reproduced this cultural truth. She self-identified as a fat, poor, working-class mom doing the best she could and ironically proclaimed herself a domestic goddess. She exploited cultural assumptions of fatness and class, and gained popularity with audiences that saw themselves reflected in her persona.

This recognition led to the production of her TV sitcom, *Roseanne*, in which she portrayed herself—or the stage persona she had created for herself—as part of a fictional working-class family. The show enjoyed a successful long run from 1988 to1997 and garnered multiple awards, including three Golden Globes and at least one Emmy for Roseanne and her castmates John Goodman (who played her fat husband) and Laurie Metcalf (who played Roseanne's sister).[39] Roseanne, who produced more than two-thirds of the episodes, successfully capitalized on her fatness by creating a character based on herself that appealed to a blue-collar aesthetic and that she could believably embody despite her size. I position her sometimes contradictory performance of self somewhere between Margaret Cho's overtly activist stance and Kirstie Alley's self-flagellating, degrading comedy. On one hand, like Shear and Cho, Roseanne in many ways used her unruly fat body to challenge social boundaries of female, fat, and class submission. Many consider her series groundbreaking. *Roseanne* was one of the first sitcoms to feature a mom as the central, driving character, and one of the very few to feature a white working-class family. However, on the other hand, such as the way in which she embraced many of the stereotypes associated with fatness and exhibited fat behavior in extremis, her

[38] Oliver, *Fat Politics*, 75.
[39] http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0094540/ (accessed on July 28, 2009).

sitcom style is closer to Kirstie Alley's in *Fat Actress*. However, scholar Kathleen Rowe makes an argument that Roseanne's cultivated persona of fat slovenliness is an expression of feminist activism. She cites Bourdieu's *Distinction* to support her assertion. She writes,

> By being fat, loud, and ever willing to 'do offensive things,' the star persona 'Roseanne Arnold' displays, above all, a supreme ease with her body—an ease which triggers much of the unease surrounding her because it diminishes the power of others to control her. Pierre Bourdieu describes such a manner as an 'indifference to the objectifying gaze which neutralizes its powers …[and] appropriates its appropriation.' It marks her rebellion against not only codes of gender but those of class, for a culture's norm of beauty or the "legitimate" body—fit and trim—are accepted across boundaries while the ability to achieve them is not. [. . .] Instead she reveals the social causes of female fatness, irritability, and messiness in the strains of working class family life. For 'Roseanne Conner,' junk food late at night may be a sensible choice for comfort after a day of punching out forks on an assembly line.[40]

Prior to 1990, Roseanne's apparent indifference to the male gaze could be construed as feminist. Roseanne was the opposite of Foucault's docile body. She rejected cultural constraints of appropriate feminine behavior and beauty and, like Shear, refused to apologize or disappear. In fact, Roseanne embodied one of the most iconic fat performances to date, as I will discuss in the next section.

The Fat Lady Sings: Roseanne's Ultimate Fat Performance

Roseanne was gaining popularity and artistic credibility, and her TV series was doing well when she accepted the invitation to sing the National Anthem for the opening of a Padres baseball game in July of 1990 in honor of "Working Women's Night." She grossly misunderstood her audience and exhibited the ultimate fat behavior when she

[40] Kathleen Rowe, *The Unruly Woman: Gender and the Genres of Laughter* (Austin: University of Texas, 1995), 64-5.

stood before a crowded baseball arena and sang the "Star Spangled Banner" badly.[41] She created a national scandal, invoking the public ire of, among others, President George Bush, who called her performance "disgraceful," when she screeched the anthem off-key and parodied the masculine world of baseball by grabbing her crotch and spitting as part of her performance. Critics, George Will in particular, compared her performance to national catastrophes ranging from the decay of American cities to the Japanese sneak attack on Pearl Harbor.[42] I assert that part of what sparked such passionate public outcry over her ill-received parody was the implied anti-Americanism of her fat body. Not only was her poor rendition of the song offensive, but more significantly, her body was offensive. Roseanne audaciously stood there in her unruly fat body and violated a myriad of cultural boundaries even before she opened her mouth. Kathleen Rowe suggests:

> Not only did she violate the space of baseball, but she encroached on another masculine territory—that of joke maker. Arnold "made" a joke, and a tendentious one, containing a thinly veiled message of aggression. Refusing to play the passive victim herself, she forced men into that role.[43]

In this way, I believe Roseanne deeply disturbed hegemonic ideals of national pride and identity. Had Reba McEntire, who now also has a sitcom based on herself as a blue collar mom, and is more slender and attractive by ideal standards made the exact same joke, singing off-key and grabbing her crotch, would it have generated the national furor that

[41] You can find a poor-quality video of this historic moment on YouTube at http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DrFW2aYHVR8 (accessed August 1, 2009). I found it interesting that at the time of my viewing, there were many recent (within the week) viewer responses to the video—an event that happened almost ten years ago. Interestingly, some of the negative responses likened her fatness and lack of patriotic pride to liberal Judge Sonia Sotomayor, who is Puerto Rican, and was then in the confirmation process to be the next U.S. Supreme Court Justice. Here again, we see the connection between fat, race, and liberal politics in the cultural landscape.
[42] Rowe, *Unruly Women*., 50-2.
[43] Ibid., 69.

Roseanne did?[44] It is probably true that any comedian poking fun at the sacred cows of baseball and patriotism would be vilified, but I believe the vehemence of the national response toward Roseanne was exacerbated by her fatness. Because she did not apologize for her size, Roseanne's performance of the National Anthem, as well as her performance of herself in her TV series up to that point, could arguably be construed as feminist. Thus, she stands apart from Kirstie Alley's performance of self, in which Alley panders to fat stereotypes by assuring the viewer that she is ashamed of her fatness and is trying comically, desperately to lose weight and rejoin the ranks of patriotic Americans. In Bourdieu's terms, Alley is decidedly not "indifferent to the objectifying gaze."

Significantly however, it was not long after the National Anthem incident that Roseanne began to alter her appearance. She recovered from the public relations snafu caused by her performance, continuing to gain Hollywood clout and economic power. She did so, in part, by finally capitulating to hegemonic beauty standards following her Anthem misstep. After years of maintaining her defiantly fat figure, Roseanne began to lose weight and have plastic surgery to bring her appearance more in line with popular representations of (attractive) women in television. She had her stomach stapled, lost more than sixty pounds, and eventually had liposuction, a breast reduction, and a nose job. For this, some of her critics have dubbed her "Roseanne Benedict Arnold."[45] Could this, on some level, have been a response to the landslide of negativity she endured following the anthem incident? She crossed a line with that "joke," offending a nation, and it seems possible that she began to make reparations by containing her unruly body.

[44] McEntire is also a popular country-western singer, so we'd have to suspend disbelief that she would sing off-key for a laugh.
[45] Part of her transformation included taking her new husband's last name of "Arnold." She has subsequently divorced and now goes simply by Roseanne.

Rowe notes that barely a year after the anthem incident, and coinciding with the beginnings of her physical transformation, Roseanne publicly came out as a survivor of incest and child abuse, thus mitigating her defiant behavior by attributing it to a childhood trauma and fulfilling cultural beliefs that fatness arises from some hidden emotional or mental deficiency. In other words:

> Arnold finally provided an explanation for her out-of-bounds behavior—and one that was ideologically acceptable. To insist, as she previously had done, that a woman could be fat by choice, angry at men, immune to social control, and sane at the same moment defies ideology. [. . .] Before, Arnold had cultivated a coding of her body as a grotesque monument to self-indulgence rather than self-denial, a material testimony to her rebellious immunity to social control, her refusal to diet, work out, make up, and shut up. At least initially, she explained the new body by reinterpreting the former one (and the transgressive behavior that accompanied it) as symptoms of the pain of her childhood abuse and the addictions which that abuse drove her to.[46]

Thus Roseanne did successfully mollify her public detractors by embracing the stereotype of fatness as a symptom of mental pathology. Her show ran another five years and integrated the evolution of Roseanne's changing physical and public persona. The show steered away from Roseanne's domestic tribulations as a fat, blue-collar housewife and tackled more controversial and socially aware subject matter, including teen pregnancy, homosexuality, spousal and child abuse, as well as Roseanne's character's decision to undergo a breast reduction to relieve back pain.

