

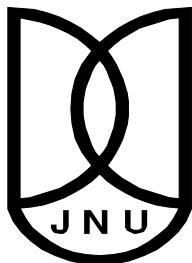
Body Curves and Story Arcs: Weight Loss in Contemporary Television Narratives

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by

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Foreword

For some people, the spark of intellectual interest in a topic comes from their personal experience, a search for a language to give life to something they have seen or felt. For me and fat studies it was the opposite—it began as an intellectual curiosity, when I happened to notice that the themes of body size and eating were central to the novels I was reading. After discovering Sander Gilman’s *Fat*, and subsequently *The Fat Studies Reader*, a new world opened to me. I had thought about different kinds of bodies before—gendered bodies, racialized bodies, etc.—but had not looked at texts through the lens of weight and social difference.

Subsequently, I have discovered just how much my life and the lives of people close to me are permeated with issues of size and weight. I have cousins who have undergone bariatric surgery, others who are thin but hawk fitness and weight loss products online. Aunts and uncles who have gained weight over the years, and others who have spent their lives trying to keep it off. I myself have been lucky to have a mostly positive relationship to my body and my weight, which has always hovered on the border between “normal” and “overweight.” I have gained and lost weight at different times, but never drastically, and never felt the need to go on a diet. I have never been thin, and I have always been aware of this fact, but neither have I been very often labeled fat; for the most part, I have had the benefits of thin privilege such as being able to shop in regular sizes and not being shamed by others for my appearance. I am close to the “average” dress size in the United States (14), an average that is nevertheless much larger than the typical woman in media.

So intentional weight loss has never been a part of my life. Since I started researching this topic, however, two people in my family have gone through processes of significant weight loss, and I share their stories here (with permission) to show what listening to them has taught me above and beyond my academic research, and how it has allowed me to think about both who I am writing about, and who I am writing for. Their stories share some similarities, particularly in the ways that their weight loss was met with praise from family and friends, often made public on social media, but they differ in their “twists.”

The first is my cousin Sara. Over a longer period of a couple years, Sara lost a significant amount of weight the “right” way—that is, through a controlled diet and regular exercise. In the

wake of the stress of her mother’s death, though, she found it increasingly difficult to maintain the weight loss. Instead of giving in to shame for regaining weight, Sara began to think about her body differently. Unknown to me, while I was researching fat studies, she was also discovering fat acceptance writings and arriving at the decision to stop monitoring her weight for the sake of her own well-being. Reflecting back on her thinner days from her current perspective, she sees that time as one of disordered eating and “orthorexia” rather than the healthy and successful makeover that others assumed it to be. She now reads and shares materials with me and others that question our cultural preoccupation with weight, insisting that, while it is not necessarily easy, it is possible for us to deprogram our minds of societal attitudes toward fat and the body.

The other story is of my brother, Chris. In high school, he was an athlete. After his father (my stepfather) died and Chris stopped playing football, he gained weight. At some point, he decided to embark on a journey of weight loss; his goal was, I would later learn, to reach the weight that he had before Ron died. He started going to the gym a lot, lifting weights and becoming first slimmer, and then more muscular. He got “ripped,” while remaining lean and reaching his “target” weight. He posted photos of himself on Facebook and Instagram doing truck pulls or flexing and garnered hundreds of likes. While I was in the process of writing my dissertation, though, I got the sudden call that he was in the hospital and it was quite serious. It turned out that he had overdosed on a substance called DNP (2,4-dinitrophenol), which had been used as a weight loss drug nearly a century ago but discontinued when it caused serious organ damage and even deaths. Despite its potentially dangerous effects, DNP has seen a recent resurgence in body-building circles.

Chris spent nearly a week in the ICU, sedated, on a ventilator and cooling machine, before his body had metabolized enough of it to return him to the world of the living. In the aftermath, we have had some frank conversations about what got him to that point. I was shocked to hear that his use of DNP was not a new thing; he had begun taking it a couple years before when his weight loss plateaued before he reached his goal. DNP got him over the hump, and he continued to rely on it whenever he felt he was in danger of slipping up the scale again. As he reaped all the social approval and “likes” of friends and family, we were unaware what was actually going into it. And even after his near-death experience, Chris told us that, looking at

one of the photos that people liked the most from those days, he could still find numerous flaws in his physique.

Luckily Chris survived. Luckily he has reflected on what happened, and is on a better path now. Luckily Sara has also found some peace in her body. But both of these stories have taught me important lessons in personal ways that perhaps I could not have learned by reading about fat studies alone. First of all, appearances are deceiving. Determining someone's health by looking at them is a losing game. Fat activist Marilyn Wann writes that, "the only thing that anyone can diagnose, with any certainty, by looking at a fat person, is their own level of stereotype and prejudice toward fat people," but it works for both fat and thin bodies.¹ Chris, at the supposed peak of his fitness, nearly died for the single-minded dedication to a numerical target weight. And although Sara's regaining means that most people would assume she is unhealthier, she is more comfortable and at peace in her body now than she was at the lower weight. Secondly, they show me that in the current cultural moment, media produce our relationship to our bodies in complex ways. While social media certainly contributed to the positive feedback loop when both Sara and Chris lost weight, reinforcing their expectations that their weight loss would generate approval, it also focused social pressure on their image. Although I sometimes felt ambivalent about responding positively to their transformations, I too was part of that media approval apparatus. But if media can tear you down, it can also build you up; in the Facebook groups and blogs that Sara follows, for example, people are sharing their critical views, building a body acceptance movement and fat community. Finally, these two people have taught me that our bodies are not incidental to our life stories; they intertwine with the events of our lives and affect our perception of ourselves just as our perceptions and experiences, our tragedies and triumphs, affect our bodies. We are not above and beyond our bodies; we *are* our bodies, and we deserve to treat them with as much respect as we would treat any other part of ourselves.

These are the personal stories that accompany me throughout this dissertation, and I am grateful to be able to share them, along with all the other body curves and story arcs in the work to come.

¹ Wann, "Fat Studies: An Invitation to Revolution," 13.

INTRODUCTION: BODY CURVES AND STORY ARCS BETWEEN FAT SHAME AND FAT STUDIES

At the climax of the popular animated movie *Shrek*, heroine Princess Fiona undergoes a spectacular transformation. Fiona has been cursed since childhood a spell with the rhyme “By night one way, by day another /This shall be the norm/Until you find true love’s first kiss/Then take love’s true form.” While she looks like a typical fairy tale princess during the day, she becomes a green ogre as soon as the sun sets. In the end, however, she receives a kiss from her unlikely ogre suitor Shrek, prompting her final transformation. This sort of transformation is a standby in the fairy tale. Instead of permanently changing to her daytime beauty as she expects, though, Fiona becomes an ogre. In this way, *Shrek* subverts the expectations of the viewer and the typical plot of the fairy tale—instead of moving from “beast” to “beauty,” Fiona moves from “beauty” to “beast.” Nevertheless, it is a happy ending. This, the film suggests, is love’s true form, and Fiona will live happily ever after with Shrek, who appreciates her true beauty.

This ending in *Shrek* takes on particular significance in the current cultural moment. Stories of transformation are all around us, and they especially abound in reality television, itself ubiquitous around the world. The majority of reality TV programs are about change, and the parallel to the fairy tale is so clear that scholar Jack Bratich uses the term “faireality” to mark the similarity. As Bratich argues, RTV programs are about distributing “powers of transformation,” and their intent is didactic as well as entertaining (Bratich 8). Meredith Jones, discussing cosmetic surgery programs, sees them in the context of a widespread “makeover culture.” As other scholars like Brenda Weber have stressed, though, the change of the makeover is not change for its own sake, but rather change directed at particular ends, entailing any number of racialized, gendered, and classed teleologies inherent in cultural assumptions about “self-improvement.”

A subtle part of Fiona’s transformation that does not receive much attention is the change in the shape of her body. Fiona’s “daytime” appearance conforms to the standards of most contemporary fairy tale princesses, especially those iconic ones created by Disney—she is white,

very thin, with a narrow waist and long limbs. As an ogre, however, she is not only green-skinned, with a broader nose and facial features, but also fat. Again, this is the opposite of the majority of fairy tales, as well as stories of weight in popular culture. In the narratives of mainstream popular culture, fat does not usually make for a happy ending. Instead, fatness is medicalized and demonized, depicted as fundamentally unhealthy and undesirable, an obstacle to taking one's "true form" rather than a true form in its own right.

The meaning of fatness is nevertheless contested. On one hand, we have medical practitioners and government officials proclaiming the health hazards of fatness in the so-called "global obesity epidemic."¹ The medical discourses of fatness combine with a rampant makeover culture to suggest that bodily transformation is inherently desirable and achievable—or, in often more urgent terms, that it is a matter of life and death. On the other hand, the field of fat studies has arisen along with fat activism to question the dominant and negative perceptions of fatness. Activists fight back by advocating for the fat body's right to exist and critiquing both the means and ends of weight loss. One side says, "You can be who you always wanted to be if you change your body." The other says, "Love your body as it is." Both, perhaps, are engaged in the search for an authentic way of living in the body, to "be yourself." While one side argues that fatness cannot be part of this authentic embodiment or one's "true" self, however, the other seeks to make room for the co-existence of fat embodiment and the self.

The following dissertation traces this debate as it appears in television series. In particular, it discusses fat subjects going through weight loss in these narratives. Television is significant, not only as a prominent medium that shapes the images of the body, bringing some into cultural visibility and erasing others, but also as a site where the meaning of the fat body is being hotly debated and constructed. At the same time that there are a glut of programs pathologizing the fat body and singing the praises of weight loss, there are programs working to revise negative perceptions of fatness. These programs may even air side by side on one channel, such as TLC in

¹ The World Health Organization warns that "an escalating global epidemic of overweight and obesity – "globesity" – is taking over many parts of the world. If immediate action is not taken, millions will suffer from an array of serious health disorders." ("Controlling the Global Obesity Epidemic"). Some of the most hyperbolic and militant pronouncements about obesity have come from U.S. surgeon generals. C. Everett Koop, for example, declared a "War on Obesity" in 1996, while later surgeon general Richard Carmona linked it to the threat of terrorism, saying it was "every bit as threatening as the terrorist threat we face today" and the "threat from within." (qtd. Burgard et al. 355).

the United States, where one will currently find not only a heap of documentary programs detailing the horrors of being fat, but also a show like *My Fat Fabulous Life* starring Whitney Thore, who rose to internet fame after producing videos of herself dancing and has since created the #NoBodyShameCampaign.

Television may also be more interesting than other media, such as film, for the discussion of fat and weight loss in that it potentially gives room to longer narratives of personal transformation. Jerry Mosher, for one, has argued that the open-ended seriality of television offers more room for fat bodies than the tight and closed narratives of film by allowing “a slower development of physical nuance” (Mosher 166). This allows stories to develop in a long arc, and often without a pre-determined end. This open-endedness is in concert with concepts of liquid modernity (Bauman) and makeover culture (Jones) that stress becoming over being, but it is also in conflict with weight loss, as it is usually conceived to have a fixed end, a “goal weight,” invoking what I call the *teleology of weight loss*. At the same time, generic constraints also play a role, encouraging or discouraging long-term transformation of characters; reality television shows about weight loss often draw their spectacular power from enacting a real change on the bodies of their participants, shaping the narratives they present. Yet, paradoxically, characters stop being interesting as soon as the transformation is complete; “happily ever after” means the story is over. Fictional genres, however, rely on making the same characters interesting over a much longer period of time, whole seasons or entire series. As a result, their attitude toward change is more complicated. The drama does this by producing long-term character development. A situation comedy, on the other hand, is more likely to produce cyclical plots that reinforce the stability of character traits, including fatness. In both cases, however, characters must remain recognizable, making weight loss problematic. As we will see, these various generic constraints offer different challenges and possibilities for representations of weight loss.

On a more abstract level, this thesis is an attempt to reconcile surfaces and contours, images and narratives, and to address weight loss and the fat body in a variety of dimensions, both in its being and in its becoming. Its goal is to go beyond the simplest interpretation of a weight loss story as a one-dimensional movement on a scale from bad/fat to good/thin to encompass fuller and more nuanced understandings of weight loss in television, and particularly to describe how

the contours of characters' bodies relate to the shape of the narrative in which they are embedded. To do so, however, it is necessary to distinguish these different dimensions (see table). I delineate them as follows: The first dimension entails the quantification of weight that grants television narratives of weight loss a particular trajectory and teleology—the line that points to the goal. The second refers to the iconography of the fat body in the two-dimensional television image—the fat body as static image, stereotype, flattened in the televisual frame. Adding the third dimension, however, allows us to appreciate the actual bulk of the body which is so important to fat studies—the body in three-dimensional space. Finally, the fourth dimension (time) allows us to return to the initial trajectory but with a fuller understanding—the transformation of the body and, in parallel or in contrast, the transformation of perception and experience of the body. Often these levels work against each other, so that, for example, a narrative may rely on static fat stereotypes (2D) while also purporting to produce a change in time (4D), a change that inherently contests the supposed stability of those stereotypes.

Dimension	Definition
First	narrative trajectory/arcs, teleology of weight loss, simple quantification and numerical change
Second	the body as image, iconography of fat in TV and visual culture, flat stereotypes of fatness
Third	the body in three dimensional space, bodies of actors as "real" bodies
Fourth	the body over time, in character development and history, modification of both perception and experience of the fat body

Importantly, the attempt to revalue the fat body from a fat studies perspective should not be read as an argument for elevating one body type over all others, nor for reading weight loss narratives as implicitly negative depictions of the fat body. To approach weight loss, we should be open to a plurality of potential meanings. We must resist the urge to see those undergoing the process as either champions of their own destiny or helpless victims of society's standards. We should acknowledge that there is tremendous pressure to be thin, but also that millions of people

effectively stay fat despite this pressure. Weight loss may increase health and mobility, or it might also lead to frustration or obsessive behavior. It may destroy the potential for fat pride and community at the same time it produces communities of fat people in organizations like Weight Watchers or Overeaters Anonymous. Moreover, we should be alive to the ways that transformation may take place both in the mind and the body, or, more likely, in a complex interaction between the two.

As Juli Zeh writes in her novel *Corpus Delicti*, maintaining the freedom to think your own thoughts means trying to escape both the dominant narrative and its countermovement: “You have to flicker. Subjective, objective. Subjective, objective. Conformity, resistance. On, off. The free person is like a defective lamp.”² In that spirit, as a joyfully defective lamp, the rest of the dissertation is written.

Liquid Modernity, Consumer Culture, and Weight Loss

Weight loss, as a transformative process enacted on the body, is clearly linked to a larger cultural phenomenon of personal change. In his slim book *Culture in a Liquid Modern World*, Zygmunt Bauman addresses this phenomenon as he lays out his view of culture in relation to his larger theory of liquid modernity. Regarding the ever-changing, fluid play of identities, Bauman writes that “[t]oday’s all-encompassing culture demands that you acquire the ability to change your identity (or at least its public manifestation) as often, as fast and as efficiently as you change your shirt or your socks” (25). Bauman’s hyperbole aside, the point is well-taken; change is in, whether the self-transformation is effected by upgrading your phone, getting a fashion makeover, undergoing cosmetic surgery, learning a new skill, or living in a new place. The tastes of the elite become eclectic, or “omnivorous,” as Bauman asserts, cobbled together from diverse sources. Flexibility and mobility are prized, while resolutely sticking to old preferences and one place or way of life is derided as antimodern.

² “Man muss flackern. Subjektiv, objektiv. Subjektiv, objektiv. Anpassung, Widerstand. An, aus. Der freie Mensch gleich einer defekten Lampe” (Zeh 149). Translation mine.

Bauman's critique in this direction is primarily directed at a consumerist society which encourages the rapid consumption of new items and disposal of the old. Bauman argues that the very economy depends on this constant flow of products in and out of the individual's possession. As he writes, "People who hold on to yesterday's clothes, computers and mobile phones could spell catastrophe for an economy whose main concern, and *sine qua non* of survival, is the fast, and ever faster, disposal of purchased and acquired goods onto the rubbish heap; an economy whose vertebral column is rubbish disposal." (*CLMW*, 25). While Bauman assumes that disposal is necessary to the economy and therefore produces cultural consequences, we might ask, however, if the causality is rather not the other way around. Does the economy require rubbish disposal directly or is it rather culture that requires rubbish disposal as a way of concealing our excessive consumption, bringing waste out of sight? The keeping of passé items, items that have fallen out of fashion, should not be a threat to the consumer economy *per se* if one continues to purchase and use new products at the same rate. Indeed, the accumulation of items, even to great excess, is a common phenomenon in countries with consumer-oriented economies. This may raise practical concerns for those who most often have limited space to store these objects, but storage also produces its own industry. In cultural terms, of course, holding on to old items is certainly seen negatively. Those who maintain large collections of stuff are often derided; hoarding, representing the build-up of objects without corresponding sorting-out, is condemned, even pathologized as a "compulsive" behavior although it has yet to be registered as an official disorder (see Lepselter). If the "compulsive" buying is accompanied by compulsive purging, however, it fails to register on the radar of pathology.

We might therefore sharpen Bauman's observations by saying that maintaining an *appearance* of carefully-regulated "flow" is certainly important to claim a certain cultural status, whether or not this flow is actually happening.³ This is not to be explained in simple economic terms. Rather than being a substantive threat to the neoliberal economy, "hoarding" is a symbolic one in that it draws attention to the contradictions within the neoliberal economy itself, which, on the one hand, espouses values such as self-discipline, moderation, utility, etc. and, on

³ Likewise, Lepselter cites Arnold and Lang 2007, who note that while exterior spaces are often carefully maintained, interior spaces reveal disorder.

the other, encourages continuous and conspicuous consumption that is inconsistent with these values. What is at stake is also a competition between a material/functional economy of objects and an affective economy, wherein the former is usually privileged and the latter disparaged (Lepsetler). Keeping a few objects of sentimental value is permissible, but not too many. As Bauman argues, in liquid modernity “assets turn into liabilities” (*Liquid Life*, 1). Affective ties to objects are envisioned as dead weight preventing the individual from moving on. In the case of extreme hoarding, this limitation of mobility also becomes literal; the house becomes a warren of claustrophobic passageways, lined by amorphous masses of stuff that could seemingly fall and crush residents at any given time.

What Bauman perhaps overstates is the perceived evenness of flow in liquid modernity. In this respect, Julie Guthman’s theory of “cultural bulimia” is helpful in that it accounts for moments of blockage in the flow of products. Guthman argues that these interruptions and reversals in the flow are not failures of the system, but in fact inherent features of it; bulimia is a “way to read the neoliberal economy itself” (Guthman 209). Rather than an uninterrupted in/out flow of consumption and disposal, Guthman argues that the neoliberal economy is characterized by periods of both “bingeing” and “purging.” In this context, behaviors such as hoarding, and its cousins “extreme couponing” or stockpiling, are encouraged by the economy as a way of absorbing excess goods. Yet while hoarding is derided and pathologized, stockpiling is viewed as future-oriented planning and extreme couponing as admirable thriftiness, even when they exceed utility—when, for example, a family buys fifty tubes of toothpaste simply because they have coupons to buy them at a drastically reduced price. If the mass of stuff takes the form of a nicely ordered stockpile rather than a disorganized pile, the appearance of order and utility is maintained.

Guthman’s argument is particularly significant in that it is not simply metaphorical, but also made literal in its bodily dimension. Arguing that the body itself acts as a “spatial fix,” Guthman goes on to write “the material contradictions of neoliberal capitalism are not only resolved in the sphere of surplus distribution, but also in bodies, such that the double fix of eating and dieting produces a political economy of bulimia” (209). In this reading, the moral panic surrounding the so-called “obesity epidemic” is at the very core of neoliberalism rather

than an incidental feature, and the push for corrective weight loss is a symptom of this cycle rather than a cure. As Guthman notes, the weight loss products and procedures marketed to solve obesity simply constitute a different kind of consumption; instead of suggesting we all consume less, the neoliberal economy proposes “purchasable solutions” for the problems it has itself created (Guthman 213). Bauman agrees on this point, adding that the market produces anxiety within consumers about their bodies, one that is never to be actually satisfied, because these consumers would then no longer need the products advertised: “For the consumer society never runs short of consumers, however, that anxiety—in a jarring contravention of the market’s explicit and vociferous promises—needs to be constantly reinvigorated, regularly fanned and whipped up and otherwise stimulated” (*LL*, 106). If weight loss products were actually successful, then they would kill their own demand..