After her series ended, Roseanne largely dropped out of the spotlight. She had a brief run as a talk-show host and returned to her roots as a stand-up comedian in an HBO special, *Blonde N Bitchin'* (2006), in which she follows in the footsteps of Margaret Cho. She actively indicts George W. Bush for his policies and champions gay marriage. She also indicts the diet industry and points out that she has basically had her stomach

[46] Rowe, *Unruly Women*., 215-16.

removed and still maintains her weight at 180 pounds. She concludes the show by realizing her two worst fears: dancing in her underwear and (significantly) singing in public. Although some have criticized her as a traitor for all the surgical intervention she underwent to change her appearance, this recent stand-up performance seems to indicate that her core ideology does indeed lean toward a pro-female and fat-activist stance. This is in contrast to Kirstie Alley's performance of self in which she aggressively disavows the fat community and tows the "party line" of disdain toward fat white women. I am inclined to view Roseanne's early fat performances as political charged and pro-fat versus Alley's, which capitulates to stereotypes in an effort to gain public appeal and capitalize on cultural prejudices.

Kirstie Alley's "Fat-Face Minstrelsy": Capitalizing on Fat

With the first announcement in 2005 that Kirstie Alley was producing herself in a new Showtime TV program called *Fat Actress*, it seemed as though her performance would subvert the usual stereotypes and strike a blow for fat actresses everywhere, including many of those unfortunate would-be performers who are simply not model-thin. The *Fat Actress* advertising poster suggested as much. It featured Alley glamorously made up, wrapped in a silk sheet, coyly biting at her finger, and throwing a seductive look to the camera, harking back to sexy Marilyn Monroe stills in which she posed nude swathed in red silk. The only hint of "fat" in the poster requires closer scrutiny: Alley is lying atop a scale that is mostly obscured by her glorious mane of hair. The premise of the show was to be Alley's struggles as a fat actress in body-obsessed Hollywood. Her weight gains and losses had been fodder for gossip tabloids since her years starring in the

successful sitcom *Cheers*, for which she won several Emmys and People's Choice Awards. Since that time, following her brief movie career, which primarily entailed the *Look Who's Talking* series, her body changed drastically. Her last network series was *Veronica's Closet*, which ran from 1997 to 2000. Toward the end of the run, she started to gain weight and, following the series close, she gained upward of seventy-five pounds.

If Alley was struggling to find roles at her size in 2006, it could have been the opportunity to turn the mirror back on Hollywood, and in the spirit of the reality TV genre, perform herself as a fully developed human being who was more than just a body—more than just a starlet whose career was destroyed by her inability to keep her mouth shut. In her essay "Fatties on Stage," Petra Kuppers reminds us:

> Most performers who started to explore the large female body as an arena of cultural politics seem caught in this labeling of loss of control [. . .] If their performances try to reclaim the "body out of control" as a site of transgression and empowerment without attempting to question these very assumptions of fertility, grossness, carnival, and the grotesque, their work can easily fall back on the stereotype, still allowing no space for inscriptions of subjectivity. Instead showing the problems with the essentialist account of fat, they embrace the large woman as caught up in her (culturally determined) fat.[47]

Unfortunately, Alley's performance of herself falls squarely into this description. The comedy of the show is rooted in Alley's lampooning herself and performing every fat stereotype of an all-consuming woman out of control.

In this section, I am exploring how Alley's performance of herself as a fat woman relies on offensive fat stereotypes comparable to racist jokes that are no longer culturally acceptable—a kind of "fat-face minstrelsy." As I discussed in chapter four, unlike gender identity, fat is comparable to race in that it is visible to the spectator at all times. In *Fat*

[47] Petra Kuppers, "Fatties Onstage: Feminist Performances," in *Bodies Out of Bounds: Fatness and Transgression*, eds Kathleen LeBesco and Jana Evans Braziel (Berkeley CA: University of California Press, 2001), 278.

Actress, Alley's comedy necessitates a particular cultural reading of her outward appearance just as minstrelsy did. I assert that *Fat Actress* relied on weightist comedy that exploits culturally embedded tropes of fat women akin to racist humor. Not only will I examine some of the stereotypes Alley manipulates in various episodes, but I will also explore the ways in which Alley's fat-face performance parallels some of the performer-spectator dynamics of nineteenth-century blackface minstrelsy.

Alley embraces the stereotype in the same way the *Amos-n-Andy* radio show featured jokes about black people eating fried chicken and watermelon. She depicts herself, without a trace of irony, as a whiny "fatty," unable to control her appetite or her bowels, a consuming monster whose grotesque appearance is the object of amusement. The comedy in *Fat Actress* pandered to audience expectations of fat stereotypes in the same way blackface minstrel shows operated on a kind of humor that depended on the "otherness" of the object of ridicule (the fat/black person). Alley's exaggerated performance of fat in a program that touted itself as "reality" is akin to the white performer blacking up and dancing "Jump Jim Crow."

In his book *Love and Theft: Blackface Minstrelsy and the American Working Class*, Eric Lott posits a nuanced performer-spectator relationship between the blackface performer and the white audience, which is more than just white audiences mocking black people and which relies in part on the performer's ability to remove the blackface and become white again. Lott argues against essentialist readings of minstrelsy performance that see it as a vehicle for black oppression and cultural containment. He argues that blackface minstrelsy performances were not so much a sign of white power but indicative of white anxiety toward black culture as well as white fascination with

blackness. Lott also sees minstrel shows as part of the development of a new white working-class audience, whereby representations of blackness in minstrelsy established an "other" against which, in contrast, they could define themselves. I assert that some of the audience enjoyment of *Fat Actress* is rooted in this very same dynamic, wherein we can enjoy Alley's performance because we identify ourselves as "not fat." Just as blackface minstrelsy was not performed for a black audience, *Fat Actress* is not for a "fat audience." Alley's performance assumes a "thin audience," or at least an audience that has been completely acculturated to view the fat body as pathologically flawed, so much so that even fat people abhor their own bodies and align themselves with the "other side" despite their own body type.

Consider the style of comedy found in a typical episode of *Fat Actress*. Episode one, entitled "Big Butts," sets up the premise for the series, wherein Kirstie will play herself, and many celebrities such as John Travolta will appear as themselves, but other actors (such as Travolta's wife, Kelly Preston) will portray fictional characters obviously based on real-life Hollywood personalities. This confusion between whether this is a reality show or a traditional sitcom with fictional characters is part of what complicates spectator positioning in the performer-spectator relationship and sets *Fat Actress* apart from *Roseanne*, which clearly established a traditional fictional sitcom setting with the main character, Roseanne Conner, *based* on the real Roseanne. In the opening sequence, we see Alley weigh herself, the shot focusing on the way in which her abundant frame, swathed in a nightgown and robe, obscures, or perhaps crushes, the tiny, defenseless scale. She then collapses to the floor in horror at her weight and crawls to the phone. Between moans of "I'm dying," she tells her agent she will not accept the Jenny Craig

commercial deal. The next sequence shows Alley with disheveled hair, still in her robe, voraciously eating a hamburger at the drive-thru while "chewing out her agent" for failing to get her jobs. As she does so, food spills down her bodice, which is a sexy lace brassiere that emphasizes her ample bosom.

Within these first few frames, Alley performs and rejects several of the classic fat-woman tropes I have discussed in previous chapters: She is "out of control," unable to contain her emotions, unable to even get dressed or groom herself before she goes out and eats more. Her howls and screeches highlight her mouth as a site of danger; dare to come near it and risk being eaten or screamed at. The sexiness of her bodice feeds into the cultural fear of fat women as hypersexual or predatory maneaters.

On the one hand, Alley is horrified by the number on the scale, as any self-respecting fat American woman should be, but in the next breath, she refuses to be a spokesperson for a diet company, seemingly a statement against cultural expectations or at least a rejection of the diet industry. As the character of herself, she claims she wants to lose weight and says insulting things about her own appearance. At the same time, she is conspicuously eating something fattening or unhealthy in almost every shot of the episode. The audience can only attribute her constant eating to deep self-loathing and an unwillingness to invoke will-power that borders on pathological behavior.[48] Again, this plays directly to cultural stereotypes that align women who have "abnormal eating habits" with some sort of diagnosable fat pathology: a psychological, neurochemical, or

[48] I am uncomfortable with the word will-power because I am not convinced that is "all" that is required for people to lose weight. There has been research that suggests that some individuals would have to put immoderate amounts (over and beyond avoiding cookies or giving up fast food) of effort into losing weight or maintaining a certain low weight. In his recent book, *The End of Overeating*, (New York: Rodale, 2009) David Kessler M.D. suggests that overeating is a biological challenge brought on by changes in our food production industry since the 1980s that cause a short circuit in the brain's food-regulating mechanisms.

physiological flaw. Her prominent eating also helps reinforce spectators' positioning themselves as "not fat," since the amount she eats, and the way she eats, is so grotesque that it is only comparable to someone engaged in sport-eating, such as a pie- or hot-dog-eating contest.

Later in the episode, Alley decides she is not going to have "fat sex," asserting that while she has a healthy libido, she is too hideous to allow herself this pleasure. Here, her verbal declaration to abstain from sex because of her weight could be construed as an effort to allay the cultural fear of the fat-woman-maneater. In desexualizing herself, Alley panders to the many negative assumptions about fat sexuality by trying to disavow her sexual appetite or at least promise that it is not as aggressive as her appetite for food. Yet, there is a reversal later in the episode, when she and her assistants decide that she should find a black man, because black men like fat women. Here again, we see the intersection, albeit stereotypical, of fatness and blackness. They go to a soul food restaurant to try to pick up a black man. Alley ends up having a sexual encounter with one of the studio executives she has met, who is black and attracted to her. The scenes of their foreplay include him showing up at the door with flowers, and her physically bowling him over in an effort to kiss him. The would-be lovers then parody the *9½ Weeks* "eating scene," with him feeding her all sorts of gooey things from the fridge and her submissively lapping it up from her position on the floor.[49] At one point, she barks like a dog. It is hard not to read this as a deliberate analogy equating the fat woman with a dog. When they finally get into bed, Alley is on top—a subtle semiotic that again points to the fat woman as

[49] *9½ Weeks* (1986) is a cult classic film directed by Adrian Lyne starring Mickey Rourke and Kim Basigner that chronicled a steamy love affair between two strangers. The film was rated R and featured many racy sex scenes including one in which he blindfolds her and feeds her all sorts of "sexy" food from the fridge such as honey and strawberries.

overly empowered and sexually voracious. Her partner compliments her body and slaps her playfully on the butt. She cannot believe his compliments are sincere and giggles and slaps him in the face. (Part of the comedy is also that the lights are controlled by a "clapper," and he keeps turning the lights on with each slap in order to see her, but she keeps turning them off.) They engage in a slapping match, and eventually Alley laughs him out of the bedroom for being so silly as to want to make love to her. Once again Alley's performance sends a mixed message. This scene has the potential to affirm her fatness with the eating sequence and a sexual scenario with a willing partner who celebrates her body. Yet on the other hand, her own behavior toward herself, the barking and driving him from the bedroom, upholds the hegemonic status quo with regards to popular cultural views toward fat women: that of comical animal unworthy of pleasure.[50]

With this seduction scene, we have both the racist and weightist stereotypes at play, when a white woman resorts to seducing a black man she would otherwise have no interest in because she is fat, playing to the stereotype that black men like fat women. It is significant that the only sexual encounter of the whole series is with a black man—a racialized other. Alley purports to have a crush on singer-celebrity Kid Rock, who appears in a later episode, and she dates a rich older man, but never again do we see Alley actually engaged in sexual activity. In semiotic terms, her fat body belongs with his black body—they are both culturally marked as other. Both the fat body and the black body, as I discuss in chapter four, are associated with the primitive and the natural as opposed to the higher plane of existence: the mind/soul.

[50] In a 2004 interview with *People* magazine, Alley seems to agree with these stereotypes. She tells her interviewer that fat looks funny, stating, "I think that's why people through history laugh at fat people. They're round and funny looking. I am funny looking." When asked about her sex life, she replied, "I'm not going to have sex while I am fat." (*People*, December 6, 2004) 88-89.

Another episode, called “Charlie’s Angels,” is built around her meeting with a director who is interested in casting her as an Angel in his upcoming sequel. On the advice of her diet guru, Alley has taken laxatives as a means to lose weight. The joke is that she has eaten the whole box, once again voracious and out of control. By the time she gets to the meeting, the laxatives have kicked in, and the second part of the joke is her inability to control her bowels as she repeatedly excuses herself from the meeting and desperately tries to find a vacant toilet. She is eventually reduced to borrowing a baby diaper from a stranger because she is about to have an accident. As it turns out, Alley still gets the job, once she assures the director that she is not pregnant despite tabloid claims. The final sequence shows her on set in a flying harness, comically kicking and flailing about with a gun, while five strapping grips struggle to hold up her bulk in the harness. Eventually, they are unable to bear her weight any longer, and the scene is played to great comic effect as they drop her. Her co-stars in this fictional “Charlie’s Angel” sequel are a dwarf and a Canadian. The joke, albeit lame, is clear: Alley is the Fat Lady in a freak show. She willingly puts herself in the same freak show category that Suzan-Lori Parks politicizes and rejects when she depicts Saartjie Baartman’s tortured existence in *Venus*.

The comedy in all the episodes relies on viewing the fat body as other, similar to the way in which white audiences enjoyed minstrel performance. Alley puts on a kind of fat-face minstrelsy, engaging in fat-associative stereotypes, such as compulsive eating, poor judgment, questionable moral fiber (many episodes feature her blatantly lying or trying to steal from or trick someone), and lack of control in all aspects of her life. In the same way blackface minstrel performers appropriated black culture and performed blackness, as Lott says, “mixing equal parts ridicule and curiosity,” Alley performs

fatness with an emphasis on the ridiculous. In trying to understand the pleasure of minstrel comedy, Lott asserts the necessity of:

> [. . .] an implicitly triangulated, derisive structure of minstrel comedy, in which Blackface comic and white spectator shared jokes about an absent third party, usually resolved to a configuration of two people, the joker personifying the person being joked about.

He goes on to offer a Freudian construct of pleasure in comedy:

> in this way white ridicule could be passed off as "naïve" black comedy, the sort of comedy, according to Freud, in which spectators indulge in lost moments of childish pleasure evoked by the antics of children or "inferior people" who resemble them.[51]

Lott points out the inherent childish vulgarity of much minstrel comedy, which depended on puns, nonsense songs, and absurd physical antics. Alley's fat-face performance relies on the same dynamic. Spectators can laugh at the ridiculous antics of the fat lady, because they see her as *other* than themselves and certainly inferior in every possible reading of the word.

By the time Alley began filming her series, she had indeed already accepted the offer to be Jenny Craig's spokesperson. In doing so, she had managed a rare feat for Hollywood: capitalizing on her fat body. The commercials were aired simultaneously with the series, featuring Alley as herself, assuring the viewer that she would lose weight with the help of Jenny Craig. A new commercial came out every few weeks, in which Alley danced around and showed off her figure and announced how much weight she had lost. So in a sense, just as the blackface performer can wipe off his corking and become white again, these commercials assure us that Alley is able to remove her fat-face and become normal again. Alley is not really a fat lady. Her weight is just a costume to serve

[51] Eric Lott, *Love and Theft: Blackface Minstrelsy and the American Working Class* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 143.

the comedy and will eventually be removed. She is not living a fat identity, but putting one on for the spectator's enjoyment.

In recent years, there have been a number of movies that capitalize on the spectacle of the fat suit, such as Gwyneth Paltrow wearing fat drag in *Shallow Hal*, and Martin Lawrence as a fat lady in the very successful *Big Momma's House* franchise (which, of course, further complicates the scenario by adding race and gender to the drag). These actors literally wore fat suits. However, in my view, framed as it was within *Fat Actress* and the Jenny Craig commercials, Alley's real body functioned as a fat suit that she could and did eventually remove.[52] Lott points out the complicated spectator-performer relationship inherent in minstrelsy, whereby the actual black performer was initially not acceptable. He gives the example of P.T. Barnum finding an African American boy who could dance better than the reigning blackface performer of the time, John Diamond. In order to enter the boy into a competition, Barnum corked up his already blackface and put red lipstick and a wooly wig on him. The editor of *New York Aurora* recalled the incident, declaring: "Had it been suspected that the seeming counterfeit was the genuine article, the New York Vauxhall would have blazed with indignation."[53] In fact, William Henry Lane, or Juba, one of the first actual black men to enjoy success as a minstrel performer, was met with much resistance. He not only wore blackface over his own dark skin, but was advertised with promises such as:

[52] However, as of this writing (August 2009), according to tabloids and talk-show appearances, Alley has gained all the weight back again, plus some, proving that dieting does not work, as much medical evidence suggests. She appeared on the *Oprah* and, after blaming herself for "falling off the wagon," told Oprah she had a new diet secret and was going to quickly lose the seventy-five or so pounds again. http://www.oprah.com/dated/oprahshow/oprahshow-20090417-kirstie-alley (accessed August 6, 2009).
[53] Lott, *Love and Theft*.,112-3.

> The entertainment will conclude with the Imitation Dance, by Mast. Juba, in which he will give correct Imitation Dances of all the principal Ethiopian Dances in the United States. After which he will give an imitation of himself [. . .][54]

In other words, the black man would perform blackness for the audience's pleasure.