These economic conditions, combined with cultural prescriptions, produce a culture in which “on one hand consuming is encouraged and on the other deservingness is performed by being thin no matter how that is accomplished.” (Guthman 209). Hillel Schwartz concurs, writing that “thin people are capitalism’s ideal consumers, for they can devour without seeming gluttonous; they have morality on their side” (Schwartz 329). Once again it is not just about less consumption, but about a different kind of consumption. “Organized” and intentional weight gain, as in body-building, acts as a corollary to stockpiling and is more positively perceived than the ostensibly “disorganized” and passive change of becoming fat, likened to bodily hoarding. Within the “moral panic” surrounding fatness, as identified by Paul Campos, it is the *appearance* of regulated consumption that grants individuals a certain moral status. In view of Guthman’s argument and the rise of makeover culture, however, I would contend that the ideal consumer citizen is not someone who is “naturally” thin but rather the bulimic or yo-yo dieter, someone who can consume excessively on one hand and then perform heroic weight loss over and over.

In *Liquid Life*, Bauman also identifies fat as a core issue within liquid modern culture: “More than almost any other phenomenon, fat encapsulates, condenses and blends the fears emanating from the poorly mapped ‘frontier-land’ stretching between the body of the consumer and the outside world, crowded with incapacitating dangers while simultaneously filled to the brim with irresistible temptations.” (*LL*, 111). According to Bauman, fat is all the more

disconcerting because it is akin to an enemy within, a “foreign occupation” or “terrorist cell” that has set up camp within the body and refuses to leave. Bauman’s metaphor echoes the way that fat is often discussed within popular culture as something that is at once part of the body and something external to the “true” self of the person to whom it belongs. Significantly, like hoarding, fat is seen as both a literal threat to mobility (“incapacitating”) and a symbolic residue of the inability, or unwillingness, to change. Weight loss promises a liberation from this excess flesh, a way to let out the thin person who is besieged and held hostage in his or her own body, and to enable their participation in liquid modern culture, which prizes mobility and change as absolute values in themselves.

Unfortunately, critics of consumerism often fall into the trap of blaming fat people themselves for the problems of the system, viewing them as overconsumers incapable of controlling their desires. Kathleen LeBesco cites a 1979 book called *The Overeaters* by Jonathan Wise and Susan Kierr Wise, but a more contemporary example would be *Blubberland*, a book in which Elizabeth Farrelly makes fat into a metaphor for everything wrong in her dystopian panorama:

But blubber is also the very opposite of light: the track-suited, mind-numbed couch potato, the quadruple-garaged McMansion, the idealised fantasy life of the virtual-reality addict, home alone with a flickering screen in a darkened room. It is the bear-pit of reality TV, the pseudo-feminist ‘me-ring’ that you buy yourself, the neurotic shopaholics aspiring to ever bigger and more perfect apartments just to house all the stuff. Blubber is the world of vast, glittering malls and dreary look-at-me suburbs interspersed with limitless acreage of concrete, asphalt and billboards. It is cashed-up pension funds forcing their market-driven conservatism across the corporate world, terrified women with silicone breasts and plastic relationships locked into the fearful luxury of gated communities, and critic Michael Bywater’s dead-hearted towns with ‘their grilles and burger joints, their litter and their obese, sportswear-clad, snarling crop-haired families locked in greed and hatred, their slashed prices, their ugliness, their interest-free deals...’.

All this, less a state of body than of mind, is Blubberland. (Farrelly 10)

The objects of cultural critique in this diatribe are familiar—reality TV and cosmetic surgery are dismissed as superficial and “plastic,” while “burger joints” and the “obese” people who frequent them are linked metonymically to greed on the personal and corporate level. In making blubber the substance representative of all this superficiality and excess, Farrelly makes fat people the embodiment of everything wrong with modernity, rather than critiquing a political/economic situation in which everyone, fat and thin, finds themselves. Guthman, like many scholars within fat studies in general, offers an antidote to this way of thinking by addressing fatness and the associated moral panic as a systemic issue rather than the failure of certain individuals to regulate their consumption within that system.

Temporality and Makeover Culture in Liquid Modernity

In addition to providing a pertinent discussion of liquid modernity in regard to the neoliberal economy, Bauman’s observations are also important in their temporal consequences.

Unlike the preceding era of ‘solid’ modernity that lived towards ‘eternity’ (shorthand for a state of perpetual, monotonous and irrevocable sameness)—liquid modernity sets itself no objective and draws no finishing line; more precisely, it assigns the quality of permanence solely to the state of transience. Time *flows*—it no longer ‘marches on’. There is change, always change, ever new change, but no destination, no finishing point, and no anticipation of a mission accomplished. Each lived-through moment is pregnant with a new beginning *and* the end: once sworn antagonists, now Siamese twins.

(*LL*, 77)

Here Bauman emphasizes the open-endedness of change within liquid modernity, suggesting that change has become a value in itself, rather than a means to an end. Whereas “solid” modernity reached teleologically to a particular goal, even if it could not fully achieve it, liquid modernity does not even look to a goal to shape its transformations. Paradoxically, the transience of identity becomes permanent; the only thing that doesn’t change is that everything changes.

Meredith Jones, in her work *Skintight: An Anatomy of Cosmetic Surgery*, without referring directly to Bauman, makes similar observations about the drastic open-endedness of what she calls “makeover culture.” Noting the increasing popularity of both cosmetic surgery and the makeover format in television, Jones theorizes makeover culture as a state “where *becoming* is more desirable than *being*” (Jones 12). Contemporary popular culture, she argues, privileges a constant process of change over a concrete ending point; “what is most desirable now is a ceaseless, stretched, *period of becoming*, rather than a finale that displays a new body. Transformation becomes a temporal and spatial mode of being rather than a static end result” (Jones 55). Whereas the previous way of structuring makeover hinged on the contrast between “before” and “after,” current makeovers stress the “during.”

For both Bauman and Jones, then, current culture is characterized by open-endedness, an eternal period of becoming, and this process plays out in all fields of identity. The body plays a central role therein. For Bauman, the endless transformation of the body is linked to the quest for “fitness,” which “knows no upper limit; it is, in fact, defined by the absence of limit; more to the point, by its inadmissibility. However fit your body is—you could make it fitter” (LL 108). Fitness is immensely valued, but subjective and ultimately unattainable. For Jones, the continued aperture of transformation is embodied in the endless permutations of cosmetic surgery; no matter what procedures are performed, the body is always open for more work: “Good citizens in makeover culture are in a permanent state of becoming something better” (Jones 57). It is about displaying a “never-ending renovation of the self” (Jones 12).

The emphasis on “work” here is not coincidental. Jones argues that “[h]ard work is the key point: makeover culture is about industriousness and the display of labour” (Jones 12). In contrast to earlier forms of makeover, in which the actions taken between “before” and “after” were elided and makeover was presented as painless, or “magical” transformation, current makeover culture shows the labour involved in getting from one point to the other. Bauman, however, underemphasizes this point, instead suggesting that consumer culture is aimed at reducing the labor required to effect such change:

The good news is that this replacement of worries about eternity with an identity-recycling bustle comes complete with patented and ready-to-use DIY tools that

promise to make the job fast and effective while needing no special skills and calling for little if any difficult and awkward labour. Self-sacrifice and self-immolation, unbearably long and unrelenting self-drilling and self-taming, waiting for gratification that feels interminable and practising virtues that seem to exceed endurance—all those exorbitant costs of past therapies—are no longer required. (*LL*, 12)

Bauman's slightly ironic tone notwithstanding, his critique rests on the assumption that consumer culture offers "easy" solutions, and these solutions are preferred by consumers. This point, a common one made by critics of consumerism, is undermined by the social hierarchy of methods and therapies. Weight loss done "the right way," for example, is assumed to be through long-term diet and exercise modification, whereas weight loss surgery or other treatments are generally regarded as less admirable because they are believed to require less willpower. Moreover, there is evidence that maintenance of weight loss often requires the constant self-monitoring and drilling that Bauman deems already passé (see Gaesser). While I would not suggest that Bauman is himself buying into the claims of products that promise "easy" solutions, he would do well to note that self-improvement is granted social value precisely because it is seen as "hard work"; if anything, the difficulty of weight loss grants it more prestige.

What Bauman's view of temporality in liquid modernity also neglects is the persistence of duration in change. Instead, he argues that time has become a series of moments that contain both beginning and end, and apparently have relation to each other. If we return to the passage from *Culture in a Liquid Modern World* cited earlier, in which Bauman argues that you must "change your identity (or at least its public manifestation) as often, as fast and as efficiently as you change your shirt or your socks," his view sounds here like the frequent misreading of Judith Butler's concept of performativity (*CLMW*, 25). But performativity, as Butler clarifies in *Bodies That Matter*, is not about deciding from one moment to the next to adopt a completely different gender identity and declare as much; rather it relies on the repetition and iteration of bodily behavior, the learning of a certain comportment, etc. While outward manifestations of identity, such as one's shirt or socks, can be changed quickly, the transformation of the underlying body is generally a much longer process. Change takes time. Even in cases of cosmetic surgery, subjects

must learn how to live in and with a new body. Moreover, change must be done carefully if one wants to preserve a certain continuity between past, present, and future. Narratives of makeover, even as they emphasize the contrast between “before” and “after,” also produce continuity between these temporal poles, serving as a document of the change.

Moreover, in narrative terms, the makeover is more interesting and profitable if it can be stretched out. In this respect, more traditional methods of weight loss may be even more suited to the new depictions of makeover because they extend the period of transformation. Popular weight loss competition *The Biggest Loser*, for example, relies on weight loss to last an entire season. The stress on exercise in this program, rather than other methods like bariatric surgery, not only makes its protagonists into valiant subjects who “work” their fat off, but also delays the “after” moment of the makeover, allowing the viewer to revel even longer in this period of becoming.

The Teleology of Weight Loss, or What Jones and Bauman Miss

Despite the apparent salience of both Bauman and Jones, there is reason to be skeptical of their emphasis on radical aperture. If we take them at their word, current culture privileges a radical openness of identity; the one rule is that it be constantly in flux, open to new changes. However, as Brenda R. Weber notes in her review of Jones’ book, this view sometimes neglects to acknowledge and discuss in full detail the “one-way teleology invested in bodies as social texts” (Weber 292). The whole vocabulary of makeover, including such words as “betterment” or “self-improvement,” is imbued with particular social meaning and this vocabulary is embedded in discourses of race, class, and gender. It is not just any transformation which qualifies as part of makeover culture; it “is not change for the sake of change alone, then, but alteration always toward a vague but never fully reachable ‘better place’ obtained through the beautiful body that might more broadly be understood as makeover culture,” (Weber 292). To illustrate her point, Weber also resorts to an example relating to weight, saying that “gaining weight is also a form of embodied becoming, and so would fit Jones’s definition of makeover culture, yet weight gain would not be applauded on television, nor, I’d venture, would Jones consider it an example

testifying to the ubiquity of makeover culture” (Weber 292). In consideration of Weber’s point, I would add that the distinction between the “right” type of transformation and the “wrong” one is less about the absolute movement on the scale and more often linked to ideas of “active” versus “passive” change. This perceived difference ensures that weight loss is championed as conscious “work,” while getting fat is dismissed as “letting yourself go.” Yet even weight gain may, in fact, be applauded if it is part of an intentional project of bulking up for the sake of body-building, as discussed above.

Weber’s critique is leveled at Jones, but it applies to Bauman as well. The fact remains that makeover, and change more generally, must be placed in a temporal context to be understood. There is no such thing as change “in the moment”; it only defines itself in contrast to a previous moment. In other words, change requires a narrative. Likewise, narratives require change. Drawing on Yuri Lotman’s definition of narrative, Russell West-Pavlov writes that “[a]n event happens and becomes worth recounting when change is produced, and the tale of that change is itself a form of symbolic change” (85). The makeover, as a particular manifestation of change, requires a narrative with a certain trajectory of betterment- there must be a before, during, and after, and the after must be better than the before. Even if the after is not necessarily “better,” we must act as if it is. Each moment contains the “threefold present,” as Paul Ricoeur calls it in *Time and Narrative*— that is, not only the present, but also the past (through memory) and the future (through expectation). But it is precisely this threefoldness which Bauman argues is absent in liquid modernity. By arguing that there is “no destination, no finishing point, and no anticipation of a mission accomplished,” it would appear that he is cutting off the connection to the future. Moreover, he argues that time in liquid modernity cannot be measured in the same way (“time no longer ‘marches on’”). If in the past we once strode through time looking to the future, liquid modernity now sweeps us off our feet and carries us along in its unmeasurable “flow.” Instead of a threefold present, Bauman argues for a duality in the moment: “Each lived-through moment is pregnant with a new beginning *and* the end: once sworn antagonists, now Siamese twins” (*LL*, 77).

This understanding of time as a constant present with no goal, however, does not hold up when we talk about fatness and weight loss, issues that Bauman himself refers to. While Bauman

correctly notes that fatness is a particularly contested issue within current culture, radically enacting as it does the complex negotiations of the body's boundaries, he fails to note that the cure for this perceived violation and "invasion," the expulsion of the "terrorist" fat cells, proceeds with a teleological end. Weight loss makeovers are significantly different from the amorphous quest for fitness, and indeed from all other makeovers, in that they are fundamentally *quantitative* in nature, rather than *qualitative*, and therefore one-dimensional. This is not to say that this is the only necessary solution to fatness as a problem; the voyage from "fat" to "fit" could be charted by very different measures. Indeed, fat studies scholars would argue for a more nuanced appreciation of health and weight, and suggest that weight itself tells us little about health. The professionals who advocate for the alternative medical paradigm Health at Every Size⁴ would suggest entirely giving up weight loss as a goal in itself, instead focusing on developing health habits that are pleasurable and beneficial independent of weight change. However, the world still largely depends on the categorization of body weight according to one dimension, Body Mass Index, which merely correlates weight and height. This diagnostic tool is not only used to describe a "normal" body, but also assumes on a normative view of the body to begin with.⁵ In turn, it produces the "normal" body by categorizing people in four major groups (underweight, normal/healthy weight, overweight, obese).⁶ Given that height does not change drastically after adulthood, though, changing one's BMI requires a net change in weight. As a result, weight loss makeovers are presented as a simple downward journey from one number on a scale to another. At the same time, there is a bodily limit beyond which weight loss is either undesirable or impossible. Most weight loss makeovers, on television or not, highlight this telos

⁴ For more information on Health at Every Size, see Burgard.

⁵ Body Mass Index is defined as mass divided by the square of height, and is usually expressed in kg/m². BMI does not take into account one's muscle or fat, and often produces skewed results for people who are quite tall or quite short, or very muscular. Moreover, BMI is practically useless in describing bodies that fall out of a certain mold, such as those of amputees or people born without limbs. Because it presumes a certain body, it fails to describe the range of bodies that exist.

⁶ These categories are often expanded to include different classes of obesity. It is also important to note that the boundary lines separating these categories are changeable. Marilyn Wann claims in her foreword to the *Fat Studies Reader* that she was told by an employee of health insurance company Blue Cross in 2003 that the weight limit for a person to be considered "morbidly obese" had been modified six times in one decade (Wann 14). Rather than change to accommodate more people in the "normal" range, in fact, these changes often work in the other direction, as in 1998 when the federal shifted their ranges down so that "millions of people became fat overnight" (Wann 14).

by operating with a “target weight,” a goal that is to be reached in order to determine success. Once reached, this telos may function as a new starting point—for fitness or other goals of personal development—but it remains a visible spot. In this way, weight loss as a process of self-improvement within the cultural trends that Jones and Bauman recognize is both unique and representative, revealing the teleological ends that all makeovers are invested in.

It is also importantly telling that weight loss is often viewed as a “journey.” Those who have successfully achieved their “goal weight” are said to have completed this journey to a better self. In a piece arguing against this very rhetoric entitled “Let’s Stop Calling Weight Loss a Journey,” author Kate Harding details her own history of weight loss and gain, reflecting on how it relates to larger narrative patterns associated with weight loss. As both emblematic of many weight loss narratives and critical of these narrative patterns, Harding’s piece is quite illustrative. Harding writes that “the first time I lost a large amount of weight, I secretly thought I’d completed a very specific type of journey — the ‘Hero’s Journey’ that appears in stories across many different cultures. After a long road of trials, I’d returned from the underworld of dieting with a new understanding of how to eat, exercise, and how to *be*.” (Harding, *Refinery29*). Harding’s reference to the basic narrative pattern of the adventure story is telling in that it entails the key elements of venturing out into the world and returning transformed. This pattern recalls both the structure of rites of passage (Turner’s threefold separation-transition-reincorporation) as well as Yuri Lotman’s concept of narrative event as the crossing of a boundary, often a spatial one. Makeover shows often conform to this pattern by taking their protagonists out of their everyday lives and putting them into a special “makeover” space (e.g. “the ranch” for *The Biggest Loser*) to do the work of makeover, and then re-integrating them at the end. Harding, when she reached her “goal weight,” felt she had made the same move: “Finally, I hit my goal weight: 65 pounds lost. Fat Kate had been eradicated — only Thin Kate was left behind. I was no longer a person losing weight, but a person who had *done it*.” This final emphasis highlights the apparent finality of the transformation; in moving from present continuous tense to past perfect, Harding shows she considered her weight loss to be finished. This change is also conceived as a symbolic death and rebirth, as Harding’s dissociation between “Fat Kate” and “Thin Kate” indicates. In a similar line from her comedy sketch, “Exercise Instructor,” Amy Schumer

admonishes her students, “This is not an exercise class. This is a funeral for the fat you.” The transformation from fat to thin appears to be so total that it produces an entirely new subjectivity.

However, as Harding goes on to argue, the perception of a finished process was misleading. Not only did the weight loss produce ambiguous effects (like excess skin) and fail to completely improve her self-esteem, it also proved to be unsustainable. As soon as she stopped obsessing about diet and exercise, she started gaining weight again. This part of the story is familiar, common to any number of weight loss stories. But Harding makes two interesting and important points. First of all, she notes that the shower of praise that one receives during the process of weight loss soon dries up after the “goal weight” is achieved. While one receives the benefits of thin privilege, *being* thin (or “ex-fat” as she says) rather than *becoming* thin means that the “steady flow of sunshine up your ass has ceased.” This has implications for makeover culture in the sense that it confirms Jones’ argument that the process is often valued over the endpoint; *doing* it is more important than *having done* it. Harding even considers the benefits of losing and gaining weight repeatedly; “I secretly thought that even if I yo-yoed for the rest of my life, at least I’d get to enjoy all the thin years between the fat ones.” Harding’s second point, however, is even more important, and this is her turn to body acceptance and Health at Every Size. This move allowed her to abandon the telos of weight loss; as she argues, “the ‘ultimate boon’ wasn’t reaching my goal weight, but gradually and deliberately losing any interest in the very concept of a ‘goal weight.’” When Harding made this move, she writes, she “embarked on an entirely different ‘Hero’s Journey.’” Importantly, Harding retains the “journey” paradigm but changes the terms; no longer is the journey about weight loss, but instead a transformation of perception. As we will see in the following section, this is precisely what fat studies as a transformative project prescribes.

Fat Studies and the Transformation of Discourse

As I have argued, weight loss is both emblematic of makeover culture and unique in some ways. In its clear teleological ends, weight loss belies the apparent openness of subjectivity and erasure of hierarchy in liquid modernity. Weight gain and loss are both processes of “becoming,”

but only one is culturally valued. Fatness is still stigmatized, and this stigma is only made stronger by ideas of weight loss that reduce it to one simple dimension—Body Mass Index—or suggest that, according to a simple thermodynamic model, weight loss is possible for all as long as we use enough willpower to expend more calories than we consume. Against this background, it is understandable that much of fat activism and fat studies is aimed at challenging these dominant ideas of weight loss, especially as they are propagated in medical science and popular culture. Instead of modifying bodies to escape stigma, fat activists and scholars argue, we should focus on transforming discourse.

Kathleen LeBesco, for example, is characteristic when she writes that she aims to replace the “spoiled identity” of fatness with a “more inhabitable subject position” (*Revolting Bodies?* 3). To do so, she argues that we must “alter the discourse of fat identity within a research context by moving inquiries about fat from medical and scientific discourses to social and cultural ones” and thereby “replace self-help literature with a different way of looking at, and living in, fat bodies” (2). Instead of using the hard sciences to learn *how* to lose weight, she suggests, we should ask *why* weight loss is necessary or valuable in cultural terms to begin with. Once this is done, we can begin to change how fat bodies are perceived and alleviate at least some of the social pressure on fat subjects to lose weight. In this sense, fat studies, as part of fat activism, is no less a transformative project than makeover culture or liquid modernity, but it is one that primarily aims to call into question people’s perceptions of bodies rather than the bodies themselves.