Alley's fat-face performance of herself as a struggling fat actress works in much the same way. The premise of the comedy hinges on the concept that she is not a "real" fat person and that her audience does not identify as fat. Even without the concurrent Jenny Craig commercials showing us her progress, the spectator knows Alley is a celebrity who has every possible means available to her to lose weight. Tabloids constantly feature movie actresses miraculously losing weight and quickly reshaping their bodies to appear highly toned after giving birth or after gaining weight for a role. If this same show had cast an unknown fat actress and there had been no promise of weight loss for the character by the show's conclusion, the brand of humor in the script would not have worked. That *Fat Actress* ultimately was canceled reflects some of the inherent problems in the show's concept, including the lack of sophistication in the comedy and the confusion resulting from the reality aspect of the program being complicated by the scripted fictional narratives that comprised the show.

Reading Fat

With the aforementioned examples, I have shown how some fat performers deliberately use cultural interpretations of their bodies to enhance their storytelling or take a feminist-activist stance against the rigid confines of beauty as represented by mainstream media. However, critics often make unwarranted assumptions about the

[54] Ibid., 115.

nature of a character based on the appearance of the actress. Thus, a performer's body type colors critical reception, which in turn can alter the playwright's intention for the character. Fat or oversize bodies add a layer to critical interpretation of a character, intentionally or not. Their bodies are cultural signifiers to which spectators attach a myriad of beliefs and assumptions that cannot be separated from the performance itself.

For example, in her exploration of gender bias in *The Feminist Spectator as Critic*, Jill Dolan points out how reviewers responded to *'night Mother* in light of Kathy Bates's chunky appearance. She writes:

> [T]he male critics' responses to Jessie were based uniformly on her physical appearance onstage, which substantially altered their reception of the play. They collapsed performer Kathy Bates' appearance into the character and proceeded to construct their own list of reasons for why Jessie decided to commit suicide. First among these, according to critics, is her weight. Although the fatal, tragic flaw in Norman's text is epilepsy, the production's received flaw, which provides the cause of Jessie's ultimate demise, is fat. [. . .] John Simon, in *New York Magazine*, was most blatant in his word choice. He called Jessie "fat, unattractive, and epileptic." Other reviewers followed in kind, describing Jessie—although they were responding to Bates' performance and her body—as an "overweight young woman with sallow skin," [. . .] "heavyset, slow moving and morose," and "overweight and homely." [. . .] These critics correlated what they saw onstage to the play's motivating action so emphatically that Jessie's appearance became more significant than Norman's actual dramatic device.[55]

This quotation perfectly exemplifies how the fat female body becomes the lens through which critics read the character. It is no wonder that casting directors hesitate to cast actresses whose bodies do not fit within culturally ascribed boundaries of slenderness. In the latter half of the twentieth and early twenty-first century, the only neutral female body is unobtrusively thin.

Another example of a review being colored by a performer's body size is Richard Eder's review of Shelley Winters's 1978 performance in *The Effect of Gamma Rays on*

[55] Dolan, *The Feminist Spectator as Critic*, 30.

Man-in-the-Moon Marigolds. In this case, he reviews her performance somewhat negatively in light of her fat body, suggesting that Winters fails in the role due to her lack of subtlety, which, his word choice indicates, is wrapped up in her fat appearance. Eder ascribes fat behavior to Winters's interpretation, which he sees as wrong for the role. He describes her performance as "oversized," calling her entrance "blowsy" and "massive." Later he describes her as "an eggplant rolling downstairs" and "a frump of a clown on one loud unchanging level [. . .] exploiting the play, not interpreting it."[56] All his critiques allude to the visual, and he seems to collapse her interpretation into her stout appearance. It is impossible to assess whether Winters's performance was as weak as Eder indicates. However, the fact that much of his critique of her performance conjures the same fat prejudices I have been discussing throughout makes his criticism suspect. Likewise, Charles Isherwood's unfavorable review of Kristen Johnston's reprisal of the role of Anna, in Vogel's *Baltimore Waltz*, also seems to collapse her large size into the shortcomings of her interpretation. Isherwood writes that the six-foot actress is "miscast" and deems her stage presence "larger than life" and overly comic. Again, his language seems to dwell as much on her size as her acting. She "delivers the kind of big, bold performance that is impossible to resist." But he ultimately concludes that "Ms. Johnston may simply be too healthy a theatrical presence to communicate persuasively the true depth of Anna's fear and confusion."[57] Based on this review, it could be that Johnson's acting fell short, but it could also be that Isherwood cannot conceive of a six-foot-tall, broad-shouldered woman as vulnerable.

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[56] Eder, Richard, "Stage: 'Marigolds,' With Shelley Winters." *New York Times,* March 15, 1978. http://www.nytimes.com/

[57] Charles Isherwood, "Death-Defying Fantasy Fueled by Love When AIDS Was a Nameless Intruder," *New York Times*, December 6, 2004, http://www.nytimes.com/ (accessed December 2008).

On the other hand, sometimes an oversize actress adds to critical reception. As I mentioned in chapter three, almost no review of Albee's *Virginia Woolf* fails to mention the physical size of the actress playing Martha, and in that case, reviewers seem to believe that an oversize body enhances the performance. Recall from chapter three that *New York Times* reviewer Ben Brantley praised Kathleen Turner's portrayal of Martha, dubbing her the "big-breasted brawler" and referring to her as "the body," while referring to Bill Irwin, who played George, as "the brain."[58] Other examples of actresses whose fat bodies enriched critical reception of their performance include Jayne Houdyshell, who was nominated for a Tony for Lisa Kron's *Well* (2006), and Anna Manahan, who won the Tony for her performance in Martin McDonough's *The Beauty Queen of Leenane* (1998). In both cases, these rotund actresses enjoyed critical success for their performances as "smothering mothers." Reviewers gushed over Manahan's performance of a cruel, controlling mother. Ben Brantley called Manahan "a large woman [who] seems to fill and anchor the room. [. . .] a mother who appears as immoveable as a mountain."[59] Although neither of these texts explicitly calls for fat actresses, the bodies of these particular performers enhanced critical reception of their overbearing characters.

As Elizabeth Grosz points out in *Space, Time, and Perversion*, the body is a surface of inscription. She writes:

> Western body forms are considered expressions of an interior, of a subjectivity. [. . .] The body becomes a text, a system of signs to be deciphered, read, and read into. While social law is incarnate, "corporealized," correlatively, bodies are "read" by others as expressive of a subject's psychic interior. A storehouse of inscriptions and messages between its internal and external boundaries, it generates or constructs the body's movements into "behavior," that

[58] Ben Brantley, "Marriage as Blood Sport: A No Win Game," *New York Times*, March 21, 2005, http://www.nytimes.com/ (accessed October 10, 2005).
[59] Ben Brantley, "Theater Review: A Gasp for Breath Inside an Airless Life," *New York Times*, February 27, 1998. www.nytimes.com (accessed August 22, 2009).

> then has interpersonally and socially identifiable meanings and functions within a social system. [. . .] Food, dieting, exercise, and movement provide meanings, values, norms, and ideals that the subject actively ingests, incorporating social categories into physiological interior. Bodies speak, without necessarily talking, because they become coded with and as signs. They become intextuated, narrativized; simultaneously, social codes, laws, norms, and ideals become incarnated.[60]

Thus, a fat or oversize body onstage is automatically inscribed with all the cultural assumptions I have described in earlier chapters. Even more insidious, because of the proliferation in twenty-first century mass media of women's bodies as extremely slender, muscular, and toned, whether by nature, cosmetic surgery, or air-brushing, Americans have become accustomed to recognizing only those bodies as "normal" or neutral. Any body outside of those standards is "read" through the lens of culturally produced meanings.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have focused on a select few diverse "fat performances." Some performers, such as Claudia Shear, Margaret Cho, and even Roseanne have taken a pro-fat feminist-activist stance and aimed to subvert or challenge stereotypes. Shear, Cho, and Roseanne deliberately used their performing bodies as sites of protest. With their performances, these actresses reject cultural assumptions of heteronormative beauty and use their unruly bodies to destabilize hegemonic power structures. On the other hand, Kirstie Alley, in my view, takes feminism and fatties back decades with her self-abasing comedy that panders to American prejudices toward fat. Her fat-face minstrelsy reflects

[60] Elizabeth Grosz, *Space, Time, and Perversion: Essays on the Politics of Bodies* (New York: Routledge, 1995), 34-5.

deeply ingrained attitudes toward fat women's bodies and capitalizes on weightist humor that would be socially unacceptable were it about race instead of weight.

Knowing that their bodies would be read as cultural texts before they even spoke, these performers have tried to make the most out of their oversize bodies, either by challenging or maintaining the cultural status quo.

However, actresses like Kathy Bates, Shelley Winters, Kristen Johnston, and Kathleen Turner have had their oversize bodies read despite their performances. Contemporary critics are unable to separate the female performer's body from her interpretation of a character or role. Any female body that does not fall within the very slender, homogenized beauty standards as proliferated by various cultural texts in the late twentieth and early twenty-first century cannot escape being read with an additional narrative that American audiences impose on them. Thus, their bodies are branded against their will and relegated to "fat performances" by critics, regardless of the actresses' actual characterization of their parts.

CH VI: Conclusion: Reclaiming Fat

Life is a movie too, starring you.[1]

This dissertation seeks to understand the position of fat women in various fields of cultural production in contemporary American culture. Through exploring cultural assumptions, including those concerning psychological pathologies, as well as class and race issues associated with the fat female form in representation, I have demonstrated the ways in which the fat body speaks without saying a word. I have also tried to highlight and thus destabilize deeply ingrained attitudes about fat.

Chapter one not only traces the roots of fat as an American cultural production but also explores the ways in which women's bodies in particular are inextricably bound to their identities. The notion that a woman *is* her body is deeply rooted in Western philosophy and continues to permeate our culture. Therefore we cannot separate her appearance from her behavior—in essence, from her mind and spirit—in contemporary representation. Chapters two through five offer various models and examples of how fat plays out onstage and in various cultural texts. Playwrights use fat and fat behavior not only as a means to develop their characters emotionally but also as a dramaturgical strategy to move the plot forward. Fat actresses are cast not just for their acting skills but for what their physical presence brings to the role. The appearance of a fat female body conveys qualities and engenders responses that are much more intricate than the practice of typecasting. It is not as simple as a blonde as the heroine and a brunette as the antihero, for example. I have tried to demonstrate that fat in America is more complex than a mere stereotype. It is a cultural product of deeply ingrained attitudes and perceptions that stem

[1] Lyric from "Love Like That," from the musical *Passing Strange* (2008) by Stew Rodewald.

from ideologies based in Puritan morality and the American ethos of self-determination and individualism that I mentioned in chapter one and will discuss further here. The discourse surrounding fat in our culture intersects with issues of class and race and requires complexity in interpretation.

Furthermore, I suggest that fat is a lived identity of outsiderness and internalized oppression that goes beyond outward appearances. Fat is an ontological position as much as a physical description. Fat prejudice is a culturally constructed oppression produced discursively and through various social practices and institutional hierarchies in American culture. If we acknowledge this as a possibility, we create potential for reframing and reconsidering fat in our culture.

Rethinking Realism

In order fully to reclaim fat from the margins of American culture, I will now take a cue from Anthony Kubiak's argument in *Agitated States: Performance in the American Theater of Cruelty* and move beyond a materialist study of theatre as a cultural text to further explore what he calls "the ontologies of performance."[2] Kubiak asserts that Americans, more than others because of the relatively short history of our country, have emerged in a culture of specularity, and that the preponderance of virtual violence in mass media—from movies and video games to the lurid reporting on the evening news—is a symptom of this cultural phenomenon and not the cause of real violence in our culture.[3] Kubiak also comments that the most compelling violence proliferated in the media is the "propagation of anti-intellectuality that seems the hallmark of American

[2] Anthony Kubiak, *Agitated States: Performance in the American Theater of Cruelty* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2002), 290.
[3] Ibid., 6-7.

society."[4] Americans are a product of their own pioneer mentality. Especially under the recent Bush administration, the pursuit of higher education, intellectualism, and self-reflection came under suspicion as unpatriotic, elitist behaviors that went against the avowed simplicity of our American mythology. Kubiak suggests that we are a culture immersed in illusion, constantly negotiating the virtual and the real, and that this situation arises in part from the rigid Puritan culture of surveillance and correction on which our country is (relatively recently) founded.[5] He reminds us that our founding Puritan forefathers were steeped in religious traditions of self-watching. Similar to Foucault's model of the Panopticon and a self-governing society, Puritan religious culture, perhaps in response to the lack of religious ritual and established religious spaces of their European ancestors, is rooted in the concept that God and the community are watching. Kubiak writes,

> In the case of the Puritans, theater, though absent as an institution, nonetheless acts in the interior as a kind of performance feedback loop that forms the very basis of morality. One is constantly assessing and reassessing *how one acts* in order to ascertain if one has *acted well*. In fact, even one's intentions are objectified as exhibition or *show* through the interior watching and are moved out of the realm of the merely intentional into the realm of the performative (how I present myself to myself), in the performance itself. [. . .] The issue, ultimately, in the Puritan mind becomes the ability to construct one's own character, to construct character itself. Here is where the issue of the performative gives way, it seems to me, to theater.[6]

This notion offers a penetrating insight into the formation of American ideology as inherently theatricalized. Our culture is intrinsically theatrical, from our political and military pageantry to the performative displays of our judicial system to the theatricality of our international goodwill gestures, such as dropping food and supplies to the needy

[4] Ibid., 7.
[5] Ibid., 19.
[6] Ibid., 33.

from planes. At the same time, the aforementioned anti-intellectualism, which discourages national self-reflection, has created a nation of narcissists and a culture of theatricality that are short sighted through their own subjectivity. He sees this manifest in the American theatrical tradition which is rooted in realism and frequently takes the mythology of the American dream as its central theme. However, Kubiak draws on Lacanian theory when he writes,

> Theatricality was and is the *ungrounded signifier* of American culture, a signifier that is at once everywhere and nowhere. Alongside this doubling of the theatrical impasse is a failure to recognize theatricality, and in this, a failure to mount a "real" theater in theatricality's face, so to speak. There is no viable American theater tradition that stands in contradistinction to, questions, critiques, the hidden and the blatant theatricalities of culture in the manner of Brecht, Beckett, or Pirandello [. . .]. We lack a stage tradition that points to the distance between theater and the real, a tradition that consciously takes theater as its object. [. . .] Hence the inability to discern the distance between the virtual and the real, the distance that Lacan gives over to the Symbolic.[7]

Kubiak makes this assertion as part of his manifesto on the importance of American theatre as a potential tool for negotiating the Real and the Imaginary. And he points to the inherent problem with realism as the reigning primary dramaturgical form in middle-brow theatre. I suggest that the vast proliferation of cultural performances disseminated in mass-media, from TV and the movies to the internet, podcasts, and YouTube, contributes to, and is an extension of, the tradition of theatrical realism that engenders a lack of distance between the virtual and the real in American culture. And thus, we need to address the mode of realism and how we understand it in various cultural texts in order to use theatre as an effective tool for renegotiating the real and the imaginary as Kubiak suggests.

[7] Ibid., 13.

As of this writing, reality shows are one of the dominant programming trends in twenty-first-century television. In the evening prime-time lineup, even fictional sitcoms and dramatic nighttime soaps—still arguably modes of realism—have been subsumed by the "more real" reality programming. In essence, this falls into the same American theatrical tradition that lacks distancing between subject and object that Kubiak is critiquing. The formula of casting "real people," frequently putting them in competitive circumstances, often with the promised prize of becoming a "star," adding dizzying layers of meta-celebrityhood, has proven to be a most popular mode of reality entertainment. Shows such as *American Idol*, *So You Think You Can Dance*, *Survivor*, *America's Next Top Model*, *The Real Housewives of Orange County*, and *The Biggest Loser*, a program particularly relevant to this dissertation, all promise "Average Joe American" a shot at stardom, which has become a most prized accomplishment in our specular, voyeuristic middle-class culture.

Ultimately, of course, all of these participants are performers acting out a sometimes-scripted version of themselves for the reality camera. The participants are screened and auditioned and groomed for their moment in the spotlight, although this is not part of the disclosure model. The premise of this programming is that an "ordinary person" has been plucked from his or her daily life and is now appearing as himself or herself, on national television. Especially with the advent of the internet, it has become increasingly possible for anyone to appear on (digital) film and to live his or her life in the public eye. This encourages people to imagine themselves only one step removed from a professional actor with all that entails—from fame and power to appearance and beauty. More and more "regular people" are blurring the line between reality and fiction

as they attempt to participate in these reality shows. Or they somehow see themselves as starring in their own reality show as they post self-made films and blog to a potential internet audience of millions.