On a basic level, the changing of discourse about fat bodies can be effected by reversing the paradigms that have defined fat as a negative feature. LeBesco, for example, performs a rhetorical reversal in her title *Revolting Bodies? The Struggle to Redefine Fat Identity*, giving room to a new meaning of “revolting”:

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 cultural

practice that calls into question received notions about health, beauty, and nature.
(LeBesco 1-2)

LeBesco stresses “political” here, but “situation” is an equally important word because it implies a dynamic context of social interaction rather than an essentialized “state” or “condition.” Cecilia Hartley, in her article, “Letting Ourselves Go: Making Room for the Fat Body in Feminist Scholarship,” makes a similar move by granting a revolutionary potential to “letting oneself go”; rather than a simply passive act of relinquishing control, she suggests that it can be a matter of agency for fat people (particularly women) to “let go” of societal standards regarding weight and beauty.

The most obvious rhetorical reclaiming in fat studies is, of course, the use of the word “fat” itself. Marilyn Wann, in her foreword to the *Fat Studies Reader*, argues that “fat” should provide a double function, “both as the preferred neutral adjective (i.e., short/tall, young/old, fat/thin) and also as a preferred term of political identity” (12). In its descriptive sense, “fat” is opposed to “thin,” but supposedly neutral; even this “neutral” use of the term “fat” is potentially subversive, however, in that it acknowledges difference but refuses to attach negative ascriptions to it. In this way, the “neutral” use of “fat” paradoxically becomes imbued with political significance, creating a productive tension between the two functions of the term. Importantly, the choice to reclaim “fat” entails a rejection of the medicalized “O” words, “overweight” and “obese.” As Wann notes, “overweight” is inherently normative, begging the question “over what weight?” (12). Likewise, she argues that “obese” is linked to the medicalization of fatness and “naturally occurring difference” (13). Rather than help fat people, she contends, “medicalization of weight fuels anti-fat prejudice and discrimination in all areas of society” (13). In opposition to the “O” words, then, “fat” operates as a less medicalized and more flexible term.

The goal of all these reversals is not only to challenge dominant paradigms, but also to construct a fat subjectivity, one that is often denied in discussions of “obesity.” Charlotte Cooper, for example, calls out news media reports for using images of “headless fatties”—fat people who have been photographed on the street without their knowledge, and whose heads have been cropped out of the frame. Cooper argues that these decapitated images speak to a culture that denies a voice to fat people themselves, even in discussions of fatness:

As Headless Fatties, the body becomes symbolic: we are there but we have no voice, not even a mouth in a head, no brain, no thoughts or opinions. Instead we are reduced and dehumanised as symbols of cultural fear: the body, the belly, the arse, food. There's a symbolism, too, in the way that the people in these photographs have been beheaded. It's as though we have been punished for existing, our right to speak has been removed by a prurient gaze, our headless images accompany articles that assume a world without people like us would be a better world altogether.

As a journalist, activist, and fat woman herself, Cooper speaks back to this dehumanization by using her own voice, putting the subjectivity back into the fat body.

There are those scholars, however, who argue that the focus on discourse within fat studies limits its potential by neglecting the materiality of fat. This move, they contend, risks disavowing the body's power and rendering it secondary/invisible/unspeaking yet again. Christopher E. Forth, in his book co-edited by Alison Leitch entitled *Fat: Culture and Materiality*, is a particularly important voice in this regard. Forth notes that in fat studies “scholars are more concerned with how representations and experiences of fat are determined by culture and are therefore arbitrary in relation to the substance itself” (15). As a result, “the materiality of fat is acknowledged only to be overshadowed by the near determinism of representation” (16). While acknowledging that discursive analysis and social constructivism make useful contributions to the understanding of fat, Forth argues that there is a danger in this approach in that it shows “a troubling disregard for the role of materiality in the construction of the person, thus reinforcing ideas about decorporealized subjectivity that resonate widely in modern Western culture” (16). In this way, fat studies runs the risk of falling into the trap of Cartesianism that puts “mind over matter.” It is as if fat studies scholars, in response to all the “headless fatties,” have reacted by taking the opposite stance, cropping the body out of the picture rather than the head. This move may be read as a way of trying “to live from the neck up,” as Hartley puts it, and it may be understandable as a way of combatting biological determinism. But, as Elizabeth Grosz warns, the mind/body divide cannot be overcome by reducing either the body to terms of mind

(“everything is discourse”) or vice versa (“everything is material”). In this respect, Forth’s attempt to reunite fat subjectivity with its materiality is important, as is Murray’s critique:

[...] in locating the ‘mind’ as the site of political change, and imagining identity as residing in consciousness, fat politics effects a ‘re-splitting’ of the mind and body. Given that ‘fat’ women have learned over a lifetime of humiliation to dissociate themselves from their bodies, to disavow their ‘fat’ flesh, the empowerment that fat pride offers them, then, comes ironically in a similarly limiting form. (Murray 6)

To be fair, however, some fat studies scholars themselves appear to be aware of the need to address the materiality of the body as well, even if they do not go so far as to address fat as a substance outside of bodies as well as within, as do the spectrum of essays in Forth and Leitch. LeBesco, for example, argues that the fat revolution requires not only thinking and speaking about fatness in new terms but also experiencing the body in new ways. Like many other fat scholars who call into question the dominant ideas of fatness in medical science, she cites the difficulty of weight loss and argues that stigma is a more effective target of intervention than weight itself. At the same time, in her last chapter, she criticizes the “will to innocence” within fat activism, the tendency to argue for social justice using rhetorical strategies that downplay the individual’s power to negotiate his or her own corpulence. Whether attributing fatness solely to genetic propensity or environmental factors, suggesting one’s fatness is not one’s own fault is “to disavow one’s own corporeal agency, a dangerous strategy for those who seek their long-awaited day in the sun of subjectivity” (*RB?* 116). Anna Kirkland, in a similar move, criticizes fat acceptance for its reluctance to discuss disability in her essay “Imagine the Hippopotamus: Rights Consciousness in the Fat Acceptance Movement.” Kirkland notes that, in their reaction to the negative messages of medical authority, fat activists are compelled to assert their own bodies as healthy and valuable, and this “defensive posture forecloses much engagement with disability, which, depending on how it is understood, could be the most interesting possibility for alliance” (418).

The reluctance to discuss the materiality of the body itself is mirrored by a difficulty in approaching the topic of weight loss within fat studies. In its stress on the health of fatness and

immutability of weight, much of fat activism fails to account for the fundamental permeability and dynamism of the body. Instead, the fat body appears to overwhelm the individual will—it is “matter over mind.” The reluctance to see weight as a mutable category may also be partially attributed to the fact, as Amy Erdman Farrell notes, most fat activists came to adopt their critical stances only after unsuccessfully trying to lose weight themselves over a period of years (Farrell 138). Citing their own bodies’ material resistance to change, they argue for the “natural” aspect of weight. Prominent fat activist Marilyn Wann is emblematic, emphasizing her own body as both fit and fat and seeing fatness as the expression of “human weight diversity” (9), something that simply happens to some bodies rather than others. Thus she takes issue with the various prescriptions for weight loss that “assume that human weight is mutable and negotiable, assumptions that are informed by current social bias and stigma against fatness and fat people” (9). By contrast, Wann argues, that “[m]ost people occupy a middle range of weights (and heights), whereas some people naturally weigh less and some people naturally weigh more (just as some people are naturally tall or short)” (9). Taking recourse to “natural” weight, though, paradoxically belies the very complex cultural processes that act on and through the body. Instead, Wann and others suggest, the actual fat body is produced by nature, while the negative attitudes toward it are produced by culture. In this formulation of nature and culture, fat activists maintain the spurious distinction between the two.

A fundamental issue here is the common understanding of the body and identity in terms of inside vs. outside and nature vs. nurture. Evelyn Fox Keller traces this distinction to a historical shift in the understanding of nature and nurture from a temporal axis (before/after birth) to a spatial one (inside/outside the body). In conceiving of the “natural” body as interior, acted upon by “exterior” social forces, the border between the two is reinforced. As Forth notes, paraphrasing Samantha Murray, this conceptualization also suggests that fat, or the body itself, is “inessential to personhood”; this rhetoric “even surfaces among fat activists who—in their otherwise admirable campaign to promote size acceptance—end up drawing distinctions between the fat body and the person ‘within’” (16-17). LeBesco, citing Judith Butler, critiques this dichotomy in the concept of internalization, arguing that it is “a paradigm that further propels abjection” by maintaining the “distinction between inner and outer” (RB? 3). Here LeBesco

acknowledges that the language that is commonly used by thin and fat alike reinforces a strict exterior/interior divide and dissociates the person from his or her own body, making the fat flesh itself an abject “other.” Yet it is hard to escape; LeBesco’s own language of “living in” and “inhabiting” suggests the body as a vessel containing an internal subjectivity.

Alternative Paradigms

To make room for fat subjectivity beyond genetic determinism or biological essentialism, though, we have to conceive of the body itself as not just an external surface or internal materiality, but something that is both fully inhabited by the self and yet open in so many ways. The grotesque body, as described by Bakhtin, is one such conceptualization that allows us to conceive of the body as a dynamic space rather than a closed surface, and it need not be considered negatively. Orifices allow the travel of matter in and out, just as sensory perception also requires the body’s boundaries to be transgressed on the way to the mind. Bakhtin’s grotesque body can also be clearly linked to the body in makeover culture or liquid modernity as a body always “in the act of becoming.” Rather than a celebration of this transgression, however, the makeover can be seen as a way of overcoming the distinction between inside and outside by modifying the “natural” body according to cultural standards. The previous disconnect between inside and outside (“how I truly am inside” vs. “how the world perceives me”) is erased, unifying space. At the same time, time is once again divided into “before” and “after.” Reversing the configuration noted by Keller, this move displaces the spatial axis back onto the temporal axis. Ultimately, while the makeover transforms the body by crossing its boundaries, it reinforces the hierarchy of mind and body, “mind over matter,” and draws new boundaries of the “natural” and “cultural.”

Weight loss is easily figured as a grotesque and abject process, a shedding of material or turning of the body inside out. Rachel Colls notes that fat itself differs slightly from other abject materials such as feces or blood, though, in that it does not seep out of the body in the same visible manner (cited Forth 18). Forth, for his part, mitigates this claim with the observation that fat is often believed to “transform” into sweat and thus leave the body (Forth 19). I would add

that in the quantified world of weight loss, nearly any substance leaving the body can be linked to fat and celebrated as matter contributing to a positive result on the scale; one need only think of the use of laxatives to aid weight loss or the common practice of urinating or defecating before a weigh-in to link fat with other abject materials. Moreover, the grueling workouts of extreme weight loss regimens encourage effusive crying, sweating, and even bleeding during workouts as signs of dedication to the process. It would seem that a process of hyperabjection is necessary to effect weight loss, but as Jones notes in regard to makeover culture, abjection is encouraged only if it is “proper,” that is, if it is done according to certain rules and contained in a particular space designated for it. After the makeover, the body appears to have ceased to be abject.

Another useful paradigm beyond the grotesque or abject is that offered by scholars like Anne Fausto-Sterling and Samantha Frost, who emphasize the “bioculturality” of the body. Frost, in her essay “Reconsidering the Turn to Biology in Feminist Theory” writes specifically about the search for causality in regard to social difference, particularly gender. Frost bemoans the fact that this search often devolves into a debate of nature vs. nurture. This discussion is characterized by a “skeptical problematic,” which makes the debate a zero-sum game, in which “to make a claim for one side is to compel the other to concede explanatory ground” (313). This game is ultimately unsatisfying because it does not change the false dichotomy of nature and nurture itself: “To shift the fulcrum of explanation one way or the other, to propose more of either nature or culture as the provenance of objects and identities, does nothing to refigure that background set of *meanings* according to which nature and culture are discrete alternatives.” (313). Moreover, she criticizes the assumption that this search will inevitably tell us how to structure our societies—that better knowledge of gender’s origins, for example, will produce better politics. Instead, Frost argues, we should be challenging the binary of nature and culture, embracing the fact that the body is, as Fausto-Sterling puts it, both “100% biological and 100% cultural.” Frost takes up Fausto-Sterling’s work as a figural resource for reimagining feminism, arguing that it “demands that we let go of the spatial figure in which the substances we call body and environment map topologically onto the distinction between inside and outside” (Frost 321). The alternative is “a

process-oriented figure in which the permeable body continually absorbs and responds to an environment as it engages and changes it” (*ibid.*).

These observations are quite pertinent to fat studies, which is also often caught up in the search for causation rather than the creation of new paradigms. In its quest to demonstrate how attitudes toward fatness are socially determined, fat studies often points to the biases within medicine and natural sciences, producing an antagonistic relationship to their explanatory models. At the same time, there is a tendency within fat studies to cite scientific studies that produce competing views of fatness—effectively, to fight “bad science” with “good science.”—as if knowing whether fatness is more determined by lifestyle or genetics, whether it is “healthy” or not, would tell us how fat people should be treated. LeBesco, in the same vein as Frost, argues for the dynamism and plurality of fat experience in fat activism:

Rather than presenting scientific counterfactuals to propel fat acceptance, activists might do well to embrace the contradictions of the lived experience of fatness. That involves recognizing that sometimes fat is healthy, and sometimes it’s not; that every person, fat and thin alike, has moments of self-control to parallel their times of abandon; and that diets do work sometimes, though the choices one makes in order to achieve considerable weight loss frequently reduce one’s quality of life. Pro-fat protesters can challenge received knowledge using these contradictions as a start but will ultimately prove more effective at redefining fat identity if they create new paradigms for thought instead.” (*RB?* 116)

In other words, singular models of what causes fat and how it should be viewed are ultimately useless if they maintain a hierarchy of bodies and keep power structures intact. As Elizabeth Grosz argues, “plural models must be used to define the norms and ideals not only of health and fitness but also of beauty and desire” (22). These models must take into account both biological and cultural formations of fatness, while allowing for the permeability of the body. Taking this permeability seriously allows us to see how “becoming” is both material and mental, natural and cultural. In the dynamic process of weight loss, there is always a productive tension between the change that the mind enforces on the body and, as Colls puts it, “what matter is capable of

doing” on its own (qtd Forth 17). Using a biocultural paradigm allows us to see this conflict in its dynamism.

Lessons from Feminism: Pleasure and Danger in Viewing Fat

It is not incidental that Frost and Fausto-Sterling come from the perspective of gender studies. Throughout its history, feminism has provided challenges to dominant ideas of the body, driving its reconceptualization. From this point of view, it is not surprising that the role of feminism and gender studies in fat studies is significant. Indeed, since the 1960s much of the critical work done on weight and thinness as an ideal has come from feminists. Notable texts in this regard include Susie Orbach’s *Fat is a Feminist Issue* (1978) and Susan Bordo’s *Unbearable Weight: Feminism, Western Culture, and the Body* (1993). Likewise, much of fat studies, explicitly or implicitly, favors discussions of the fat *female* body. It is generally assumed that weight is more of an issue for those who figure as female in society, and thus dieting and weight loss are also feminized. As Naomi Wolf famously observed in *The Beauty Myth*, the focus on women’s bodies has even increased just as women have made more progress in other arenas, such as workforce participation; the prescription of feminine thinness is, in her reading, just another way of policing the female body. Likewise, as Cecilia Hartley notes, “cultural expectations have progressively shifted away from what a woman is allowed to *do* onto what a woman is allowed to *look like*” (Hartley 62). Being thin is part of this, as women are supposed to literally take up less space than men. Women who are fat are excluded from “proper” femininity, seen either as completely desexed or, alternately, hypersexual and aggressive. At the same time, fatness feminizes men in its perceived link to bodily softness and weakness of will. By producing bodies that are quite similar in their silhouettes, fatness appears to blur the gender boundaries presumed to exist between “naturally” male and female bodies.

While some scholars, such as Sander Gilman in his book *Fat Boys*, have explicitly considered fat in relation to masculinity, much of fat studies continues to be done from a feminist perspective. This is true also for that research which has discussed fat in television. Yet the role of fat studies within feminism itself remains quite contested. As Farrell demonstrates, feminism

historically has had problems integrating fat positive discourse; both suffragists and their critics, for example, depicted each other as fat in a derogatory gesture. The difficulty of integrating fat issues into feminism persists, despite the increased pertinence of critiquing weight issues from a feminist perspective. As Boero argues, “a general cultural acceptance of the ‘fat=unhealthy’ equation, along with a larger societal fat phobia, in part explains why the ‘obesity epidemic’ is only now beginning to be critically deconstructed by mainstream feminism and social science” (“Fat Kids, Working Moms” 140).

Of course, viewing television from a feminist perspective brings its own risks. As Merri Lisa Johnson points out in her thoughtful introduction to *Third Wave Feminism and TV*, the dialectic of pleasure and danger has a long history in feminist media studies. In the immediate aftermath of Laura Mulvey’s seminal “Visual Pleasure in Narrative Cinema,” the problem of female visual pleasure was increasingly thematized as fellow critics and scholars attempted to grapple with locating the female viewer in relation to the camera’s gaze, which was seen as analogous to the “male gaze.” Pleasure itself was generally viewed with suspicion by feminist critics as a dangerous source of harmful ideology that precisely works by producing enjoyment. Those claiming to be enlightened, feminist viewers must thus police their own pleasure for its “correctness.” As Johnson points out, there would appear to be an inherent danger here for the feminist critic: “I am not only ‘caught looking,’ I am *caught liking.*” (8). Yet, as she astutely points out, both feminist and Marxist critics often reproduce the kinds of pleasure they criticize: “The pleasures of reading Eagleton and Mulvey are, it seems to me, at least as masochistic as the pleasures against which they warn us in aesthetic and cinematic products, in that both theorists require us to trash the delight that doubles as complicity.”(8). The resulting dilemma would appear to produce a choice between various types of masochistic pleasure—the pleasure of asceticism, turning away from television and media entirely, knowing that it is sexist; the pleasure of indulgence, consuming problematic media as a “guilty pleasure” despite its ideology; or, finally, the pleasure of deconstruction, paying attention to media as a “noble cause” with the explicit aim of deconstructing its ideology.

Johnson, as a third wave feminist, criticizes both the dialectic of pleasure and danger, as well as the tendency of feminist criticism to reproduce reductive readings that simply demonstrate the

“always-already-ness of patriarchal capitalist white supremacist media manipulation and commodification” (14). This mouthful is telling in its clustering of master terms and its inherent implication of media’s top-down power a la Adorno and the Frankfurt School. Instead, Johnson argues that there is a need to go beyond the “wry pleasures of catching patriarchy at its old tricks once again” to produce more innovative and nuanced readings (16). As she says about the dating reality show *The Bachelor*, “to say the show is sexist is like saying the sky is blue. Yeah, it’s sexist. And?” (13). In response to this rhetorical “And?” I would suggest that there is a need to approach media with a “Yes, but...” reading. Turning away from media altogether is not an adequate stance, nor is hunting through each cultural product just looking for sexism very illuminating. The trick is to say “Yes, this show is reproducing this harmful ideology, BUT maybe it’s also doing something else, or we have the power to do something else with it.” This is precisely what “sex radical media critics” or “visual pleasure libertarians,” as Johnson calls them, do; they “import sex radical theories into television studies, valuing fantasy as a space of free play, advocating acceptance of our darker drives, and indulging in fascination with imagery that queers gender, decenters heterosexuality, and valorizes the erotic” (15-16).

The dilemma of pleasure and danger does not only inform feminist criticism, however; it can be extended to nearly any field of cultural media studies which attempts to uncover power relations at work. Those who work with ideas of the fat body and discourse, such as myself, grapple with the same issues. From a simple fat studies reading, it is not hard to find examples from the programs I discuss which reproduce harmful stereotypes about fat people, overemphasize the simplicity of weight loss or exploit fat bodies for commercial gain. It is also not difficult to produce a more paranoid quasi-Foucauldian reading of these programs that stresses the surveillance of the body and governmentality enacted through this kind of television; discussions of reality television, in particular, easily feed into interpretations that sees television strictly in terms of power relations. At the same time, it does not do, either as a scholar or a viewer myself, to entirely discount the pleasures that such television produces on the grounds that a certain of ideology of fat is being propagated. And just as Johnson argues that it is hardly innovative to catch patriarchy at its tricks “once again,” I argue that it is similarly unsatisfying to see television solely in its propagation of fat phobia. Likewise, I resist the frequent accusation of

simple voyeurism in structuring the viewer's relationship to fat bodies on television. Readings must account for the fact that these programs are popular not only because the "obesity epidemic" has become more politicized, but also because fat issues have entered public discourse in a larger sense; the recognition of fatness as a potential demographic or identity has prompted networks to cater more to such issues. Instead of simply looking at the ways fat is framed as a social crisis or individual problem, then, we should be alive to the ways narratives of weight loss *also* contradict their own logic, resist dominant ideologies, and prove to be "polymorphously perverse, offering sites of pleasure all over the textual body" (Johnson, 16). As Patrocinio Schweickart argues, cited by Johnson, there is a possibility of utilizing a "dual hermeneutic: a negative hermeneutic that discloses their complicity with patriarchal ideology, and a positive hermeneutic that recuperates the utopian moment—the authentic kernel—from which they draw a significant portion of their emotional power" (Schweickart 619, qtd. Johnson 16). Such an approach applied to fat also answers Christopher E. Forth's call to take the materiality of fat more seriously, particularly in the way that it may provide pleasure at the same time it is stigmatized:

Thus, even when fat is framed as deviant or abject in the wider culture, the properties and capacities of fat as a substance necessarily offer other possible ways of living the subjective experience of fat. Thus fat may be seen to roll or 'gather' on the corpulent body, to hang, flow, or even 'dance' in ways that may be experienced as pleasurable and comforting rather than shameful and degrading.