A perfect example of the way in which reality shows provoke a blurring of the lines between truth and fiction is the couple who managed to crash the first White House state dinner of Barack Obama's presidency on November 24, 2009. Michaele and Tareq Salahi, a couple aspiring to reality show stardom, slipped past security and "crashed" the state dinner. The couple, who brought their own makeup artist, dressed glamorously and even paused on the red carpet for press photographers.[8] They posed alongside the vice president and the White House chief of staff and posted the photos on their Facebook page. They were also photographed shaking hands with the president. They were hoping to gain attention in their bid to appear on *The Real Housewives of D.C.*, part of a television franchise that recruits "regular" folks to live their lives on TV. [9] This astonishing breach of security has resulted in multiple inquiries into White House procedures and has, no doubt, cost the government plenty of money and a few secret service agents their jobs.[10] The couple then appeared on *Larry King Live*. This incident came just a few months after a Colorado family, also trying to gain attention from television producers, instigated a national search for their child, whom they led

[8] It is significant that not only were the Salahis a handsome, well-dressed white couple, but Ms. Salahi is an extremely slender blonde woman who appeared quite glamorous—like a movie star if you will. I suspect if the Salahis had been fat by current standards, or people of color, they would not have slipped past security so easily.

[9] The show originated with "The Real Housewives of Orange County" and has branched into "The Real Housewives" of New York and New Jersey. Each season, the program features a collection of couples and films their lifestyle and all the drama the participants can generate for the camera. (This might include extramarital affairs, getting one's kids into school, fights among friends, etc.)

[10] Helene Cooper and Brian Stelter, "Obamas' Uninvited Guests Prompt an Inquiry," *New York Times*, November 27, 2009, http://www.nytimes.com/2009/11/27/us/politics/27party.html?hp (accessed November 27, 2009).

authorities to believe was trapped inside a homemade air balloon and floating through the sky. The story made national news, and viewers were able to watch in real time as rescuers attempted to capture the runaway balloon and save the boy, who was later found hiding in his garage. When the family went through the ubiquitous nationally televised interview process following the incident, including *Larry King Live*, they were exposed as hoaxers trying to gain celebrity attention in hopes of landing a reality series about inventors. The allure of this kind of press coverage is exacerbated by media coverage of real-life dramatic events, such as the plane that safely crash-landed into the Hudson River in January of 2009. The news story was co-opted by the media and packaged as "info-tainment." This real-life event had the perfect dramatic narrative: It prominently featured the heroic actions of "regular guy" Chesley Sullenberger, the captain who "ditched" the plane without loss of life. Some news channels even developed and played specific theme music before reporting on the accident and gave the events surrounding the incident a neatly packaged, marketable name, dubbing it "Miracle on the Hudson."[11]

Arguably, the players in "Crashing Couple" and "Balloon Boy" could be construed as harmless publicity mongers in a long tradition of celebrity seekers. (Who can forget the streaker behind David Niven at the 1974 Academy Awards?) On the other hand, in both the aforementioned instances, these individuals duped public officials and private citizens in their ruses. The secret service agents *really* faced disciplinary actions at their jobs and there was *real* inquiry into White House security. Hundreds of local rescuers and government agencies *really* participated in trying to save the little boy, at great financial and emotional expense. Millions of Americans watched the "Balloon Boy"

[11] CNN, FOX, and New York One, for example, had a "Miracle on the Hudson" graphic and a music lead-in specific to the incident, which they reported on for weeks (January, 2009).

story play out in real time and shared in the fear and suspense of the rescue. There were real consequences for these performative actions.[12] As Michael Hirschorn, former vice president of programming for reality-centric TV for VH1, puts it, "prospective reality stars [are] becoming smarter about 'self-producing,' knowing they have to inject drama into the shows. At this point, there must be what, a thousand reality personalities on TV at any time?"[13] The notion that thousands of "regular" individuals are self-producing a version of themselves (with added drama) for reality programs speaks to the idea that America is a culture steeped in its own theatricality, and that Americans are preoccupied with performing their own realism. The internet age has intensified this phenomenon.

Consequently, it is not only live theatre as a cultural text, but other entertainment media in the mode of realism, that blur distinctions between the virtual and the real. According to Kubiak, "[t]heater as a phenomenon represents a historically situated critical feedback loop that moves from play to culture, from culture to unconscious subject, and back again."[14] He asserts that American culture has been "unknowingly immersed in, and formulated through theater, the ontologies and strategies of seeing and being seen, of revelation and concealment."[15] He argues,

> The appearance of the authentic and the material (i.e., the material conditions of cultural production) must be empirical, demonstrable; they must be, in other words, repeatable. In the case of cultural materialism, the connections between attitudes and ideas and cultural production must be *shown*. The provability or authenticity relies, in other words, on empirical verifiability, on a re-creation or replay, or socially and psychically speaking, on theater.[16]

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[12] In fact, the "Balloon Boy" parents, Richard and Mayumi Heene faced charges and were sentenced on December 23rd, 2009. He was sentenced to ninety days in jail and she to twenty days in jail. They were both given four years probation during which time they may not earn any money related to the stunt. http://www.nytimes.com/aponline/2009/12/23/us/AP-US-Balloon-Boy.html (accessed January1, 2010).
[13] Cooper and Stelter, "Obamas' Uninvited Guests," *New York Times*, November 27, 2009,
[14] Kubiak, *Agitated States*., 20.
[15] Ibid.,30.
[16] Ibid. 22-23.

He goes on to draw from Hillel Schwartz's study of doubling and mimesis, claiming that Americans have a "habit of relying upon reenactment and repetition to establish the truth of events and the authenticity of people."[17] In other words, in our culture, "the copy threatens to overtake the original in its claim to the authentic."[18]

I believe this observation has profound implications not only for how we read bodies onstage and in various cultural texts, but also for what audiences perceive as "realistic." The constant repetition of the slender, homogenized female body has become empirically verifiable as the authentic. Female bodies represented in film and TV are typically excessively thin in relation to the average American woman. It is part of the job description for starlets to maintain an extremely slender, muscular physique. This is the beauty aesthetic proliferated in the field of cultural production within the film and TV industry and all the tabloids and publicity outlets that circulate within that. However, unlike the average middle-class American woman, successful Hollywood actresses have plenty of money and professional motivation to engage in plastic surgery and to enlist personal trainers, personal chefs, and so on. This is in addition to all the help they receive from "industry magic," such as makeup and airbrushing, in order to accomplish their slender, polished appearance. Not only is the lifestyle of a film actress conducive to maintaining her appearance, but it is a career imperative to keep up her homogenized beauty. Despite all the technological advances in the film industry, it seems that we still have not developed a camera that does not "add ten pounds" to the performer, as the saying goes. As a result, film and TV performers have made it a practice to maintain extreme slenderness and indeed, over the years, have gotten even slenderer as the

[17] Ibid., 22.
[18] Ibid.

cultural aesthetic has gradually gotten even slimmer.[19] However, considering the dwindling gap between celebrity and "real" person as depicted in reality-based TV programming and the proliferation of self-produced internet programming, many "average" middle-class women, who do not have the accoutrements that a celebrity has, nonetheless feel pressure, or more insidiously, feel as if it ought to be *possible* for them to look like a "star." In light of Kubiak's theory, in which Americans persist in blurring the line between the virtual and the real, we are all potentially on the same plane as any performer we see on TV or onstage. And, as I mentioned in chapter one, bearing in mind the economics of commercial and regional theatre, and the increasing crossover between film and stage for performers, the female bodies we see onstage in live theatre are frequently part of the "cult of slenderness" demanded by the film and television industry. Yet all of these bodies are perceived by a middlebrow white audience as realistic, even though they do not represent real women's bodies and have been modified by any or all of the practices that I mention above.

Referring to Kubiak's aforementioned "cultural feedback loop," I assert that the "authentic"—the *real*—female body has largely been overtaken by the copy as depicted in various cultural texts, including theatre.[20] American audiences have become so accustomed to the slender, homogenous beauty aesthetic as proliferated in mass media, that any body that strays outside that parameter interferes with the viewer's notion of what is believable—or what is realistic. Thus, the only neutral female body in

[19] For example, if you view a popular TV series from the late seventies or early eighties, such as *Laverne and Shirley*, *Dallas*, or *Remington Steele*, you might be surprised, as I was, that the actresses appear pudgy to a twenty-first-century viewer. (Some of them also have remarkably smaller breasts than a present-day TV viewer is now accustomed to seeing.)

[20] This assumes that the "real" female body in American culture reflects the average American woman, who is a dress size twelve to sixteen.

representation, or perhaps more accurately, the only "realistic" body in representation is the slender, dainty, hyperfeminine white woman. If a female performer's body falls outside these cultural notions of authenticity, by being fat, tall, or of color, then her body is adding a layer of meaning beyond the textual narrative. In some cases, when the role in question calls for a particular kind of personality, as I have demonstrated through my examples in chapters two and three, this effect is desirable, and directors and actors benefit from this unconscious cultural collusion between audience and playwright. However, in many other cases, this consequence is an unrecognized by-product and severely limits the possibilities of whom audiences will believe in a majority of roles in the context of realism.

In other words, a traditional romantic "boy meets girl" kind of scenario in dramatic representation, such as Neil Simon's *Barefoot in the Park*, would not be understood as realistic if the female performer's body was fat. Even though "normal-" sized men fall in love with size sixteen women all the time in real-life, a play that represented this would become another kind of story. For another specific contemporary example, consider Sarah Ruhl's *In the Next Room or The Vibrator Play,* which opened on Broadway November 19th 2009 and ran through January, 2010. The play is ostensibly realistic, with a linear plot and a fully realized stage and costume design representing an upper-class American household circa 1880 at the dawn of electricity. The two female leads are played by fairly well-known actresses (Laura Benanti and Maria Dizzia) who have significant film, TV, and stage credits. Ms. Benanti, who won a Tony for her performance in the title role of *Gypsy* and is the romantic lead of this drama, is not only traditionally beautiful but slender as a reed. This is especially specious considering that

the time period in which the play is set would virtually require a fuller-figured woman to play the role. I propose that were the role to be played by the equally talented, attractive, and age-appropriate Marissa Jaret Winokur (who also won a Tony for her portrayal of Tracy Turnblad in *Hairspray*), critics and audiences would somehow perceive her depiction as unrealistic—inauthentic—or even perverse. At the very least, as I have demonstrated in previous chapters, if Ms. Winokur had played the role, it would have connoted some qualities about the character that the playwright and director did not intend. Interestingly, the only heavy set—or realistically sized—actress to appear in Ruhl's play is Quincy Tyler Bernstine, an African American. Because audiences are more accustomed to seeing large black women in representation, particularly those depicted in a lower economic and social status, as was the case in *The Vibrator Play*, Ms. Bernstine's body can still be read as authentic in the context of the realism that has been shaped by twenty-first-century theatre and film practices. Given the economics of producing Broadway theatre in particular, but also nonprofit regional theatre, producers have increasingly been compelled to cast performers with "names" in order to guarantee success of a production, and this crossover means not only that slenderized film actresses are filling many of the roles in live theatre but also that actresses who are primarily theatre performers are forced to maintain a very slender appearance in order to increase their "castability."

Since TV and film actresses are more recognizable to a wider middle-class audience, it is not surprising that economic considerations result in the overlap in casting in all three areas of the entertainment industry. Thus, the bodies of these actresses are embedded in Kubiak's cultural feedback loop, wherein the "copy" depicted onstage or on

TV has overtaken the original as to whom audiences recognize as "realistic."[21] The bodies of professional actresses, which are groomed, toned, and trained as a career necessity in the same way a professional athlete maintains his or her skills in order to excel in sports, are the cultural texts (in the context of realism) in which white, middle-class American women see themselves mirrored. Furthermore, Hillel Schwartz highlights the contemporary American cultural "predicament" when he refers to

> [o]ur habit of relying upon reenactment and repetition to establish the truth of events and the authenticity of people. Despite the rhetoric of uniqueness and once-in-a-lifetime experiences, our culture of copy mocks that romanticism which seeks out the irreproducible as the source of the Truth. [. . .] Technologies of visual replay—movies projected in slow motion, the Polaroid camera, videotape, computer digitizing—accommodate our predilections for perfecting the instant. [. . .] Our culture of copy wants every replay to transcend the original.[22]

Bodies in representation are among the cultural texts that we look to in order to establish the Truth—or authenticity. Because popular representations of women have persistently reenacted a homogenized white slender beauty and demonized fat, audiences have difficulty understanding a fat female body in the context of realism without attaching to it some of the fat pathology I have described in earlier chapters.

Revising Aesthetics

As I discussed in the introduction, fat is a cultural construction, and the "obesity epidemic" is, to a large degree, a myth perpetuated by the industries vested in keeping

[21] In other words, the bodies of actresses and models that are a kind of "copy" that many "average" American women (the originals) view as real or authentic when in fact, the representations of the actresses are altered by technology and the actresses themselves participate in extreme body modification practices (dieting, plastic surgery) that most middle-class American women can not duplicate for economic reasons.
[22] Hillel Schwartz, *The Culture of Copy: Striking Likenesses and Unreasonable Facsimiles* (New York: Zone Books, 1996), 290. Keep in mind Schwartz's quote above predates the proliferation of cell phones as cameras and video recording devices.

consumers spending money on diet products, pharmaceuticals, and surgical interventions. "Realistic" representations of women in performance remain impossibly slender despite the statistical fact that average American women commonly wear sizes twelve, fourteen, and sixteen. Yet these sizes are frequently considered plus-size by the fashion industry.[23] Recuperating fat in representation would require a fundamental shift in cultural perceptions of realism onstage and the casting practices that perpetuate this phenomenon.[24] In other words, we must interrupt Kubiak's cultural feedback loop. Or perhaps more accurately, if we cannot use theatre more effectively to interrogate theatricalities of culture as Kubiak suggests, we can at least endeavor to reprogram the feedback loop.

Kathleen LeBesco points out the obstacles facing such a paradigm shift; media and other consumer industries are reluctant to promote any display of fatness that suggests fat acceptance because of the potential consequences for the health and beauty industries.[25] And there does seem to be reluctance among consumers to truly accept plus-size mannequins, for example. This resistance—intolerance, really—is exemplified in a recent "Critical Shopper Review" of the new J.C. Penney store in Herald Square, New York City, that appeared in the *New York Times*. Cintra Wilson, who conspicuously positions herself as "not fat," writes:

[23] I spoke to buyer, Maru Hagerty, at SAKS Fifth Avenue, which is a high end store on the cutting edge of fashion. She says that many designers carry up to a size fourteen, but very few carry a sixteen. She added that sizes 12-14 are considered for "bigger women" and that SAKS has a special department for big women on the top floor (out of sight?). In my experience, lower end stores such as GAP and Old Navy do carry up through size sixteen.
[24] Kathleen LeBesco, *Revolting Bodies: The Struggle to Redefine Fat Identity* (University of Massachusetts Press, 2003), 71.
[25] Ibid., 71.

> It took me a long time to find a size 2 among the racks. There are, however, abundant size 10's, 12's, and 16's [. . .] To this end, it had the most obese mannequins I have ever seen. They probably need special insulin-based epoxy injections just to make their limbs stay on. It's like a headless wax museum devoted entirely to the cast of "Roseanne." [26]

Notice the disparaging tone with which Wilson singles out the sizes of the average American woman, and how she situates herself as the superior size two. This is, quite literally, spatial profiling. The fact that the store is J.C. Penney, not Ralph Lauren or some other pricey designer store, also implies class discrimination in addition to fat discrimination.

However, as LeBesco points out, it is not only the fashion industry that is guilty of fat discrimination. Fat women, as well as the millions of women who are struggling to lose the ten pounds that will make them as "camera ready" as their popular female icons, will not be able to stop the cycle of self-loathing and battling their bodies until bigger bodies are presented as "normal" in the media.[27] LeBesco writes,

> As long as no one questions the genesis of the idea that fat is dirty, as long as no one questions why the larger social structure benefits from the marginalization of fat individuals, as long as fat people remain complicitous with this larger structure, fat as bad will continue to seem natural rather than be exposed as the social construction that it is [. . .] [I]t will be assumed, through today's culturally constructed historical blinders, that fat is something that is now and forever has been bad, and this will serve as the rationale for the continued oppression of fat people.[28]

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[26] Cintra Wilson, "Playing to the Middle," *New York Times*, August 13, 2009, http://www.nytimes.com/2009/08/13/fashion/13CRITIC.html?scp=1&sq=playing%20to%20the%20middle&st=cse.
[27] LeBesco, *Revolting Bodies: The Struggle to Redefine Fat Identity*, 72.
[28] Ibid., 28.

Middle-class white women will continue to position themselves in relation to popular representations of the female figure, which, according to Kubiak's theory, they perceive on some level as more authentic than their own apparently imperfect bodies.