(17-18).

Likewise, there may be other views of viewing fat on TV that do not rely on a cruel voyeurism or desire to see fat people being punished.

Mediatization and Medicalization

It seems obvious that the discourse of fatness, as well as the contestation of this discourse through fat activism and fat studies, is produced and propagated by media. More importantly, though, I would argue that this discourse is linked to the mediatization of health. If we take the

basic thesis of mediatization, that is, that media increasingly pervade more and more spheres of everyday life, we can easily identify processes that could be grouped and designated under this heading. These processes are evident in a variety of examples, but they importantly go beyond a simple discussion of health topics in produced media (e.g. A TV talk show that makes “obesity” a topic) to include the interactive use of media to represent and monitor health by individuals (e.g. A person may use an application or device like a FitBit to track heart rate, etc. during a workout and then post the results to Facebook). Deborah Lupton has written extensively on the various ways that media and technology increasingly work together to produce “health.” On a more basic level, however, we should not forget that while media become increasingly “disembedded” (to use a term favored by Andreas Hepp), this does not necessarily produce an equal disembodiment. Or, as Hepp notes with the term “translocal,” the disembeddedness of the “trans”—the ability of media to cross space and time, to become “deterritorialized”—is still nevertheless tied to the “local” in the sense that human beings still have a physical location. Media use is necessarily tied to the body even as it seems to extend or transgress these boundaries.

The relationship between media and body, in turn, is produced by media discourse. It is a common cliché that excessive media consumption, in front of the television or computer, for example, discourages physical activity and thus negatively impacts health. The image of a fat kid at home alone in front of the TV is typical, as Boero notes in her discussion of mother blame in the “obesity epidemic.” In the debates about fatness and media, then, media use is critiqued for its material consequences—an excess of entertainment appears to produce an excess of bodily flesh. Indeed, when I tell people I am researching about fatness in television, they often assume I mean to investigate how watching television produces fatness in its viewers, rather than how discourses of fatness are produced in the texts themselves. This type of sociological research is well-known to a general public, although its findings are generally overstated or assumed to be commonsense. In this debate, critics of media stress the bodily deficits supposedly produced by media use, but often fail to consider how different ways of being in the body, and different skills,

may be developed in tandem.⁷ Cultural pessimism dictates that modern bodies are in an “unnatural” state of degeneracy, and the dependence on media itself is viewed as a cause.

Within the mediatization of health, we can also identify mediatization of fatness. This is most evident in the entrance of the so-called “obesity epidemic” into public discourse. There are a number of studies (like Abigail Saguy’s *What’s Wrong with Fat* or Natalie Boero’s *Killer Fat*) that attempt to show how changing attitudes toward fatness are not only reflected in media, but produced by these media themselves. Fatness as a variation of human difference has existed throughout time, but it is only in a more recent media context that it has been called “obesity” and constituted as a social, national, or even international problem. In the last twenty years especially, fatness has been increasingly presented as part of an “obesity epidemic.” This labeling reflects the tendency to label more and more social problems as “epidemics.” This trend makes obesity a “postmodern epidemic,” in the words of Natalie Boero, or an “epidemic of will,” in Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick’s terms.

As a consequence of this mediatization, we have all become versed in reading the fat body as a part of particular narratives. As Mark Graham writes, “in fat-obsessed cultures we are all ‘lipoliterates’ who ‘read’ fat for what we believe it tells us about a person. This includes not only their moral character but also their health” (178-179). Building on this idea, Samantha Murray notes the ways in which the fat body itself acts as a “virtual confessor,” implicitly speaking to its own transgressions and giving people viewing it the idea that they can diagnose from afar. Jerry Mosher stresses how this viewing seeks out the cause of fatness, arguing that popular narratives of fat “often reduce corporeal difference to the symptomatic and invite speculation on how fat people got that way.” (167). This reading is a teleological one but in a reverse direction, excavating the past to determine the provenance of bodily excess. In this respect, Mosher’s comment recalls a passage from Katherine Dunn’s novel *Geek Love*, in which the narrator, an albino dwarf, discusses people’s reactions to the sight of her body:

That was when I first recognized a need to explain myself. That was the time when I realized that the peculiar look on people’s faces when they saw me was

⁷ While certain types of fine motor skills associated with the physical process of writing by hand suffer and fall out of use as handwriting becomes less common, for example, other motor skills associated with typing, whether on computer or mobile phone, are developed.

not envy or hatred, but could be translated into one simple question: “What the hell happened to you?” They needed to know so they could prevent it from happening to them. (Dunn 319)

Dunn points out here how the search for causation implies a desire to prevent certain bodily features from appearing. As Kathleen LeBesco argues persuasively in her essay “Quest for a Cause: The Fat Gene, the Gay Gene, and the New Eugenics,” the search for genetic causes of both fatness and homosexuality are “implicated in a new consumer eugenics movement aimed at abolishing aberrations seemed [sic] socially or aesthetically undesirable” (65). The temptation to support such research may be understandable if one believes that a genetic cause will make fat more acceptable, but it brings the added danger of actually erasing the bodily difference that one tries to accommodate.

This reading of morality and health in the fat body is important, not only for those discussions of obesity in news media that Saguy and Boero analyze, or even the medicalized reality television makeover, but also for the fictional narratives that I include in this dissertation. In the numerous discussions I have had about fat narratives in classrooms or at conferences, it quickly becomes apparent that it is very difficult to discuss fatness independent of health. Regardless of other themes in the narratives, these discussions often devolve into an argument about the health of the protagonists; the mere existence of fat characters who are not attempting to lose weight is often used as grounds for viewers to accuse the narratives of “promoting” obesity, which is assumed to be unhealthy. In more vitriolic forms, this debate surfaces in online forums responding to increasing representations of fat people, whether in modeling or on TV. For many, fat on television is only acceptable if fat characters are evidently apologetic, trying their best to escape a “fat” identity. In a way, this points to both the ubiquity of makeover culture (you can be fat as long as your identity is in process, if you are “working on yourself”) and the somewhat exaggerated power that media is assumed to have, as if merely making a phenomenon visible in discourse encourages the recipients of this discourse to adopt a fat identity. It also makes it clear that new paradigms of the fat body are desperately needed, paradigms that do not merely combat the idea of fat as unhealthy, but also reflect critically on the mediatization of health and “healthism” itself.

Fictional Roles, Real Bodies

The reading of fat characters in film and television draws attention to the complicated relationship between character and actor produced by the body they share. On one hand, we are dealing with narratives and images, which we know to be constructed, and, on the other, with the presumably real bodies of actors and actresses. In this way, the media image of the body produces the “this-has-been” photo effect identified by Barthes in *Camera Lucida*. This effect may even be enhanced in television narratives given that television is unlikely to be subject to the extreme graphic manipulation we are now accustomed to in both the photographic image and in feature film. Likewise, television as a serial medium ensures that the body endures over months or even years. As Jerry Mosher contends, “television’s seriality allows for a slower development of physical nuance and encourages viewers to regard its characters as ‘real people,’ creating a verisimilitude that contributes to the fusion of actor and role.” (166).

In a sense, becoming a character always requires actors to submit to a certain type of makeover—hair, make-up, costumes, etc. In film, the degree of transformation is often linked to an increase in prestige; the more body work required for an actor or actress, the more he or she is praised. Yet television, in its long arcs, makes different physical demands of its actors, requiring a longer commitment. While the transformations of film may be temporary, the adoption of a television role is often an implicit long-term dedication to a certain character and embodiment over time. Rather than exclude fatness, this difference allows television to give more room to the fat body. As Mosher argues,

The film medium’s ability to spectacularize even the most mundane characteristics works against actors with excessive bodies, whose appearance on the big screen may overwhelm a scene; fat actors in film are thus usually relegated to playing clowns, grotesques, ‘heavies,’ and minor character roles. Television’s small screen, on the other hand, is friendlier to fat, making it appear more ordinary. (Mosher 166)

At the same time, Mosher notes that television narratives utilize “containment” strategies in their depiction of fat bodies. These strategies include various kinds of camera movement and shot framing that minimize fat, as well as a general taboo on showing naked fat flesh itself. The paradoxical demands of the fat actor mean that he or she must be invisible and visible at the same time: “The impulse to exploit fat’s visibility while hiding its raw appearance invests it with a pornographic signification that fat actors are forced to suppress, limiting their range of acceptable performativity” (171). As a result, Mosher argues, the fat actor must play both “elephant and magician,” being “a huge, docile animal” that “must make itself disappear” (171).

Kirsten Lentz, in her discussion of feminist television, makes a distinction between a “politics of the signifier” and a “politics of the referent” in television narratives. While Lentz applies these terms to “quality” television and “relevance” programming in the 1970s, this important distinction can be fruitfully applied to the case of fatness as well. While the “politics of the signifier” allows a self-referential play with images and reference to television as a medium, the “politics of the referent” relies on a discourse of authenticity and proximity to social reality. I would argue that rather than attributing these politics to different genres, we can also see how these different categories operate within each individual series. Each television program is necessarily intertextual, referring to generic conventions, narrative precedents and cultural stereotypes, and thus produces a politics of the signifier. In terms of fat, this realm would include the ostensible views of fatness produced by the narrative through its character arcs and how they reflect social ideas of fat and relate to previous depictions. Likewise, every narrative depicting the fat body must determine how to deal with its materiality—how to dress it, frame it, follow its movement through space, etc. This is the politics of the referent.

In the narratives of weight loss I discuss, there is often an evident disconnect between these two realms—in effect a difference between ostensible politics and the handling of the actual fat body. While many of the fictional television narratives to be discussed in this dissertation demonstrate a self-awareness when it comes to depicting the fat body, reflecting on the common tropes of fatness and weight loss, they often do so in a way that erases the fat body itself and reinforces the “pornographic signification” of fat flesh (171). As Mosher argues, “even when a show’s ostensible goal is to portray the struggle and dignity of fat experience, the lighting, sound,

camera placement, point of view, and other elements of mise-en-scene can unwittingly suture the viewer into a ‘sizist’ perspective” (171-172). In the case of *Mad Men*, for example, weight plots are produced by putting thin actresses in fat suits and using body doubles; while the plots reflect on the constricting images of femininity at work in the 1960s, they do not give room to the actual female body, instead obscuring it. In a reverse move, a sitcom like *Mike & Molly* purports in its plots to be invested in weight loss, rarely critiquing the means and ends of makeover culture or the social conditions of fatness, but the actors do not actually become thin. Instead, the “politics of the referent” accepts the fat body, giving the characters narrative space to stay fat, even as the camera indulges in the same containment strategies Mosher identifies. It is only when a series effectively fuses the politics of the signifier and the politics of the referent that a truly revolutionary fat politics emerges from television. The closest approximation of this fusion can be found, I argue, in series like *My Mad Fat Diary* and *Huge*, series which not only employ fat actors and actresses, but cleverly critique the popular images of fatness with power and humor.

The politics of fat bodies on television also spill into the extratextual realm to encompass how the fat bodies of actors and actresses are handled by producers, or represented and discussed in other media. Fat actors and actresses are often asked about their embodiment in interviews, ensuring that weight remains a topic even off-camera. Television may be friendlier to fat characters, especially men, but those roles also expose fat television actors to insulting comments or criticism for being a bad “role model.” On the other hand, writing from a fat activist or feminist point of view may praise fat actors and actresses for their representation of a bodily reality that differs from the mainstream. In the push to expand the possibilities for fat characters there may be a temptation on the part of these critics to argue solely for the “politics of the referent” on the basis of “authenticity”—showing the “real” experience of “real” people who have “real” (imperfect) bodies. Making this argument, however, for just the “politics of the referent” runs the risk of devaluing certain bodies as fake/plastic/etc. in favor of other more “authentic” ones, and does not guarantee better politics. After all, reality television displays “real” fat bodies, but exposes them to shame and erasure rather than granting them room to just be.

Between these two poles, even losing weight can be a risk for fat actors or actresses. Actors, as performers that often strive to maintain a certain “star” image, are unlikely to submit to a major change in bodily form that is more permanent; even lauded processes of weight loss require stars to do a fair amount of rebranding, as it threatens their recognizability. Jennifer Hudson and Jonah Hill are two examples of stars who were praised for losing weight but nonetheless found it difficult to find roles, having lost embodiments that made them distinctive in thin-obsessed Hollywood. In her discussion of celebrities and weight loss, Jennifer Mobley draws on theater theorist Carlson’s concept of “ghosting” to describe how performers are necessarily haunted by all the previous roles they have played, especially if these roles have garnered public attention. For actors who have lost weight, then, they are likely to be haunted by the “ghosts” of their earlier fat characters. Mobley argues that celebrities like Oprah or Kirstie Alley attempt to escape this phenomenon and market their weight loss transformations by making them intensely public, often tying them to weight loss product promotion in the process. Exorcising the “ghosting” images of their former fat selves, however, requires the performance of disgusting spectacles such as Oprah’s “red wagon” episode, in which she pulled a red wagon full of animal fat onto stage to represent the weight she had lost. For fat acceptance activists, such transformations and spectacles, particularly those performed by stars who previously embraced a proud fat identity, are akin to a sort of betrayal. Beth Bernstein and Matilda St. John, for example, dub these formerly fat icons as “Roseanne Benedict Arnolds.” These extratextual dynamics often shape the way viewers respond to fat characters, and thus are also important for understanding fat in television.

Weight and Television Narratology

Narratives of weight loss are necessarily shaped by the various discourses—of fatness, of personal transformation, etc.—in which they are embedded. But they are also produced by media and the generic conventions of these formats. While a number of fat issues have been addressed in relation to media, and television in particular, most of this analysis focuses on those media which are considered to be non-fictional i.e. news programs, documentary, etc. Likewise, much

of scholarship on makeover in television has focused on reality television, whereas makeover in fictional genres, such as sitcom, primetime serial, etc has generally been underexplored. One contribution this dissertation hopes to make is to consider how makeover culture influences narratives beyond the immediate realm of news and makeover shows. For makeover culture has concrete and significant implications for narratives, both fictional and nonfictional, particularly in their temporal arrangement. This is especially true in the medium of television, as previously argued, not only because makeover's ubiquity is most visible in this medium, but also because television itself is a serial medium which is at once “open-ended” (in the sense that a series usually begins without a definite number of episodes or ending in mind) and yet constantly concerned with endings on the level of episodes or seasons.

In comparisons to films or novels, television programs function within a much more rigid structure, one that divides them on multiple levels. These levels go beyond the more obvious dividing barriers between episodes and seasons to include, as Michael Z. Newman suggests, such units as “beats” (individual “scenes” within acts) and “arcs” (multi-episode storylines). If we consider the full spectrum of televisual storytelling units, from the smallest to the largest, it might look something like this:

shot	beat	segment/act	episode	season act	season	arc ⁸	series
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Television programs must manage their storytelling on all these levels simultaneously, often balancing multiple plots at once to keep both casual and regular viewers engaged. It is common, for example, for a police procedural to introduce and solve a different case each episode but also develop the relationships between the detectives over many episodes or even an entire series. Viewers who watch casually get an episodic type of satisfaction, whereas more loyal viewers gain an extra layer of experience seeing the characters interact and knowing what has gone on before.

⁸ The placement of “arc” here is not absolute. Narrative arcs may exist within individual episodes, over multiple episodes, or even over an entire season or series.

As Newman and other scholars have noted, there is a tendency toward greater serialization in television. More episodic formats like sitcoms and police procedurals have begun to incorporate more serial elements. In terms of Robert Thompson, these series have developed a “memory,” which he names as one of the markers of “quality TV.” Thompson goes on to write that “[t]he complexities of these shows that are so praised by critics, scholars, and serious viewers come from the slow layering of events, character traits, and other visual and dramatic details over the entire run of the series” (35). Brett Martin, in his book *Difficult Men: Behind the Scenes of a Creative Revolution*, makes a similar point about the shows that he considers “quality”: “More subtly, all employ an open-ended, ongoing mode of storytelling that distinguishes them from either of their closest precedents: the largely episodic ‘quality’ network dramas of the 1980s and early 1990s (*Hill Street Blues*, *thirtysomething*, *St. Elsewhere*, and so on) and the closed-ended high-production-value miniseries of the BBC.” (Martin 12). For both Thompson and Martin, then, the development of storytelling over the course of a season or series is crucial for quality. Martin adds an extra element, however, by suggesting that open-endedness of the narration is important.

Martin’s point fits nicely with the discussion of makeover culture and liquid modernity by stressing again the open-endedness of narration, which seems to be very much in tune with what Jones and Bauman assert about the absent goal of change in makeover/liquid modern culture. However, we might ask two pertinent questions: first, is this open-endedness limited to “quality” television? And second, is this apparent open-endedness without teleology? In regard to the second question, it would also be relevant to ask whether we find, in fact, a return to the ending, in the sense that many programs, especially those very shows considered “quality,” now attempt to plan for the ending of the series rather than drawing it out as long as possible before cancellation. It has even become a cliché of quality TV that the main character must die at the end, an ending that is not a surprise, really, because each is revealed to suffer from a terminal illness. In this way, paradigmatic examples like *The Sopranos* and *Breaking Bad* build the ending of the character’s life, and thus the series, into the work itself. The extreme example in another genre is *How I Met Your Mother*; the makers of the show knew exactly how it would end and even filmed the final scenes at the beginning of its run. If this trend continues, we might argue

that there is a return to teleology in television, at the same time that makeover and transformation are made more open and less dependent on fixed states of being. Such considerations must be taken into account when addressing weight loss narratives and their potential teleology or subversion thereof.

Addressing Media Texts

Andreas Hepp argues for seeing media texts and cultures of mediatization as “multilayered strata of diverse cultural thickenings” (73). In order to approach media texts, he argues, we have to take a “core,” that is, cut through the layers to reveal the different strata. In some sense this is what my work also attempts to do, to describe how media artifacts “thicken” around the topic of weight loss. However, this geological metaphor is somewhat flawed in that it seems to imply that the thickening is something that is pre-given and simply must be discovered, revealed and measured. Instead, I would argue for the acknowledgement that a study like mine can actually act itself as a “thickening” or produce this thickening by bundling texts together that appear quite heterogeneous. Or, in terms of Hepp’s metaphor, even if these texts exist already in some given relation to each other, how I “slice” the strata or decide from where I take my “core” is important; doing it in a different way might yield different results.

In this sense, Jason Mittell’s discussion of genre as a cultural category provides a fruitful counterpoint. While Hepp and Mittell apparently agree on contextualizing media in their respective historical and cultural environments, Mittell appears to be more aware of the role played by actors, such as media scholars, in constituting the categories with which they operate. As he writes,

Rather than emerging from texts as has traditionally been argued, genres work to categorize texts and link them into clusters of cultural assumptions through discourses of definition, interpretation, and evaluation. These discursive utterances may seem to reflect on an already established genre, but they are themselves constitutive of that genre; they are the practices that define genres, delimit their meanings, and posit their cultural value. (Mittell 17)

Mittell's term "discursive clusters" is quite similar to "cultural thickenings," but leaves a bit more room for human agency; while "thicken" can rarely be used as a transitive verb, "cluster" can be an action performed by the scholar him- or herself.

The texts that this study clusters together primarily come from three different and apparently distinct cultural/national contexts—the United States, United Kingdom, and Germany—and are divided and discussed in the following chapters according to genre. This selection and organization of texts raises a few methodological issues. First of all, there is the problem of comparison; while some genres are produced in all three countries, others are made only in two of these places. The sitcom, for example, is well-established in the UK and USA, but practically absent in German productions. How, then, can the work attempt to compare if there is no basis for comparison in some cases? In answer to this objection, I argue that my study is not, in fact, comparative in the most obvious sense, that is, I do not want to look at different examples from these cultural contexts with the goal of identifying similarities and differences, and then extrapolating them to the national level; I do not read these texts with the intention of saying "the Germans see fatness this way, whereas the English see it that way, etc." Hepp, in his final chapter, also critiques this type of method, which he sees as representing a "territorial essentialism":

Nonetheless, in the comparative study of media there remains a tendency to 'essentialize' this relationship between the state, (political) media systems, the media market and media culture in a binary comparative model. Then the comparative approach to media cultures becomes essentially the comparative definition of the nature of 'German', 'French' or 'English' media culture, for example. (125)

This kind of territorial essentialism fails to account for the translocal dissemination of media cultures and texts, which often circulate and function on a global level. While the majority of my chosen texts come from the United States, for example, they are television programs that are widely available in both the UK and Germany. Even shows that are made for a primarily national audience, as in Germany, partake of translocal genres and practices, such that they can be easily connected to similar programs in other countries and therefore a larger media context. *The*

Biggest Loser Germany is a prime example in that it adapts a global franchise originating in the United States and produces a local version for a national market.

Instead of choosing shows and compartmentalizing them according to national context so that they can be compared one-to-one-to-one, therefore, it makes more sense to see the large body of texts depicting weight loss as one pool of available material, from which examples may be chosen as needed. This is not to suggest that the “fuzziness” of the boundaries between national media contexts leads to a complete erasure of difference. Hepp makes this clear:

It is on the contrary precisely because of the translocal technical-based mediation of media cultures that we need to deal with today’s cultures of mediatization as multilayered strata of diverse cultural thickenings. If, however, these thickenings are placed in a comparative framework it becomes possible to distinguish and describe media cultures, despite their lack of clear boundaries. (Hepp 73)

This type of comparative approach is, however, simply one that acknowledges the connections between the different “thickenings” as much as their distinctions, and does not attempt to make comprehensive conclusions in an anthropological sense.

The second methodological issue, related to the first, is also one of fuzzy boundaries, but not those between countries and their media, but rather between genres. The grouping of texts according to genre presumes that generic categories can be plausibly delimited and defended. It is important to emphasize, though, that genre categories cannot be assumed to be pre-given. As evident in the quotation cited earlier, Mittell is particularly critical of this presumption, arguing that genre should always be seen as a cultural category rather than a textual component and stressing the intertextual nature of genre categories. Turning to Foucauldian discourse analysis, Mittell attempts to account for genres as both “active process and stable formation” (44):

Discourse theory offers a model for such stability in flux—genres work as discursive clusters, with certain definitions, interpretations, and evaluations coming together at any given time to suggest a coherent and clear genre. However, these clusters are contingent and transitory, shifting over time and taking on new definitions, meanings, and values within differing contexts. At any given time, a generic cluster functions as a stable cultural convenience, a

shorthand label for a set of linked assumptions and categorized texts, yet these discourses (and associated texts) are bound to shift meanings and definitions as a genre's history transpires. (Mittell 44-45)

On a practical level, Mittell suggests determining genre based on “operative coherence”; if a category fulfills various criteria, then it can be considered as a genre in a particular cultural or historical moment.⁹

Mittell’s point is well-taken that any work of media scholarship working with genres must be aware of how it assumes *a priori* the definition of certain genre categories and, at the same time, constitutes these genres in the process of discussing them. However, my project is not an attempt at genre analysis *per se*; for the purposes of this dissertation, categories such as “sitcom” or “animated comedy series” will be used without delving into an extended reflection on the construction of these categories. Of course, these genres should not be taken for granted and situated in their context, whether that be cultural or historical, but I will not be engaging in determining exactly where generic boundaries lie.

On another level, though, Mittell’s proposed methodology remains somewhat unsatisfying. In his attempt to define genre as primarily intertextual and fundamentally exterior to the text’s content, he falls into a somewhat circular argument that could be simplified as “a genre is a genre when people say it is”; this statement highlights the discursively constructed nature of genre categories and how they are produced by consensus, but it does little to explain how such a consensus may be generated at a certain historical or cultural moment and not at others. Moreover, Mittell’s hesitation to attribute “deeper meaning” to genres may be understandable to a certain extent, given that scholars might easily project their assumptions into the text, but runs the risk of failing to critique cultural power relations in media, which Mittell, like so many other media scholars, implicitly assumes to be the function of media studies. Genre is fundamentally intertextual, but it cannot be understood simply as a “hollow” or “empty” box that groups texts in

⁹ “Does a given category circulate within the cultural spheres of audiences, press accounts, and industrial discourses? Is there a general consensus over what the category refers to in a given moment? Do so-called ‘subgenres’ play a useful and widespread role in classifying, interpreting, or evaluating programs? If these questions can be answered positively (such as for ‘police drama’), then the category operates as a genre; if not (as for ‘police procedural’), then the category does not have enough cultural relevance to work as a genre, at least during that particular historical moment” (Mittell 37).

a completely arbitrary way. If one thinks of the connections between texts in a slightly different way, not as a box but rather a more open cluster of objects tethered together by various strings, it becomes apparent that the connection between texts always requires a point of contact, a docking point. It is still somewhat arbitrary and hardly permanent, but worth considering. Meditating on these points of connection links the “how” of formal analysis with the “why” of cultural contextualization.

Selection of Corpus

In view of the aforementioned methodological issues, it behooves me to briefly discuss the selection of the texts that I have made. First of all, rather than discuss any mention of weight loss in a television program, I have chosen TV narratives that explicitly reflect on their characters as fat. That is to say that while people at any point on the scale may choose to lose weight and even very thin people may describe themselves as “fat” in some cases, such as anorexia, I have chosen to focus on those that are identified as fat and treated as such *by the text itself*. The crucial difference is that while thinner actors and characters may desire to lose weight or have other bodily insecurities related to fat, the judgement of these issues by the narrative itself and by viewers is likely to be quite different. While an anorexic character may be presented as the victim of a tragic misperception of her own fatness, for fat characters and actors, it is assumed by society at large that they *should* lose weight, or at least desire it. Moreover, while there is a perceived distance between a thin character’s body issues and the actress herself, fat appears to collapse actor and character. For this reason, programs depicting fat characters must inevitably grapple with fat politics and its representation, reflecting on the overwhelming medicalized views of fat and health as well as the increasing pushback against these attitudes. These issues have become more visible in the wave of shows produced against the backdrop of the “obesity epidemic” in recent years, and for this reason I have selected those television narratives that have been produced in this century. This temporal boundary excludes earlier precedents, such as the well-known *Simpsons* episode “King Size Homer” in which Homer gets fat to capitalize on disability benefits, in favor of those that more clearly reflect contemporary trends.

The selection of texts, while international, also admittedly reflects an imbalance in favor of texts from the United States rather than other places. This aggregation toward the U.S. is not only the result of American dominance in global media production and distribution, but also partially the result of the current dominance of the U.S. within fat studies. British fat activist Charlotte Cooper, in her essay “Maybe It Should Be Called Fat American Studies,” discusses this trend, suggesting it is both “understandable” and “problematic” that fat studies is focused on the United States (347). Cooper argues for cross-cultural approaches, and her intervention here is a vital one for the future of fat studies; just as it is wrong to assume the “obesity problem” originates within the U.S., it is problematic to assume that fat operates the same everywhere, or to look for solutions only there. Certainly, other cultures often provide alternative views of fat that can be quite useful in challenging those ideas of fat that appear stable and universal in the U.S. national context; as has been pointed out to me, for example, Asian iconographies of fat include such positive figures as the “laughing Buddha” or sumo wrestler. Fat studies scholars in the United States like to look to other times and places for these alternative attitudes, but, as Cooper notes, often fail to adequately analyze with those alternatives: “Fat rights proponents are happy to trot out the cliché that ‘fat is ok in some cultures’ without engaging in the complexity of what that truism really might mean” (350).

In this dissertation, I hope to combat the insularity of American fat studies by making connections to other places in the world. At the same time, my research is limited by my own personal knowledge as well as institutional barriers. First of all, while narratives of weight loss are produced worldwide, I have chosen programs from countries like United States, United Kingdom, and Germany where I have both linguistic competence and knowledge of the cultural context. While a country like India, for example, offers a very interesting field of study in reference to weight issues, I do not yet have the linguistic nor cultural skills to adequately analyze programming in Hindi, Punjabi, or other Indian languages. Secondly, while a wealth of television narratives are broadcast around the world, they are often not readily available after this point, even in the countries of their production. Even a huge global franchise like *The Biggest Loser* is difficult to find; while the U.S. version of the *Biggest Loser* is available via iTunes and on DVD, for example, others are not. When possible, I ordered a DVD of the relevant program

directly from the broadcaster, as in the case of the German documentary *Jung und Dick! Eine Generation im Kampf gegen Kilos*. To get a glimpse of other programs, I have often relied on YouTube or other video sites, where clips are sometimes available but often incomplete, in poor quality, or lacking subtitles. When officially uploaded by the broadcasters themselves, these clips often cannot be viewed outside their country of origin due to copyright restrictions. While reality formats themselves travel from one country to many, producing indigenous versions, these different versions often are not officially allowed to travel to other countries.¹⁰ Instead, each version serves to produce an exclusively national vision while borrowing international concepts and formats. In the future, more archival research is necessary to draw out this body of material from other cultural contexts and give it due attention. Inevitably, such scholarship will have the potential both to productively critique both American ideas of fatness and to challenge the observations I have made here about narratives of weight loss. In the meantime, this dissertation operates within the realm of interdisciplinary and global American studies. Like an octopus, with its head in one place and its tentacles reaching out to other places for sensory information, the work situates itself in the United States, but makes connections to other contexts to complement and complicate its observations and assumptions.

Description of Chapters

To begin my discussion of weight loss in television, I will first turn to the most obvious candidates for such analysis, reality television programs. This first section will address the most ubiquitous genres depicting weight loss, especially the weight loss documentary and weight loss competition in the chosen three countries (US, UK, Germany), with additional examples from other countries. More specifically, the chapter will discuss the highly successful weight loss

¹⁰ There are exceptions to this rule, of course, at least as long as the host country does not have its own currently-running version of the franchise. In India, for example, I became a fan of MasterChef Australia, and TLC is currently advertising MasterChef Canada. The paths of these migrations are not always clearly-defined, but they are often likely to go only in certain directions—Australia to India, for example, but not the reverse, and likely not to other destinations such as the UK or USA.

competition show *The Biggest Loser* in its various incarnations, and also look at less well-known programs like *Dance Your Ass Off* (US), which combines a weight loss with aesthetic performance in a competition format, and selected documentaries like *Jung und Dick! Eine Generation im Kampf gegen Kilos* (Germany). In the analysis of these shows I will primarily discuss how the weight loss makeover relates to the makeover genre as a whole. The weight loss makeover sets itself apart, I argue, by its quantitative nature, producing its own particular teleology even as it confirms many of the raced, classed, and gendered teleologies identified in the makeover by other scholars. Beyond the fixed endpoint of the “target weight,” however, the weight loss makeover also folds itself into other processes of makeover. In assessing the possibilities of the weight loss makeover continuing after the “after,” I identify three trajectories — 1) The Saga Continues, 2) The Student Becomes the Master, and 3) Joining the Rebel Alliance. Each of these entails a different relationship to makeover culture—as a continued devotee, as a newly-minted “expert” who goes out and makes over others, and as a discontent who speaks or works against the makeover.

The next section will discuss comedic genres, including sketch comedy, the sitcom, and animated comedy series, exploring how comedy offers creative frameworks in which the teleologies of makeover can be satirized and possibly subverted. This begins with a discussion of a wide variety of individual sketches by comedians like Amy Schumer (US) and Oliver Kalkofe (Germany), and moves into a more concentrated analysis of the recurring “Fat Fighters” sketch in *Little Britain* and *Little Britain USA* created by comedy duo Matt Lucas and David Walliams, addressing its adaptation in both US and British contexts. The sitcoms discussed will be *Mike & Molly* (US) and *Miranda* (UK), with a slight excursion to *It's Always Sunny in Philadelphia* (US). Analyzing selected episodes, I will argue that the sitcom primarily uses weight loss for episodic plots that ultimately revert to the mean—what I call a “boomerang plot.” In *Miranda*, for example, while much is made of the title character’s tall and fat embodiment throughout the series, she only attempts weight loss once, and this attempt ultimately fails. Even *Mike & Molly*, in which the eponymous characters meet at Overeaters Anonymous, does not see its characters actually lose weight; their romantic plot is tied up with makeover culture, but not ultimately dependent on the successful achievement of an “after” body. *It's Always Sunny*, however,

presents an interesting counterexample in that Rob McElhenney, the show's creator and also one of its actors, chose to gain weight for season 7, claiming that it was part of a larger mission to "deconstruct the sitcom." While temporarily reversing the teleologies of makeover, McElhenney's stunt was not of lasting impact, as he lost the weight again in the following season break. Interestingly, in speaking about the process in interviews, McElhenney also reproduces common assumptions about weight loss, in contrast to his purported critique of makeover teleologies in the series itself. The final part of this section will consider how the internationally successful animated comedies *Family Guy*, and *South Park* use weight plots to demonstrate the narrative elasticity of animation as well as to satirize the sitcom. I will ultimately argue that the narrative conservatism of the sitcom paradoxically works in subversive ways in makeover culture by rejecting its dominant logics of change and self-transformation.

The last section will discuss two dramas from the United States, *Huge* and *Mad Men*, and one drama from the UK, *My Mad Fat Diary*, examining the particular storylines of the prominent female characters in each series and arguing that issues of fatness and weight loss are used to reflect on issues of femininity and the body. *Huge* is particularly interesting in that it utilizes a setting intimately linked to weight loss (a weight loss camp for teens), but presents fairly complex and ambivalent attitudes toward weight loss itself, conveyed through the contrasting attitudes of the two lead female characters. *My Mad Fat Diary*, also about teen protagonists, reflects on weight and gender in a similar way but adds the issue of mental health, choosing to foreground an acceptance of the self and body over weight loss. In the case of *Mad Men*, the discussion will focus on Peggy's storyline in seasons one and two, as well as Betty's weight gain and loss in seasons five and six. Both character arcs are intimately tied to the show's meditation on femininity and the body, and as such offer fruitful material for the discussion of fatness and gender. In exploring these three shows, the section will explore how the generic flexibility of drama and contested concepts of gender inform the ambivalent attitudes toward weight loss they project.

PART ONE

CHANGE IN “REAL” TIME: THE TELEOLOGIES AND TEMPORALITIES OF THE WEIGHT LOSS MAKEOVER

In the discussion of fat bodies on television, the first programs that come to mind are those that fall under the larger umbrella of reality television or documentary-style programming. By and large, these are the shows that most obviously discuss issues of fatness, problematize obesity as a social issue, and prescribe and/or produce weight loss as a cure for the “problem” of fatness. While depictions of weight loss within fictional formats are relatively rare (with exceptions, to be discussed in following chapters), they abound in reality television, so this is a natural place to start for the scholar attempting to understand the role of weight in television. The abundance of fat participants in “real” genres rather than in fictional ones is partially due to the ubiquity of reality television (RTV) itself. In the past couple of decades, the number of reality formats has exploded, taking over primetime slots on the major networks as well as the bulk of screen time on cable channels. This preponderance of reality programming is often linked to the market conditions created by increased deregulation of television and opening to private channels in many different countries; reality television, with its comparatively low production cost, has consistently offered a cheaper alternative in an ever more fragmented viewing market (see Moran). The dominance of reality television, in turn, has also produced new ways of conceiving and presenting narratives of the body, entailing new aesthetics and temporalities.

Within RTV the makeover has assumed a key role. As Jack Bratich notes, change is the essence of RTV; it can be conceived as “a performative phenomenon that captures, modifies, reorganizes, and distributes [...] ‘powers of transformation.’” (Bratich 8). Even in formats that are ostensibly not about makeovers, personal growth is emphasized and resistance to change is punished. Whatever the amateur participants of RTV are supposed to be doing, whether they are transforming their bodies or careers, competing for a new job or a chance to be the romantic partner of an aging rock star, they are supposed to be growing and changing. Meredith Jones, as discussed in the previous chapter, reads this tendency in television as indicative of a larger “makeover culture.” Brenda Weber, for her part, identifies the ways in which the makeover aims

to “normalize” subjects. Given that fatness is often conceived as an aesthetic and health problem, it is perhaps not surprising that weight loss has become a key element of a number of makeovers on television. Although in early examples of full-body makeovers like *The Swan* and *Extreme Makeover* weight loss was just one technique of self-improvement among others, it has since emerged as the key engine of others, most notably *The Biggest Loser*.

On the surface, weight loss is perfect for the makeover genre. While other makeovers, such as the cosmetic surgery programs that Meredith Jones primarily discusses, are more vague in their aims, weight loss appears to offer a clear-cut kind of transformation. While many makeovers are *qualitative*, weight loss is primarily *quantitative* and one-dimensional. In this respect, weight loss draws attention to the particular teleology that all makeovers are invested in. As Weber argues, makeovers always operate with teleology, more often than not aimed at producing subjects who reflect normalized ideas of beauty related to race, class, and gender. The weight loss makeover, with its stated objective of bringing people from “obese” or “overweight” categories to “normal” weight, is a clear illustration of this normalizing impulse. At the same time, weight loss makeovers present a different telos from the one identified by Weber, who concludes that the goal of makeover is a “vague but never fully reachable ‘better place’” (Weber, Review of Jones 292). In other words, Weber conceives of makeover culture as asymptotic, ever approaching but never reaching its goal. Weight loss, however, usually conceived as having a clear “goal” or “target” weight, presents a telos that *is* reachable, at least for some people, if not necessarily maintainable. This fact ensures that the weight loss makeover can neither be entirely understood in terms of “open-ended” transformation privileged of Jones, nor in the asymptotic vision of Weber.

The one-dimensionality of weight loss grants it a particular shape that is easily adapted to makeover formats. Weight and time are placed in tension to each other as participants strive to move down the scale within the allotted weeks or months. Ideally, for the purposes of narrative, the achievement of the goal weight coincides with the end of the program or season, preserving the “before/after” temporal frame. The strong teleological drive serves as a motor for the narrative, just as the inclusion of numerical “bookmarks” give us a sense of how the makeover is progressing. At the same time, for the sake of the narrative, the weight loss cannot be too clear

and consistent. Instead, various interruptions and reversals, stalling out or regaining, must be inserted to preserve narrative interest. Paradoxically, even these moments of crisis may proceed according to a certain design, appearing at certain points in time to structure narrative climaxes. In addition, the lean one-dimensionality of weight ensures that the weight loss makeover must be padded with other content, particularly highlighting the emotional transformation of the participants alongside their bodily transformation. Like other makeovers, weight loss makeovers are often produced through “affective domination,” a combination of shame and “love-power,” as Weber conceives it. The “Before-body” is denigrated, while the “After-body” is celebrated. Throughout this transformation, weight loss makeovers suggest that transformation of the body will produce, in turn, an emotional transformation.

Importantly, however, the fact that weight loss makeovers have clear and achievable goals does not release them completely from makeover culture’s open-endedness. Instead, weight loss is often, and perhaps increasingly, embedded in larger makeover processes, just as other makeovers (like the fashion makeover, for example) also figure as part of the weight loss makeover. Once achieved, the clear telos of weight loss often acts as a springboard for another kind of transformation, whether it is cosmetic surgery to remove excess skin or a new quest for fitness. Having completed their makeovers, many participants proclaim that they will soon embark on a new, different transformation. In this way, weight loss is sutured into larger processes of self-making in makeover culture. This connection is also made by paratextual media, through online content on the shows’ websites or blogs that update viewers on the current status of those made over. After discussing the weight loss makeover in detail, this chapter will therefore also consider what happens after the “after” of the weight loss makeover, arguing that these narratives generally offer three trajectories beyond their ends: 1) The Saga Continues—the participant continues the makeover, usually in another form, 2) The Student Becomes the Master—participant adopts the role of “expert” to inspire makeovers in others, or 3) Joining the Rebel Alliance — participant expresses dissatisfaction with weight loss or makeover itself, usually adopting a critical stance toward weight loss as makeover. While those following the paths of 1 and 2 still profess belief in the aims of makeover culture, those in the third group reject the conditions of makeover they were subjected to and often reject the logic of makeover itself. The

pop culture references of these trajectories are obviously a bit tongue-in-cheek, but the evocation of epic here is not merely incidental if we consider how weight loss is presented as a “hero’s journey,” as Kate Harding describes it— “[a]fter a long road of trials,” a return “from the underworld of dieting with a new understanding of how to eat, exercise, and how to *be*” (Harding). Like Harding, people undergoing weight loss often feel they have “achieved something major and acquired wisdom worth sharing” (Harding). For many, however, success in weight loss is fleeting. Faced with the difficulty of maintaining extreme weight loss, people may continue on trajectories one and two, or, like Kate Harding herself, abandon weight loss as the ultimate goal and seek self-acceptance in other ways. While such dissidence is unlikely to be included in makeover programs themselves, extratextual discussion of the weight loss makeover —on blogs, web forums, or social media—often brings up these points.