Despite all news reports telling us that Americans are fatter than ever, it is surprisingly difficult to locate a strong fat female presence in any area of performance. Fat Studies is becoming a subfield of academic inquiry as represented by several recently published books, such as *The Fat Studies Reader*, and Fat Studies being represented at academic conferences that explore popular culture.[29] There are also a significant number of fat blogs and a growing genre of fat literature—fiction and nonfiction books that take fat as their central theme or subject. Moreover, in the spirit of guerrilla activism, over the past ten years or so, a few grassroots performance groups have emerged that are trying to resituate fat in our cultural mind-set. Interestingly, many of the trail-blazing fat-friendly performances are based in dance and movement. As I mentioned, burlesque is one mode of performance that is more open to body diversity. There are a number of fat burlesque performers who have gained momentum and popularity, such as Dirty Martini, whose performance I described in chapter five.[30] Another example is the Fat Bottom Revue, a San Francisco-based burlesque troupe of fat female performers led by their fat mistress of ceremonies, Ms. DeMeanor. Big Moves is another San Francisco-based dance organization that has chapters in New York, Boston, and Montreal. Big Moves is devoted to promoting dance for fat body types, and from that, several fat dance troupes have

[29] Esther Rothblum and Sondra Solovay, ed., *The Fat Studies Reader* (New York: New York University Press, 2009).
[30] For a look at Dirty Martini, her bio, and some of her performance history, see: http://www.missdirtymartini.com/html/home.htm (accessed December 6, 2009).

emerged, such as the Phat Fly Girls, who perform hip-hop dance. The Padded Lilies, based in Oakland, California, are a group of fat synchronized water-ballet performers. Still, fat performers are a rarity and seem to find their home in alternative performance venues, not in the mainstream. Furthermore, the kinds of performances they are engaging in are generally situated in the contexts of fat activism and nonrealistic genres in which they embody themselves rather than a character.

Yet, the national discourse surrounding fat does seem to be shifting slightly. For example, the recently released film *Precious* (2009) has generated a lot of press coverage and Academy-Award buzz. *Precious* tells the story of an obese, dark-skinned black woman and addresses many of the questions I raise in chapter four. It is hardly surprising that Lee Daniels, a well-regarded, African American, independent film director, had to rely on private investors to raise the initial eight million dollar production budget.[31] Indeed, the heroine of *Precious* is the most disenfranchised American possible: a fat, black, illiterate woman on welfare. However, in my view, she is portrayed as heroic, because to some degree she lives up to the American ideals of self-determination; she does not lose weight, but she achieves her modest goals of escaping her abusive home and collecting both of her children under her own roof. Still, aside from the potential audience reach of *Precious*, the field of cultural production in which these aforementioned fat performances operate is relatively small and is not based in the mode of realism in performance. Even *Precious*, as gritty and realistic as much of the

[31] See "The Audacity of Precious" in *The New York Times Magazine* for October 25th for an extensive article about Daniels and the making of *Precious*, including the difficulty of finding a very fat, dark-skinned black actress to play Precious. (www.nytimes.com/2009/10/25/magazine/25precious-t.html?_r=l&emc=atal&page , accessed October 26, 2009).

filmmaking is, features flights of fancy in the mind of the main character when she imagines herself as a skinny, white, blonde girl.

When we consider that the aforementioned Puritan ideals of temperance and discipline are manifested physically in human form by angular, slender lines, and that, conversely, the vices of sloth and gluttony are depicted in round folds of human flesh, then the representation of the fat female on stage in the latter half of the twentieth century and early twenty-first century has served to maintain a cultural status quo that includes deep seated misogyny. It is not by chance that the female body needs deviate only slightly from the established norm to be considered outside that norm or "other," and that a white male body has to be profoundly deviant in the form of gross obesity before offense will be taken by our society at large. This double standard continues to permeate our society and is at the heart of many ongoing feminist concerns.

Nor is it surprising that fat prejudice remains one of the last socially acceptable forms of discrimination. Like sexuality, fat is perceived by many as a deliberate choice and therefore deserving of inequitable treatment socially and by government and political decisions.[32] Anti-fat bias is a by-product of American ambivalence that at once celebrates discipline, control, and thinness as the outward show of moral character but at the same time revels in our food surplus and freedom of choice. This is reflected in the contradictory myths of abundance and scarcity flourishing simultaneously in our culture.

[32] Michael Pollan's recent best-selling book *In Defense of Food: An Eater's Manifesto* (New York: Penguin Books, 2008) is one of many new studies that are exploring how the proliferation of "faux" food-science as well as genetically modified food, and the excess of corn-products in our food chain (thanks, in part, to government subsidized farming initiatives) have actually contributed to the so-called obesity problem in our country. He suggests that some of the damage done by these practices is irreversible in terms of national health and weight concerns. Indeed, fat may not be as much of a choice as many perceive it to be. Furthermore, statistical evidence has repeatedly demonstrated that dieting does not work in so far as ninety to ninety five percent of dieters gain back all the weight they have lost (plus some) within five years of losing it.

Especially in large cities, but even in suburban developments, as our population grows, space is tightly controlled and regulated through economic and market forces. Mass-producing culture dictates the size of everything, which results in a "one-size-fits-all" concept of industrialized civilization that further promotes the idea of scarcity of space in our daily environments. Hence, we have spatial profiling directed even at our bodies.[33] Even the size of theatre seats is designed to maximize potential while simultaneously enforcing conformation to a certain body type. Our global crisis over the scarcity of basic resources such as fuel, our environmental crisis over pollution and global warming, our recent economic crisis, and the ever present moral justifications for living moderately have us all "tightening our belts" and "doing more with less" and "cutting back on consumption." Yet a stroll down any aisle in a Whole Foods or a Wal-Mart sends a completely different message; there is an over-abundance of everything, and not only is it is immediately available to the consumer, but it is a necessity to maintain American quality of life. And demographic statistics tell us that Americans are taller and heavier than ever before, but that we should feel bad about it. This dichotomy is at the crux of a schism between the real and the virtual.

However, with the emergence of characters like Tracey Turnblad, whose figure and superior morality challenge physical, racial, and gender stereotypes, or a character like Precious, whose struggle for human dignity is clearly and immediately identifiable, fat and fat behavior takes on new meanings. "Body-blind" casting practices can also serve to destabilize cultural assumptions and initiate new ways of reading bodies in representation.

[33] For example, the question of whether fat people should be required to purchase two airline seats or be charged a "fat tax" has become an increasingly frequent topic in the news media.

Fat Manifesto: Reclaiming Fat Onstage

In her essay "Performance, Utopia and the 'Utopian Performative,'" Jill Dolan suggests that theatre can transform communities and change perceptions. She declares,

> Live theatre remains a powerful site at which to establish and exchange notions of cultural taste, to set standards, and to model fashion, trends, and styles. [. . .] [T]heatre and performance can articulate a common future, one that's more just and equitable, in which we can all participate more equally with more chances to live fully and contribute to the making of culture.[34]

If we agree with Dolan, live theatre is the perfect medium to (begin to) rupture the cultural feedback loop and change the way audiences read female bodies onstage. Live theatre is a place where we can re-create culture by putting all body sizes and shapes in all performance modes, but especially in the context of theatrical realism. Indeed, during her plenary address at the 2008 American Theatre in Higher Education (ATHE) Conference, Dolan discussed the dangers of "liberal arts acting programs that conform to egregious racial and body-profiling practices of mainstream, professional casting practices."[35] She envisions theatre practice as a Utopian model of society through which students are shaped into citizens of the world and a "forum in which ideas and possibilities for social equity and justice are shared."[36] Furthermore, Dolan suggests that the making of theatre is a transformational cultural practice that can offer audiences "glimpses of utopia."[37]

I am inspired by Dolan's notion of the utopian performative as way to help rethink body realism when it comes to women onstage. The liveness of theatre offers a

[34] Jill Dolan, "Performance, Utopia, and the 'Utopian Performative,' " *Theatre Journal* 53 (2001):455.
[35] Jill Dolan, Plenary Address at the American Theatre in Higher Education Conference, Denver, CO 2008.
[36] Dolan, " 'Utopian Performative,' " 456.
[37] Ibid.

medium in which we can investigate fat and model a utopian world of body diversity. University theatre is a prime venue to begin to change casting practices that adhere to such rigid physical stereotypes and reshape what audiences view as "realistic" when it comes to female bodies in representation. I would argue that audiences are still more accepting of color-blind casting than "body-blind" casting. However, university theatre could be an opportunity to model true body democracy and include all sizes as part of the world represented onstage, to practice "body-blind casting." There is no reason college productions could not draw from the diversity of female bodies in their department (rather than encouraging eating disorders and perpetuating stereotypes) and cast a fat girl as Emily in *Our Town*, or a tall and pudgy Juliet for a waif-like Romeo. If we draw from current cultural demographics, it is perfectly "realistic" to imagine either of these young, romantic characters might be a fat person.

Admittedly, university theatre is hardly a wide field of cultural production in terms of both the producers and the consumers of college theatre. However, if one function of university theatre is to cultivate future directors, playwrights, performers, designers, and filmmakers, then it is an opportunity to begin a cultural shift with the next generation of artists. If the next wave of theatre artists no longer stigmatizes fat and no longer views body diversity in casting as anomalous, they might eventually take these trends to the professional level. Through persistent repetition of fat in modes of realism and representation, perhaps Kubiak's feedback loop can be reprogrammed so that the slender homogenous Hollywood bodies that audiences have become accustomed to—the copies—no longer suppress the originals when it comes to body type.

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