The existence of paratextual or extratextual media that stress the “after” of “after” thus highlight the temporal tensions in the televised weight loss makeover. Unfortunately, scholarship has tended to focus primarily on those programs like *The Swan* and *Extreme Makeover* dealing with cosmetic surgery makeovers and has neglected to address weight loss makeover shows in their particularity, although they are now just as popular as plastic surgery depictions, if not more so. Fat studies scholars, while addressing a wide range of issues related to the social meaning of the fat body, have also failed to seriously address the weight loss makeover, perhaps because its spectacular performance of weight loss also presents a challenge to the popular fat studies perspective that fatness is simply an expression of human genetic difference and thus largely immutable. This chapter, by analyzing a wide range of weight loss makeover television shows in RTV, will consider how the temporal and bodily constraints of weight loss are incorporated and negotiated within the narrative patterns of makeover culture. It does so by first theorizing makeover more generally with the help of Meredith Jones and Brenda Weber, then identifying the key particularities of the weight loss makeover in relation to quantification and temporality, particularly the various biotemporalities of mortality and adulthood. Then it considers how these particularities play out in relation to competition and meritocracy, especially in relation to race, ethnicity, and gender. Finally, the chapter analyzes the various trajectories offered to weight loss makeover participants after the “after.”

I. THEORIZING THE WEIGHT LOSS MAKEOVER

Paradoxes

“An obese woman appeared on stage wearing a micro-mini frock and high heels. Her waiting family members shook their heads in disgust and the audience booed and jeered. But then Springer said she had recently lost 100 pounds. Instantly boos changed to cheers and the woman sat down proudly, ready to defend her right to wear skimpy outfits. Makeover culture was in force. The large woman was suddenly praiseworthy because she was undergoing transformation: she was no longer horribly fat but was now ‘losing weight’. Negative judgments about her inappropriate dress sense became praise for being in the process of becoming slimmer. Thus we learn [...] that a big woman can’t wear sexy clothes but a woman who has lost 100 pounds can, *even if those two women are exactly the same.*” (Jones, *Skintight* 11, emphasis added)

In this anecdote from her book *Skintight: An Anatomy of Cosmetic Surgery*, Meredith Jones illustrates the paradoxical way that fat bodies are viewed in makeover culture. If a fat woman is placed in a narrative framework of deviance, in this case because she wears clothing that is deemed too revealing and thus inappropriate for her fat body, then she is castigated by the audience; if, however, the frame changes to a narrative of self-transformation, then the woman is praised by the very same people and her body is celebrated. The body is the same, but the narrative changes. While this example is taken from *The Jerry Springer Show*, this contradictory attitude toward the fat body is prevalent in a variety of genres in contemporary television of the United States. Nowhere is this more evident than in the weight loss makeovers of reality television; in popular programs like *The Biggest Loser*, fatness is demonized and medicalized at the same time the fat contestants are praised and encouraged as they lose weight. Oddly enough, the very program that depicts the fat body as inherently abnormal and weak ends up normalizing its appearance on television and demonstrating the physical feats it is capable of while still in

transition. Even those bodies that still figure as “fat” at the end of the makeover are celebrated as long as the transformation continues.

Jones describes the surprise produced by her viewing experience of this *Jerry Springer* moment as the start of her interest in the makeover. Brenda Weber, in her book *Makeover TV*, locates her spark of interest in the makeover in a similar moment of contradiction; when Amy, participant on *Extreme Makeover*, finishes her transformation, she insists that she no longer cares about what people think, despite having said that it was social disapproval that led to her to desire the makeover to begin with. As Weber concludes, “By the time of her ‘big reveal,’ we get the clear sense that by capitulating to social standards about appearance, Amy becomes empowered with the ability to transcend those very standards” (2). Following this observation and subsequent analysis of a large volume of television makeovers, Weber develops a list of “thematic paradoxes” at work in the makeover, which I have numbered here:

- 1—To be empowered, one must fully surrender to experts;
- 2—To become ‘normal,’ one must endure ‘extreme’ body-altering interventions aimed at one’s gender, sexuality, race, class, and ethnicity;
- 3—To be ‘truly’ feminine or masculine, one must be hyper-gendered;
- 4—To communicate an ‘authentic self,’ one must overwrite and replace the ‘false’ signifiers enunciated by the natural body;
- 5—To be unique and special, one must look and act like everyone else;
- 6—To be looked at appreciatively, one must first be critically condemned by the social gaze;
- 7—To achieve a state of privacy where ugliness does not code as transgressive, one must appear on national and international television and publicly expose the shame of the ‘ugly’ body (Weber 4).

Within these paradoxes, we see particular patterns at work. First of all, there is a clear sense that to be “raised high,” contestants must first be brought “low.” This pattern, evident in numbers 1 and 6, derives from the fact that makeover is essentially a genre concerned with redemption. Thus these paradoxes might be labeled *paradoxes of redemption*, and their popularity in the

makeover may be usefully connected to Christian paradigms of suffering and salvation, especially in the Protestant-inflected United States. As one character remarks on *South Park*, “it’s only in America somebody can become famous just because they go from being a big fatass to not being a big fatass” (“Jared Has Aides,” 6.1). The title of the very popular weight loss makeover show *The Biggest Loser* is a perfect illustration of this redemptive principle. It is the person who “loses” the most weight who wins at the end. More importantly, it is the person who is the biggest “loser” at the beginning who has the most capital in the competition. Being heavier at the beginning of the show not only gives you a tactical advantage in having more weight to lose, but also makes the promised transformation all the more dramatic, the “big reveal” even bigger, the redemption all the more spectacular. In the same vein, we might add other relevant paradoxes, such as “to cast off abjection, the body must be made hyperabject, dramatically opened up to expend blood, sweat, and tears.”

A second trend is a clear tension between being “normal” and being in excess of a norm. In the case of number three, for example, Weber notes how the signifiers of the body are changed via makeover—through large breast implants, for example—to make it both hyper-gendered and yet “normal”; paradoxically, to be read as a “normal” woman, the made-over female body is given breasts that are larger than average. Number seven reflects a similar theme, but on a more general level. The latter paradox evokes a contrast between being comfortably invisible and glamorously hypervisible. In this tension, it seems that the actual goal of the makeover is unclear, whether it is to simply cast off a stigmatized identity and be seen as “normal” or rather to achieve an extraordinary body. But the problem here is not only a lack of clarity in the ends, but rather a contrast between means and ends in the makeover; to become “normal,” participants must undergo an extraordinary process. This process, publicly televised, entails a visibility that is seemingly disavowed in the desire to “just be like everyone else.” This is a paradox evident in all of reality television, however, in that these shows grant fame and recognition to “ordinary” people who then, through this fame and recognition, cease to be merely ordinary. In the case of weight, this paradox is particularly relevant because the transgression of “normal” weight often is ordinary—in countries like the United States, where over fifty percent of people are labeled “overweight” or “obese,” being fat is the average, not the exception. Viewers are likely to be as

fat as the people depicted; thus reality television participants in the weight loss makeover are, as Jerry Mosher indicates about fat TV characters more generally, both “deviant” and “ordinary.”

In the weight loss makeover, we can see other paradoxes at work as well. For example, while many participants view their processes of weight loss as a way to be better parents or spouses, to escape early death and “be there” for their families, the weight loss makeover often effects a spatial dislocation. To “be there” for their families, contestants are taken out of their homes and brought to remote locations so that they may focus solely on their transformation for weeks or months at a time. This means that contestants can, and often do, miss important events in their own lives. In season 15 of *The Biggest Loser* (USA), for example, Matt postpones his wedding, while Hap misses the birth of his child. Trainer Bob illustrates this paradox when he says about Hap, “He has left his family behind to be here *for* his family.” (15.02, 20.00). Contestant David elaborates this principle in a later episode, saying “I’m gonna miss moving my daughter into her college dorm, and I’m gonna miss my youngest daughter’s first day of kindergarten, and my middle daughter’s first varsity [...] game—things that are big deals to us and our family—but me being *here* is what we all need for that big picture.” (15.03, 23.22). David’s speech here illustrates the way in which this dislocation is seen as a necessary sacrifice for the family. In focusing exclusively on his own body for the next few months, David believes, he serves his family and their long-term interests. To be selfless, one must be selfish. This statement also draws attention to the tension in the makeover between the body-for-itself and the body-for-others; participants focus on themselves so that their bodies may be regarded differently by society.

All these paradoxes are necessary for the makeover, it seems, to achieve its ultimate goal—to produce selfhood for its subjects. That this selfhood is achieved through the body makes sense if we believe Niklas Rose’s assertion that “personhood itself is becoming increasingly somatic” (Rose 7). Weber, for her part, stresses the importance of subjectivity very much in her work on the makeover. “Before-bodies,” as she terms pre-makeover subjects, barely have their own identity; instead, “makeovers depict stories of failed or imperiled selfhood, the locus of identity stalled or stagnated” (Weber 5). Making over the body, whether it is the physical body or the symbolic body (rooms, cars, families) promises to unblock this path and “unlock the

self” (5). This image of “stalling,” “blocking,” or “stagnating” is particularly significant in its link to the economic rationality within neoliberalism which emphasizes flow. Julie Guthman, in discussing her concept of “cultural bulimia,” points to the moments in which the continuous “flow” of goods, both around and through the body, is disrupted; the fat body, absorbing and storing the excess produced by the economy, operates as a “spatial fix.” As I have argued in my article “Consume, Purge, Repeat: The Spectacular Pleasure of Cultural Bulimia in U.S. Television,” this cultural bulimia can be taken to the level of the symbolic body as well; the hoarded house, seen as an abject part of the self (Lepsetler), appears analogous to the fat body. If the fat body, or the hoarded house, represents a snag in the system, it makes sense that makeovers would promise to correct it by encouraging work on the body, restoring circulation through “correct” consumption.

More importantly, it seems to me here, is the way that the paradoxes of the weight loss makeover draw attention to the larger cultural paradoxes produced by neoliberal economic conditions. In this reading, the fat body and the now-thin body are two sides of the same coin. As Sender and Sullivan note, “The neoliberal moment that demands self-disciplined, self-directed, willing citizens both produces and requires their nemesis: the undisciplined, food-addicted, lazy fatty” (140). Neoliberal culture requires Before-bodies to exist at the same time that it attempts to transform them into After-bodies. Transformation means effectively erasing the Before-body, but the makeover can only continue if a continuous supply of Before-bodies is available. This means that weight loss makeovers both make the fat body more visible on television and attempt to effectively erase the fat body entirely. While, as Weber argues, neoliberalism is certainly not the only explanation for the very diverse genre of makeover, it certainly has a role to play in the weight loss makeover (see Hearn, Redden, etc.).

While both Jones and Weber do well to illuminate the paradoxes at work at the heart of makeover, though, neither one discusses weight loss makeovers in detail. Jones limits her discussion to cosmetic surgery and Weber, while she surveys a wide range of makeovers, dedicates a scant few lines to the weight loss makeover. In many ways, the weight loss makeover exhibits the characteristics they identify, but it is also particular in a few key ways. First of all, fatness has its own web of associations, particularly in the contemporary context of the moral

panic over the “obesity epidemic”; weight loss is often treated by scientific and popular discourse as a medical and social necessity whereas cosmetic surgery procedures are more likely to be seen as a personal choice made for the sake of self-fulfillment or psychological well-being. For this reason, weight loss makeovers operate within different parameters than those performed through cosmetic surgery or behavioral modification. Weight loss makeovers are more likely to be medicalized than other makeovers and call upon scientific understandings of fat to justify their goals.

Secondly, as to be discussed in the next section, the weight loss makeover displays an obsession with measurement and numbers that is practically unique among makeovers. Discourses of weight illustrate the “one-way” nature of makeover culture, in that they provide a one-dimensional axis of gain/loss in which one direction is nearly always valued and the other demonized, but they differ from other makeovers in naming a concrete numerical “goal.” Weight is then charted numerically against time. Whereas the “better place” promised by other makeovers may be, as Weber concedes, “vague,” or at least multivectored in the sense that different body parts are targeted in different ways, the promise of a concrete number in weight loss reduces the bodily change to one dimension and presents a final stopping point for the transformation. Other teleological considerations—beauty, gender identity, happiness—are certainly important to the weight loss makeover and may function asymptotically, but its central goal—a “normal” weight—cannot be considered this way because whether or not it is achieved appears to be obvious. At the same time, the teleological assumption that “thinner is better” powers weight loss competitions like *The Biggest Loser*, pushing participants down the scale and sometimes even beyond the “normal” telos and into the “underweight” category. At this point, the weight loss makeover meets its material limits. The weight loss makeover cannot be endless, after all, if there is a physical point beyond which losing weight is no longer desirable, or even possible. In this way, the weight loss makeover presents a particular case, both illustrating the problematic teleologies of makeover while also producing its own particular logics.

Labor Revealed: Exercise and Affect



On *The Biggest Loser*, shots of contestants in pain are a regular staple (Cheryl, season 9, NBC).

The extreme bodily interventions of weight loss makeovers take a variety of forms, but they share a focus on “hard work.” Shows like *The Biggest Loser* and *I Used to Be Fat* spend considerable narrative time and energy on showing the bodily exercise participants must endure. In this way, they clearly fit into what Jones identifies as a key part of makeover—“labor revealed.” The body’s transformation requires more than physical labor, though; it also entails affective labor. As Weber argues, the makeover is powered by the energy of “affective domination.” Within the affective labor of contestants, confession takes a central role. Drawing also on Samantha Murray’s reading of the fat body as “virtual confessor,” then, this section elaborates how both physical and emotional labor combine to produce the hard work of makeover and rid the body of its excess fat.

Jones argues that, in contrast to earlier forms of makeover, in which the actions taken between “before” and “after” were elided, current makeover culture shows the labour involved in getting from one point to the other; “[h]ard work is the key point: makeover culture is about industriousness and the display of labour” (Jones 12). Thus people “losing weight” are valorized once their bodies are located within a particular trajectory that indicates they are working hard

and participating actively in improvement. From the first episode to the finale, weight loss makeovers such as *The Biggest Loser* create a temporal frame in which constant becoming is rewarded. Rather than the “feminine” activities of calorie counting or dieting, though, the *BL* grants much more screen time to workouts and physical challenges. Each episode features contestants testing their physical limits, enduring extreme pain, and grunting through grueling workouts and challenges. Close shots of contorted faces abound. Paradoxically, in order to produce the seemingly smooth, self-disciplined body at the end of the transformation, the contestant’s body must first be opened up to hyperabjection; candidates are shown crying, sweating, vomiting, and in some cases even bleeding their way to weight loss. This is consistent with Jones’ observation that makeover culture produces abject bodies, but ones that are “properly” abject; by designating certain spatial and temporal frames as acceptable settings for the abject, makeover culture manages to contain the messy side of physical transformation (*Skintight* 109). In the case of *The Biggest Loser*, the ranch is the place in which abjection is allowed.

There is a clear and important parallelism here, though, between emotions and the body; trainers and other makeover experts suggest that in order to have both physical and emotional health, the body must be opened up dramatically to release harmful fat *and* negative emotion, both of which are conceived as being pent-up inside. This vision of opening the body to cause weight loss draws on a long history of fatness being perceived as something that must be “let out” of the body (see Georges Vigarello). Abby of season 8 is also emblematic of this view when she tells season 15 contestants that “sweat and tears are healing waters” and thus important at the *BL* ranch (15.11, 46.15). It is perhaps less about changing the surface of the body than poking holes in the surface to release what lies beneath; when the negative emotions/substances have been purged, those holes can be paved over again, creating a clean surface that appropriately expresses an “inner” authentic self. In a sort of exorcism, then, the show elicits a performance of hyperabjection and hyperemotion so that in the future both body and emotion can be managed effectively.

In “exorcising” negative emotion through extreme physical exercise, there remains an uneasy balance between encouraging contestants to “let it all out” and then chastising them for

not “keeping it together.” Scenes that display this contradiction abound, like in one scene when trainer Bob tells a contestant during a workout, “you’ve got to stay strong for your teammate, Andrea. You cannot cry right now. Your teammate needs you, you understand me? This is your first week; you’re crying over your first week? NO!” (09.01, 48.00). In the next moment, the camera cuts to a shot of Bob explaining his training style: “I’m gonna say this. I get in there and I just, like, I just wanna push people to their extremes and I want them to just, like, cry and yell and scream and jump up and down” (09.01). After a brief shot of another contestant crying in pain during an exercise, he continues: “But what it does is they’re going to remember being at the *Biggest Loser* house and they’re going to be like ‘I can handle anything.’” Bob’s paradoxical stance, in which he pushes his trainees to emotional outbursts and then castigates them for these very outbursts, reveals the contradictory attitude that trainers have toward their teams’ bodies.

This contradictory treatment makes sense, though, in the context of the affective domination of makeover participants that Brenda Weber describes. Weber theorizes “affective domination” as a combination of “shame and love-power” with which all varieties of television makeovers operate. She notes that makeover programs often adopt a stance of “tough love” toward their candidates, opening with public shaming of the candidates before shifting to the expression of friendly encouragement on the part of the trainers/stylists/etc. as the makeover continues. In this process, the subject’s body must first be rendered docile in order to become the object of makeover’s “work”; “[e]ven kinder and gentler shows like *Makeover Manor*, *Head 2 Toe*, and *A Makeover Story* require that the Before-body and appearance be castigated so that the After-body can emerge resplendent” (Weber, “Makeover as Takeover” 82).

The transition that Weber notes from shame to love-power is certainly evident in weight loss makeovers like *The Biggest Loser*, as the shouting of trainers amply illustrates. Shame has the potential to be a particularly effective motivator in the case of the weight loss makeover, as fatness, arguably more than bad dress sense or a crooked nose, is viewed as a moral failing in society. As Amy Erdman Farrell details in *Fat Shame*, fatness has a long history of negative associations in the U.S. context, although the content of these negative associations has changed over time. The mere exposure of the fat body produces shame. *The Biggest Loser* heightens this shame by always making weigh-ins into public performances. Understandably, the first weigh-in



In season 9 of *The Biggest Loser* (USA) shame was heightened by initial public weigh-ins.

is often accompanied by visible discomfort in the faces of the contestants; this was especially true in the case of the first weigh-in of season 9 of *BL USA*, in which all candidates had to take off their shirts and be weighed in front of their entire communities. The humiliation continues into the early workout scenes, in which the trainers shout at the contestants, insulting and otherwise provoking them verbally, whereas later scenes of later workouts reveal a more positive and encouraging style of training. Likewise, initially humiliating weigh-ins transform to scenes of success in which the contestants can celebrate their weight loss from week to week.

But shame is not only produced in the exposed body; it is also projected onto the body from outside. It is at this point that Samantha Murray's reading of confession in relation to fat bodies is important. Drawing heavily on Foucault, Murray notes the increasing role that confession plays in everyday modern life—in legal and psychiatric as well as religious contexts. Importantly, confession requires a confessee, a person who can absorb the confession and acts as “a subject of authority who holds the power to forgive, correct, alter or transform the newly purged confessor” (76). In the diagnostic procedure of medicine, this confessee is the doctor. However, Murray contends, the medical encounter has particular implications for people who are fat because the fat body acts as a “virtual confessor” that, in Grosz's terminology, expresses an “internal” truth. The fat body is already legible as pathological; the doctor already knows, or

presumes to know, what the fat person will confess to—overeating and failure to exercise. The function of the confession, then, is not to aid the doctor in producing a diagnosis, but rather to force the fat person to recognize their own “sins,” to claim “ownership of a body of transgressions” (74). The sitcom *It’s Always Sunny in Philadelphia* even pokes fun at this trend when Mac goes to a priest to confess how he got fat (“How Mac Got Fat”).

Murray’s reading here is extremely helpful for understanding the fat body in the weight loss makeover. It is easy to see how the makeover’s experts, whether doctors or trainers, act as confessees and how confessions form a crucial part of the makeover, especially to show how burdened the “before” body is with shame. In the first episode of each *Biggest Loser* season, for example, candidates are also encouraged to talk about why they want to lose weight, tearfully admitting their failings in both personal and professional life and attributing them to their embodiment. Koli, a candidate from season 9, is emblematic when he says in Episode 1 of that season that his relationships with women have never been successful because he pushes them away, never believing that “anyone could really, seriously love a 400 lb. man.” (*BL* 09.01, 44.00). Tearful confessions of this sort are the norm, especially in early episodes, and they serve not only to mark the body with shame, but to force contestants to “own” their bodies, as Murray suggests. Ownership of this shame is necessary to embark on the redemptive journey of weight loss.¹¹

Yet the television confession is not like the private encounter between the doctor and patient. Instead, the camera, and by extension the viewer, acts as a third witness. This fact complicates the relationship between doctor and patient, confessor and confessee, and requires the viewer to position him- or herself affectively in relationship to the people on screen. Are we on the side of shame with the fat protagonists or on the side of the confessee, listening and judging? Important work done by Katherine Sender, sometimes in collaboration with Margaret Sullivan, examines the ambivalent reactions of viewers to reality television shows such as *The Biggest Loser*. These reactions are often more nuanced than critics assume; even fans of such shows are critical of many of their methods, and empathize with participants (Sender &

¹¹ In a subtle way, though, Koli’s confession here also points to the possibility that the real problem is the fear of rejection rather than the actual impossibility of being loved while fat; because he projects his fears on to the women he is with, their affection is nullified, no matter how they actually feel.

Sullivan). These findings contradict the common presumption of simple voyeuristic pleasure to be gained from watching the fat body exercise and suffer. In a similar move, Alexia Smit argues in her dissertation that the very intimate depictions of the body one finds on television—from scientific scenes of autopsies to the performance of surgeries—are not only about showing bodies from the superiority and safety of distance, but also producing affect through intimacy with the body and its exposure or penetration: in such programs “bodily excess is foregrounded, celebrated and elaborated upon in a self-aware performance of the capacity to grant access and bring viewers close to the body in a way that demands an affective response” (Smit 29). This phenomenon—the production of affectivity through the on-screen body—she labels “teleaffectivity.”

The weight loss makeover certainly has the power to produce this teleaffectivity, bringing the viewer close, sometimes uncomfortably so, to the suffering of the contestants. When I watch a show like this, I inevitably become wrapped up in the characters, affectively responding to their pain, both physical and emotional. However, as Sender and Sullivan note, there are limits to the critique that this intimacy enables. While audiences recognize the mechanisms of shame and sympathize with those whose bodies are being exposed and ridiculed, they often nonetheless appreciate shame as a “necessary evil” that compels change. Moreover, “[e]ven if they distanced themselves from some of the representational and instructional strategies of the shows, regular viewers shared the shows’ framing of fat as a problem to be changed or disguised.” (139). While some non-viewers are more critical, regular viewers “endorsed the shows’ assumption that fat bodies manifest a crisis of the inner self that the makeover can solve” (139). Affective domination, then, may be criticized in some of its techniques, but not for its objectives.

If the fat body acts as a virtual confessor indicating an inner crisis, confession gives this crisis voice and seems to identify its exact cause—is it a troubled childhood or a painful break-up? Dissatisfaction with one’s job or grief at a loved one’s death? What emotional hole is being filled with food? Fat bodies are read as a physical manifestation of an emotional problem. In a way, confessions of the sort described above allow the participant of the weight loss makeover to self-diagnose, to place his or her own body in an explanatory narrative in which legitimate

emotional problems are simply addressed with the wrong means. Fatness, then, is read as the result of poor emotional management.

To make the makeover effective, then, affective domination also works to transform makeover subjects emotionally. Subjects are depicted as going from poorly-managed or out-of-control (negative) emotion to carefully-controlled positive emotions. As Weber notes, excessive emotionalism is punished; makeover subjects, especially women, are derided for expressing frustration, ingratitude, or insolence toward their experts, even when extraordinary circumstances make it understandable.¹² Managing pain and frustration becomes a key part of the “work” of makeover. Rather than address emotional problems with therapies that work on the mind, such as psychiatry, however, the weight loss makeover prescribes going through the body. The personal trainers become the most important experts, apparently exercising authority in matters both physical and emotional. As their area of expertise is the body rather than the mind, however, they insist that the bodily transformation, produced by mental strength and willpower, will loop back to fix the emotional problems that caused the body’s fatness to begin with.

While negative emotion is discouraged in this framework, Weber notes that there are moments in which the expression of such emotions, like anger, is encouraged. She cites a moment on *The Swan*, for example, when contestant Belinda was encouraged to aggressively hit a punching bag displaying a picture of her ex-partner. Weber reads this moment as an indication that aggression is temporarily allowed for women in the name of empowerment, but I would argue that this moment also indicates that makeover is more about expressing emotion (both positive and negative) in “appropriate” times and places rather than sublimating it entirely. When boxing is the task at hand, aggression and anger are necessary.

In *The Biggest Loser*, similar scenes abound. The US trainer Jillian, in particular, encourages her contestants to express negative emotions through boxing exercises. In one episode, when she accompanies Jay to his home in Missouri, she encourages him to express his pain and anger in relation to difficult events in his life, which include his childhood home burning down and his parents divorcing. Jillian reads the hole left by the destroyed house as a

¹² Incidentally, *UnREAL*, a fictional series about the making of a reality dating show like *The Bachelor*, masterfully shows how reality television often cleverly edits out the context of emotional outbursts, thus making them appear less understandable and painting the contestants as simply “crazy.”

metaphor for Jay's death and rebirth, and attempts to lead Jay to that reading himself. As they stare at the site, Jillian says "Tell me about what ended that day [the day of the fire]" (15.08, 21.03). Jay is initially confused, unsure how to respond. When she asks again, more insistently, he tries to give an answer, but she is unsatisfied, saying "that's not what I'm asking. I'm asking you what ended. Because for something to be reborn, there has to be an acknowledgement of something that died." Finally, as she again says, with emphatic punches of one hand into the other, "I'm asking you, in your heart, what died that day?" he finally answers, "I did." In this moment, it becomes clear how Jillian, perhaps at the behest of the producers, is forcing a certain narrative on Jay for the sake of the redemptive themes of the program. She justifies this as a necessary lesson about reckoning with the pain of the past. Rebirth can only happen, she suggests, when the negative emotions are acknowledged and transformed into fuel. As she finally says, "There are ways to take those emotions and express them safely. You know, they get channeled into certain behaviors that are healthier. Get mad now. Let's work out, and I'll show you where to get mad" (15.08, 22.57). Again, it is not a clear suppression of emotion, but a redirection of aggressive energy into weight loss. Jillian positions herself as the knowledgeable expert who has the authority to point out the moment in time when Jay should "get mad," and Jay acquiesces. In this way, Jillian indicates to Jay, and by extension the viewers, that the expression of negative emotion is allowed as long as it is done in a controlled manner and in the right place. If abjection is about "matter out of place," then this is about preventing "emotion out of place." The gym is the place where both bodily fluids and negative emotion can be released from the body.

Health and the Tyranny of Numbers

If affective domination drives the makeover's emotional content, another kind of authority governs the measurement of the weight loss makeover's progress. While Kim Chernin speaks of a "tyranny of slenderness" in society, we might identify a similar "tyranny of numbers" in the weight loss makeover. Quantitative change is a crucial thing that binds reality television weight loss makeovers together and distinguishes them from nearly all other makeovers, as well as

representations of weight loss in the other genres to be discussed later in this dissertation. While all weight loss plots involve teleological aims, the weight loss makeover depends on explicit reference to numbers. Or rather, one particular number over time: weight. The scale and the calendar, measuring weight and time respectively, become the fundamental devices structuring whole series. As a result, relative weight change dominates all other health markers, making arbitrary weight goals important, determining the success or failure of the weight loss makeover, and effectively shaping narrative arcs. The way the weight loss makeover structures the relationship of weight and time thus merits closer analysis.

The reliance on numerical weight may seem trivial and obvious, but it is not necessarily so if we consider how complex the body is, and how other quantitative indicators—percentage of body fat, blood pressure, blood sugar levels, or fitness performance—may be used to paint a fuller picture of health. This is not even to mention the qualitative feeling of health that cannot be captured in numbers.¹³ If the weight loss makeover is really about health, as it professes, then certainly factors beyond mere weight would have to be taken into account. Yet even Body Mass Index, the metric that is most often used by doctors and public health officials such as the National Institutes of Health to classify people as at a “normal” weight or above, is largely absent from the weight loss makeover.¹⁴ In individual cases, especially when doctors speak, the BMI or other metrics may be mentioned, but they fail to have great power in the logic of the makeover except to emphasize again how “unhealthy” the candidate in question is at the beginning of the transformation. It is up to the dedicated chroniclers in the paratextual realm of Wikipedia to calculate and document the change in BMI in contestants. While BMI itself is a simplified metric that relates height and weight and neglects a number of other factors, the weight loss makeover speaks an even simpler language—net change in pounds, kilos, or stone.

Of course, other measurements are sometimes referred to in the course of the makeover, especially at the beginning when the “dramatic” health problems of participants are put on display or at the end when the makeover’s positive health benefits are stressed. The 2011 finale

¹³ It is this subjective feeling of health that alternative paradigms like Health at Every Size emphasize in contrast to the traditional medical discourse, which generally recommends weight loss as an end in itself. See Burgard, “What is Health at Every Size?”

¹⁴ See discussion in first chapter for more information about Body Mass Index.

of *Peso Pesado*, the Portuguese version of *The Biggest Loser*, for example, went further than many other weight loss makeovers by presenting graphs of the collective change of its contestants' bodies in terms of cholesterol, blood sugar, and blood pressure. These numbers serve to legitimize the weight loss makeover as a process that promotes health, but the graphs fail to individualize contestants so that the shift is not made visible on the level of the character arc, but rather generalizes the experience of all contestants.

The use of numbers in the weight loss makeover marks its medicalization and embeddedness in scientific processes that, especially since the Enlightenment, have increasingly come to measure and categorize the body by “objective” standards (see Gilman and/or Vigarello). The related phenomenon of calorie-counting has its origin in the thermodynamic model of nutrition proposed in the late nineteenth century which suggested that calories consumed must be equal to calories expended to create equilibrium. According to this model, still widespread though discredited by the many complications to this formula, weight loss can be performed simply by expending more calories through physical activity than one consumes by eating or drinking.¹⁵ While proponents of weight loss argue that these measures are scientifically objective and thus devoid of moral content, Samantha Murray points out “the necessary intermingling of medical science and moral values attached to quantification of certain bodies in marking normativity,” (72-73). Moreover, as Marilyn Wann notes in her foreword to *The Fat Studies Reader*, the use of quantitative measures of weight has social consequences, producing what Patrick Colm Hogan calls “micro-hierarchization.” As she writes, each point higher or lower on the scale indicates a respective higher or lower status:

People feel superiority or self-loathing based on each calorie or gram of food consumed or not consumed, in each belt notch, pound, or inch gained or lost, in each clothing size smaller or larger. Each micro-rung on the weight-based hierarchy exerts pressure to covet the next increment thinner and regret the next

¹⁵ The thermodynamic model of calories originated with German scientist Max Rubner, who posited his “isodynamic law” in 1878. More recent research has contested the truism “a calorie is a calorie” by noting that not only do caloric estimates vary depending on the method of preparation (how a vegetable is cut or how long it is cooked, for example), but also that energy from different sources is used differently by the body and metabolized at different rates. See Taubes.

increment fatter, leaving little room for people to recognize and revolt against the overall system that alienates us from our own bodies. (Wann xv)

More than a mere fat/thin binary or even a categorization of bodies in a few basic categories, quantification creates a sliding scale of weight correlated with status, both across and within these categories.

Implicit in the use of numbers in the weight loss makeover is also the idea of necessary self-surveillance in health—that if people know the numbers that measure their body’s well-being, especially if those numbers are in “dangerous” ranges, they will be motivated to improve them. It is often suggested that weight loss makeover participants, avoiding the scale and medical intervention, do not have an accurate picture of their own health. The initial weigh-in, combined with conversations with the makeover’s experts, acts as a “wake-up call” that forces the contestants to face their health problems as a result of weight and potential risks for disease. As Deborah Lupton notes, public health programs are all “directed at constructing and normalizing a certain kind of subject; a subject who is autonomous, directed at self-improvement, self-regulated, desirous of self-knowledge, [...] seeking happiness and healthiness” (Lupton 12). This self-regulation and self-knowledge requires a certain vigilance about one’s own health. As other scholars have observed, this practice is in line with a larger trend in the makeover toward self-surveillance for the sake of change (see Weber, for example). What sets the weight loss makeover apart is simply the reliance on particular numbers to quantify just how abject their “before” state is and mark how much progress is made in the makeover.

Self-surveillance of health numbers extends to viewers as well, who are implicitly being recruited to lose weight just like the candidates. The *Biggest Loser* book *Six Weeks to a Healthier You*, for example, promotes the “*The Biggest Loser* Know Your Number™ HealthScore” and even includes a quiz for the reader to determine their own score (46-47). This short survey assesses risk based on identity markers (race, gender, age), health habits (exercise and smoking), current diagnoses (heart disease, stroke, sleep apnea, etc.), and family history. It also includes a question on weight and a question on blood pressure, but the difference in their framing is telling. While the blood pressure question asks “How would *you* describe your blood pressure?” (emphasis added) and offers *descriptive* answers (e.g. “It’s a little high (120/80 to

140/90)") the weight question asks, "How would *your doctor* describe your current weight?" (emphasis added) and offers *prescriptive* answers (e.g. "I should probably lose 10 to 20 pounds."). This difference suggests both a recourse to medical authority to determine whether weight is in a healthy range or not (the test-taker him- or herself is not trusted with this judgment), and a moral compulsion to lose weight. Ultimately, while this quiz demonstrates an ostensible willingness to take a variety of health factors into account, it is problematic in that it again collapses all these factors into one singular number.

The Know Your Number™ HealthScore is also called upon to explain the reduced risk that contestants experience in the makeover. Shortly after the quiz, the book presents a table with results from the season 9 contestants, demonstrating their "5-year risk for CHD [coronary heart disease] or stroke onset" in week 1 and week 6, expressed in percentages and odds (49). The results, we are told, are derived from the contestants' Know Your Number test scores. Of course, all the results listed demonstrate a positive reduction in risk. Not all contestants from the season are listed, however; only ten of the twenty-two are included, presumably because the results for the others are not as impressive or they have already been eliminated and are thus no longer subject to the extreme surveillance of the show's producers and staff.

More importantly, the inclusion of various health measurements may serve to legitimize the weight loss makeover and reinforce the basic message that fatter=unhealthier and thinner=healthier, but they do little to change the course of events. Ultimately, what decides is the scale. It is the ultimate authority because, as contestants and trainers frequently say, "the scale doesn't lie." Or, as German coach Detlef D. Soost puts it, "In other shows one can perhaps judge subjectively, but on *Biggest Loser Teens* the scale is the truth. Period."¹⁶ This reliance on weight makes the weigh-in the central event of the weight loss makeover. Weigh-ins are ubiquitous across the genre and subgenres, and they are deployed strategically to structure the narrative. They also take up significant narrative time, up to a third of an individual episode. Importantly, they are also public events, performed in front of doctors or trainers, fellow contestants, and of course the viewing public at home. Jennifer Fremlin even goes so far as to

¹⁶ "Andere Shows kann man vielleicht subjektiv beurteilen, aber die Waage bei *Biggest Loser Teens* ist die Wahrheit. Punkt." ("Das erste Wiegen," [sat1.de](#))

liken the aesthetics of the weigh-in with pornography; the weigh-in becomes the reward for viewing and the climax of the episode, the “money shot.” Indeed, the weigh-in is where the spectacular power of the makeover is most apparent. This spectacularity is derived not only from the magnitude of the numbers but also the fact that the weight is revealed simultaneously to all who are watching, including the person on the scale. The tension builds until the number is revealed. When the moment comes, camera work capturing the reactions of people to the number is as important as the number itself, directing our viewing expectations into ecstatic shock or disappointed dismay.

The weigh-in is also important because it is where the bodily change produced by the makeover becomes evident. We cannot actually see the fat leaving the body as we can, for example, see a part being removed by plastic surgery, but we can at least see the change writ large on the scale, broadcast in huge digits. These numbers even bridge culture and language, bringing viewers together with the universal language of numbers. I may not be able to read Arabic script, for example, but I can read the scale on *Al Rabeh Al Akbar* and appreciate the numerical change in weight. In this process, though, a curious transformation takes place; the material change of the body is made virtual, displaced from an internal feeling of embodiment to an external measurement, which then validates or calls into question what the people being weighed say about themselves. While the most important weigh-in in narrative terms is always the final one, forming the “after” of the before/after transformation, intermediate weigh-ins may even be more important in their visualization of the “during” of weight loss. Within an individual episode or segment at the middle of this transformation, we may not be able to “see” the relative change; the weigh-in, however, affirms that change is taking place and moving toward its teleological end, the “target” weight. Indeed, even makeovers in which the before/after frame is not as important (like *Jung und Dick*, which will be discussed later) rely on these intermediate weigh-ins to mark time within the program.

The numerical emphasis of weight loss has the added effect of making arbitrary milestones important. Contestants often refer to goals such as “getting under” a certain number for their weigh-ins. On the *BL USA*, it is common parlance to designate being under 200 lbs as being in “wonderland.” Likewise, arbitrary goals of weight loss (reaching 100 lbs lost, for example) are

emphasized at individual weigh-ins throughout the season. These numbers serve as mile markers, gauging the contestant's progress through the competition. The arbitrary nature of these numbers becomes obvious, though, when we consider weight loss makeovers from different cultural contexts. In addition to the multitudes of other cultural and personal factors that influence what a participant deems a "normal" or acceptable "target" weight for him- or herself, different systems of measurement divide the weight scale in different ways and thus influence the milestones which contestants refer to along the way. Taking *The Biggest Loser* in the US, UK, and Germany as examples, we see that different units of measurement (pounds, stone, and kilos, respectively) produce different milestones entirely. While contestants in the US celebrate getting below 200 lbs., Europeans are more likely to find being under 100 kg important, making this marker significantly higher (about 220 lbs). Likewise, the British reliance on stone structures numerical markers according to units of 14 lbs rather than the decimal change of 10 lbs or 10 kg (22 lbs) in the other formats.

Numbers also rule the competition on a micro-level. During each weigh-in, as contestants approach the scale, the host tells them how much weight they will have to have lost to be "safe"—that is, ineligible for elimination. While the ranking itself is determined by percentage weight lost, rather than net weight loss, this number is conveyed in pounds/kilos: "Contestant X, in order to beat Contestant Y and be safe from elimination, you need to have lost Z lbs." Often, before the result of a strategically important person's weight is revealed, the show creates a cliffhanger, cutting to commercial and thus heightening the anticipation. The constant reference to numbers during the weigh-in, both in absolute and relative terms, highlights their ubiquitous power to mark and structure the makeover.

The reliance on weight as the primary marker of progress, however, brings its own challenges; it often does not proceed as uniformly along the temporal axis as expected. In fact, the weight loss *should not* proceed uniformly; moments of stalling or crises of motivation act as important structural elements in the narrative to raise the stakes and increase tension. Even contestants on *The Biggest Loser* as dominant as season 15's Rachel Frederickson, who consistently lose significant weight and win challenges, face moments of crisis; in Rachel's case, there was one week in which her weight loss was disappointing and she had to be "saved" by her

team. This momentary crisis allowed her story to have a rare redemptive moment, and to suggest that she would have to rededicate herself even more to survive in the competition, which she eventually won.

Numbers do not only mark the competition, though; they determine its course. Because losing weight is constituted as the way to prove one's deservingness, the scale is assumed to reflect, one-to-one, a contestant's effort. As Joey, a trainer in an episode of *I Used to Be Fat*, says after his trainee Jordan has a disappointing weigh-in, "And the scale does not lie, you know. If you are training hard and you are eating right, the scale will tell you exactly how hard you trained and how strictly you ate" (1.5, 25.04). Participants in the weight loss makeover echo this logic; as Holley in season 15 of *The Biggest Loser* says at one point, "there's no way I'm pulling less than a 5. I worked hard enough for 10" (15.07, 36.37). At the same time, Holley's statement reveals the residual anxiety that the scale will not, in fact, reflect the work one has done. In this case, the scale defies Holley's expectations, revealing that she has lost only three pounds and will be eliminated. Such situations are not uncommon; numbers often do not conform with the apparent effort expended by particular contestants. This discrepancy presents a challenge to the narrative, though, which must assimilate results on the scale into a larger story about who works hard and deserves to win.

When deserving contestants fail to produce the expected numbers, trainers often resort to platitudes or deny the importance of the weigh-in itself. Trainers downplay the number or otherwise attempt to dissociate it from the contestant. As Dolvett says in reference to Tanya in BL USA season 15, "Don't get it twisted. I'm disappointed in the number. I'm not disappointed in you." (15.03, 37.58). The distinction between being disappointed in the number and the contestant does not hold up, however, if one considers that the entire performative identity of a contestant depends on losing weight; as Fremlin notes, "[t]he dieter is constituted here as performer, and his or her ability to lose weight as a performative identity." In this context, pulling big numbers on the scale is essential to constituting one's persona as a "winner" on the show. The final authority of the scale to determine the course of the game is never challenged. This means that, paradoxically, those who lose weight too successfully (i.e. too quickly) and satisfy the demands of individual weigh-ins for spectacular results soon stall as they approach

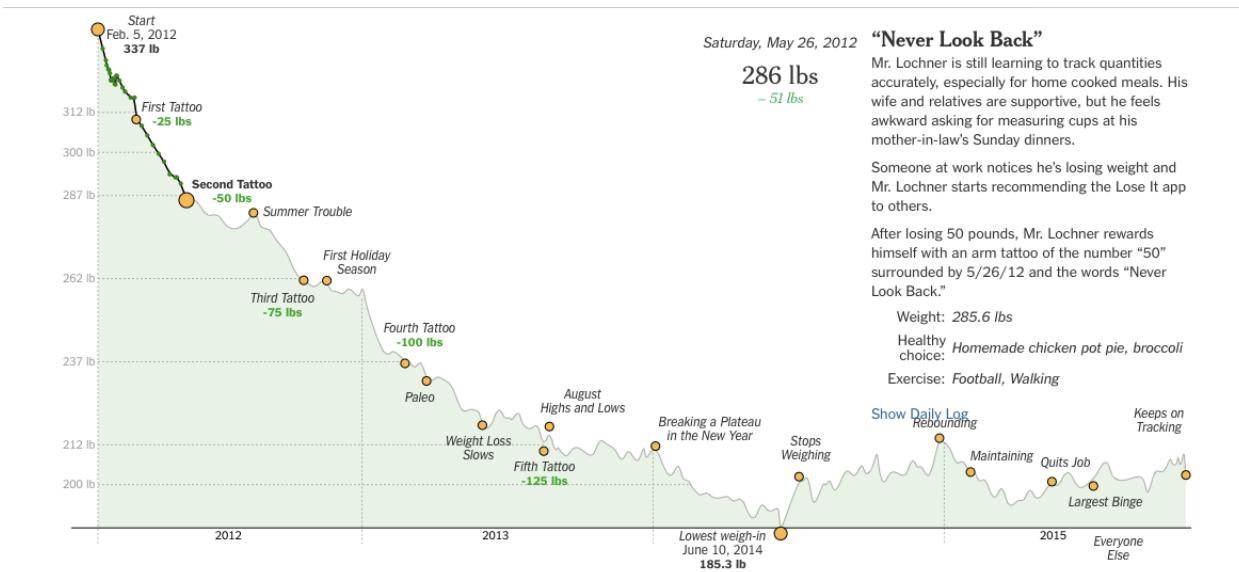
their goal weight and are eliminated; Jay from season 15 of *BL USA* and Sam from season 9 of the same are prime examples. In those makeovers that do not include competition, the scale is nonetheless as present, even as their experts also insist that the number is secondary to a larger picture of health. Ultimately, the success or failure of the makeover is always measured in relationship to weight; other developments may be complementary, but secondary.

The appearance of “bad” numbers for “good” contestants thus presents a challenge to the narrative framing of the show. Likewise, the surprisingly positive results of some less promising candidates forces the narrative to move in other directions. One could see this clearly in season 15 in the contrast between Bobby and Hap. While the shy Bobby is initially mostly ignored, granted little screen time, masculine and gregarious Hap appears frequently. While Hap excels in workouts, especially weight-lifting, Bobby is continually presented as lacking motivation in workouts and not working as hard as others. However, Bobby soon inexplicably begins to lose large amounts of weight relative to his fellow contestants. Teammate Hap’s frustration with this fact becomes palpable in week 8; buying into the logic of the show, Hap believes that his superior effort in the gym should be reflected on the scale. In this week, however, he only loses two pounds while Bobby loses twelve, keeping their team safe. Bob, the trainer, also expresses his disbelief with this state of affairs. Eventually the narrative finds an explanation for Hap’s disappointing numbers by indicating that he has not been on the right diet and therefore could not capitalize on his efforts in the gym. In the following week, Hap seems to make good on his promise to change his eating habits and loses 11 pounds, while Bobby is eliminated. When Bobby is brought back for a chance at re-entering the competition, however, he easily surpasses Hap and sails from this point on into the finale. As the power dynamic between the two men begins to shift to favor Bobby in the competition, the framing of his story changes. His career as a lawyer is mentioned, and his journey to coming out as gay to his father is depicted as a heroic act of courage. While he never becomes a fierce competitor in challenges like Rachel or others, his performance on the scale redeems him and forces the narrative to reframe him as deserving. In the end, Bobby reveals himself to be an even better subject for makeover precisely because his initial weakness makes his eventual triumph a greater redemption.

II. THE TEMPORALITY OF TRANSFORMATION

Although the scale occupies a central place in the weight loss makeover, one should not forget that the calendar is just as important. The trajectory of numerical weight change is placed on an axis in relation to the equally important temporal frame, which is also numerically conceived (as a fixed number of days, weeks, or months) and produces the constraints within which the makeover can proceed. The temporal frame not only creates a particular length of time, bookended by “before” and “after,” but is also subdivided on the level of individual episodes or segments. In *I Used to Be Fat*, for example, the whole time frame is usually about three months, but time is marked by a large calendar in which each day has its own page and is torn off in the countdown to the next. In other series like *The Biggest Loser*, transformation takes place over about six months, unfolding over the course of a season; individual episodes refer explicitly to the change in weight in relation to smaller time units (usually the “week”). In this way, time and weight are placed in tension to each other.

A recent interactive feature in the *New York Times* serves to illustrate how the relationship between weight and time may be represented visually. In “Diary of a Food Tracker,” programmer and journalist Albert Sun plots the changing weight of one man, Steve Lochner, in an interactive chart with data taken from his food tracking app “Lose It.” This chart is fascinating in a number of ways, but particularly informative in that it combines numerical data with narrative content. As becomes abundantly clear, the progress of weight loss is far from uniform; in addition to the achievement of various milestones, there are moments of stalling and regaining. More importantly, though, the data does not just simply speak for itself; to allow the reader to understand Lochner’s trajectory, various important points are chosen along this line to be explained; by clicking on a particular point, one activates a short text that appears to the upper right, providing context for that data point. The reader learns, for example, that Lochner marked each milestone of 25 lbs lost with a new tattoo; at fifty pounds lost, for example, he “rewards himself with an arm tattoo of the number “50” surrounded by 5/26/12 and the words ‘Never Look Back.’” This statement is paradoxical, of course, because the tattoo itself does just that—



The “Diary of a Food Tracker” Chart combines data with narrative content (Albert Sun, published online by *New York Times* Nov. 16, 2015).

looks backs and literally inscribes the story of bodily transformation on the surface of the “after” body, suggesting that its present state can only be read in the context of the past.

The chart does not end, however, when Lochner reaches his goal after losing 150 pounds in over two years. Instead, it continues nearly a year and a half after this point, which remains his lowest weight ever. This tail end of the trajectory shows a fair amount of fluctuation, although trends up the scale are soon countered with downward movement. Looking at Lochner’s food logs from this time, however, reveals wide swings in food consumed—up to 6,000 calories of “unhealthy” food like fast food and sweets some days, followed by penitent days of less than 1,000 calories with exclusively “healthy” foods like lean protein and fresh fruit. The accompanying text around the time of his largest binge tells us that “Mr. Lochner struggles to get back to his low weight and still has bad days when he can’t control his eating.” What both the data and this text suggests is that, even after extreme weight loss appears to be achieved, the road may remain rocky. Instead of living a stable life of careful moderation, as one might assume, Lochner appears to vacillate between bingeing and purging. While having completed such a dramatic transformation should be rewarded with the license to indulge in less controlled eating (and tracking), Lochner soon realizes that his weight loss requires discipline to maintain. This

pattern is consistent with the current state of weight science, which suggests that maintaining such an extreme weight loss requires continued vigilance; those who have lost so much weight cannot simply live “like a normal person” if they want to be thin, even after they have reached their goals. At the end of the chart, Lochner’s future still seems unclear; as the text tells us: “Today Mr. Lochner’s weight hovers around 200 pounds and he worries about regaining lost weight. He wants to keep tracking his progress, but without specific goals, motivation is harder.” In the last word, Lochner himself says, “I don’t like the fact that I can easily let myself go, and I’m trying to get past that.” Whether or not this attempt will be successful, however, remains to be seen.

Within this analysis, I have primarily discussed Lochner’s fluctuation in weight; that is what so dramatically changes. Yet the representation of the data here, and our subsequent interpretation of it, relies on an assumption of uniform time; while weight goes up and down, time forges on, constant, a silent player at the bottom of the chart. Problematizing weight, then, becomes easier, while time proves itself to be quite a bit more slippery. What produces this slipperiness is precisely time’s apparent constancy and objectivity; time appears to be the reliable axis on which uneven weight loss proceeds, separate from the events it measures. As Russell West-Pavlov notes, the progressive measurement of so-called “absolute” time produces “...a slow but ineluctable separation of two linearities: that of calibrated chronometrical time, and that of a mode of temporality given by nature itself and part and parcel of natural processes and events” (13-14). Time becomes abstract and homogeneous, used to capture all sorts of different things in its framework: “Homogeneity permits a plethora of different events of differing durations, scales, speeds, to be evenly reified with an abstract framework of time. The virtue of reification is that the framework, unaffected by that which it contains, can posit an even speed of temporal progress.” (West-Pavlov, 37). In this respect, it seems that time is constantly flowing below the weight loss makeover and its events, rather than caught up in it. If we flipped the axes of time and weight in the “Diary of a Food Tracker,” though, we would view the data quite differently; we would see the fluctuation of time in relation to weight (the increasing temporal distance between goals, for example) rather than the other way around.

To understand time in weight loss, we must also acknowledge a variety of temporalities. First of all, we would have to see that the body's time exists in tension to "absolute" time; the perception of weight loss in the body, then, depends not only on the abstract concept of externally measured time, but also on other, more difficult to measure feelings of time in the body, just as the perception of the body's spatiality does not depend solely on the "objective" number on the scale, but also on other indicators (tightness of clothing, how the body "fits" into the built environment, etc.). Secondly, we have to acknowledge how processes of weight gain and loss are connected to larger biotemporalities of adulthood, reproduction, aging, and mortality, etc. On the one hand, weight gain is viewed as a "natural" part of aging. Too much weight gain, however, or being fat too young, appears to signal premature aging, an apparent hastening of mortality. Weight loss, then, promises to reverse this process and align one's "biological age" with "chronological age," and thus prevent early death. Likewise, while weight gain during pregnancy is acceptable for women, there is increasing pressure on women to shed this "baby weight" after birth, or even limit weight gained during pregnancy to a "healthy" range. Weight loss in this context signals a return to the mean after childbirth, a disavowal of the corporeal consequences of giving birth. All of these temporal scales are important in understanding weight loss. In this respect, addressing time in weight loss shows us how "multiple temporalities inhabit but also exceed the human scale, with agency and processual transformation (immanent temporalities) inhering in all human and non-human processes of becoming" (West-Pavlov, 3-4).

In the weight loss makeover, the number of temporalities multiplies. Like in literature, television demonstrates a separation between the narrated time and the time of narration, between "story" and "discourse." This classical distinction refers to the difference between how events proceed in time and how these events are captured and packaged in the narrative's diegetic time or, as Patrick Keating describes it, "the sequence of events as they are presented to the spectator and the sequence of events as they are reconstructed by the spectator" (Keating 59). A moment in a show, for example, may refer to "day 10" of the makeover but is simultaneously and necessarily placed in the temporal context of the series—in "episode X" of "season Y" at the time Z minutes and Z seconds, broadcast on a particular date at a particular time. The

presentation of events may proceed more or less chronologically, but television narratives, especially those in reality television, also create frequent temporal dislocations through flashbacks or previews. Keating argues that these techniques allow narratives to perform their three “master functions”—suspense, curiosity, and surprise (Keating 56). Described in more temporal terms, these three functions correspond to what Meir Sternberg identifies as “prospection,” “retrospection,” and “re-cognition.” These functions allow viewers to make suppositions about what will happen, but also revise their assumptions with new information and re-align their understanding of events. Drawing on Sternberg, Keating identifies how these three functions are produced by reality television competitions like *Project Runway*, ultimately arguing that the manipulation of temporality contributes to reality television’s “surprisingly complex narrative dynamics” (55).

As Keating also notes, however, the classical literary distinction between “narrated time” and “time of narration” must be expanded when talking about reality television. Because reality television purports to be documentary, there is a third temporal strand that hovers above narrated time—“the sequence of events as they actually happened in the world” (Keating 59). This sequence is inevitably inaccessible to the viewer in the narrative itself, as the program assumes, and induces the viewer to believe, that it is identical to narrated time. Indeed, if there is an evident discrepancy, then it is generally labeled a “continuity error.”¹⁷ In contrast, a “successful” use of narrated time presents it as seamlessly tied to the real world, the two strands admitting no difference. In practice, however, we know that there is often a wide divergence between “reality” and “reality TV.” One such dislocation is produced by the temporal gap between filming and airing. The necessary time of production ensures that events must be filmed weeks or months before they are broadcast; the series themselves, however, often seek to mask this gap. The discrepancy between filming and broadcast time becomes apparent, though, when special events such as holidays appear in a show. While an episode of *The Biggest Loser* (US) may have a Halloween theme and be broadcast in the same week as the holiday, for example, the filming of the episode must happen far in advance of October 31. Therefore contestants must act as if it is

¹⁷ The potential for continuity errors in reality television is great, and is generally assumed to detract from its quality. The blog *Jezebel* even makes a joke of this in their series of entries on *Keeping Up with the Kardashians* entitled “Keeping Up with the Kontinuity Errors.”

that holiday when it is not, and act as if it is not a holiday when it is. More significantly, though, the temporal scale of the weight loss makeover is not only dislocated from the filmed events, but is also internally inconsistent. A “week” in the *Biggest Loser* narrative, for example, is not a week in the real world. While weigh-ins are always presented as happening weekly, interviews with past contestants reveal that the time between weigh-ins may vary from five days to three weeks, depending on production schedules (Symon). In both of these examples, the appearance of holidays and the apparent time between weigh-ins, it becomes clear that the timing of the series is oriented to the viewer’s experience, rather than the contestant’s.

These temporal discrepancies are certainly not limited to the weight loss makeover; any reality television program is likely to shrink or expand the “week” to fit production schedules. Keating even argues against the importance of this third “real world” sequence of events, writing that “such an addition will ultimately be irrelevant to our understanding of the show’s narrative dynamics, which are grounded in the interplay between a set of events presented to us and the constantly changing set of assumptions and hypotheses we must develop to make sense of the presented sequence” (59). While it is certainly true that there is enough within the internal dynamics of the programs to analyze, we can never fully discount this third sequence because reality television claims, after all, to reflect “reality,” even with all its distortions and manipulations. And while time discrepancies may not be especially problematic in programs like *Project Runway*, they have important consequences when the body’s transformation is being so visibly tracked as in *The Biggest Loser*. As season three finalist Kai Hibbard says of her experience on the show, viewers’ judgments of contestants rely very much on the perception of time (Symon). Unaware of the compression of time that edits out hours of exercise, for example, viewers may assume that contestants are so physically unfit, or worse yet, lazy, that they quickly give up on their workouts. As Hibbard says, this perception is skewed because “they don’t show the additional mandatory six hours or so of us furiously flailing the pounds away. They much preferred filming us right at the end of a workout, when we looked like lazy quitters for stopping so early.” Likewise, the variable length of the “week” changes the amount of weight loss that can reasonably be achieved in that period, and also influences how viewers perceive the weight loss of contestants: “Sometimes the real period between weigh-ins was over three weeks, and you got

liked like a rock star for losing so much weight so quickly. Other times it was only five days, and the audience thought you were phoning it in that week.” Moreover, the perception of contestants’ weight loss has an impact on viewers’ expectations of themselves. They become easily disappointed when they realize that they cannot replicate the results of the program to lose as much weight in a week as contestants lost in their “week.” As she says on *Jezebel*, Hibbard has had personal encounters with such fans:

When I have people come to me crying, telling me how hard they work and how they log their food and how they've done everything they could and [they ask] ‘Why can't I lose 12 pounds in a week like you?’ I feel a responsibility to get out there and go, ‘You know what? Sue me if you want to, NBC, but I'm telling these people, I didn't lose 12 pounds in a week. It didn't happen. It wasn't a week. And even when it looks like I lost 12 pounds in a week . . . I was so severely dehydrated that I was completely unhealthy. (qtd. Poretsky)

Hibbard, in pointing out this discrepancy, not only exposes the temporal manipulation of the producers, but also criticizes the very premise of the weight loss makeover, which so clearly relies on measuring weight against time.

One might assume from Hibbard’s account that the fans she encounters are simply not “smart” viewers, and thus susceptible to the narrative machinations of the makeover. As Sender and Sullivan’s research indicates, though, viewers of makeover programs such as *The Biggest Loser* are often more aware of the show’s manipulation of certain aspects than one might assume. They are often irritated, for example, by product placement or the representational strategies used to produce shame (Sender and Sullivan, 138). What they nevertheless often fail to critique is the very premise of such makeovers. Part of this uncritiqued framework is the temporal axis. While viewers are easily aware of the stretching of time in the narration—the building of suspense during weigh-ins, for example—less obvious manipulation of time, especially of narrated time, goes unnoticed. While the progress of weight change is constantly thematized or problematized, time appears to quietly proceed. It is precisely for this reason, however, that the various temporalities in the makeover need to be examined in detail. These expand beyond the more obvious temporal framework of “before/after” identified and discussed by media

scholarship, to include other temporal frameworks, such as the biotemporalities of adulthood and mortality.

Before/After and During

The primary temporal framework available to the makeover in general is the “before” and “after.” Both Meredith Jones and Brenda Weber discuss makeovers in relation to this temporal structure. As Jones argues, the “before/after” frame comes from older, familiar depictions of makeover processes such as cosmetic surgery or weight loss in the photographic juxtaposition of two images side by side. These images recall a “magical” narrative of transformation that fills the temporal gap between them. What differs in contemporary makeovers, however, is that the period between “before” and “after” is stretched and filled in. The wide range of makeover shows that Brenda Weber analyzes testify to the ubiquity of this new temporality, which not only includes “before” and “after,” but during.

While Jones and Weber both take recourse to the “before/after” as a structuring principle of the contemporary makeover, they disagree on what exactly constitutes the “after.” Jones theorizes makeover culture as a state “where *becoming* is more desirable than *being*” (Jones 12). Contemporary makeover culture, she argues, privileges a constant process of change over a concrete ending point; “what is most desirable now is a ceaseless, stretched, *period of becoming*, rather than a finale that displays a new body. Transformation becomes a temporal and spatial mode of being rather than a static end result” (Jones 55). In contrast, Weber argues that makeover is less about change for change’s sake, but instead about change directed toward particular ends. In other words, makeover entails teleology. As Weber notes in her review of *Skintight*, Jones sometimes neglects to acknowledge and discuss in full detail the “one-way teleology invested in bodies as social texts” (Weber 292). The whole vocabulary of makeover, including such words as “betterment” or “self-improvement,” is invested with particular social meaning and this vocabulary is embedded in discourses of race, class, and gender. As she suggests, “gaining weight is also a form of embodied becoming, and so would fit Jones’s definition of makeover culture, yet weight gain would not be applauded on television, nor, I’d venture, would Jones

consider it an example testifying to the ubiquity of makeover culture” (Weber 292). Likewise, in *Makeover TV*, Weber points to the types of change that would not be found in makeover, arguing that the genre neglects transformations that do not “normalize” bodies: “Makeover logic can bring the margins to the center, but it cannot imagine stories of reversal that challenge the center or change only for the sake of variety and newness” (32).

Moreover, Weber argues importantly that this teleology is fundamentally tied to ideas of authenticity, in which makeover is used simply to bring the body in concordance with an essentialized “inner” self:

Regardless of the type, makeovers ardently promote an essentialized and authentic idea of self that is stable, coherent, and locatable, where gender unambiguously correlates to sexed identity. Though the makeover authorizes change in order to achieve this stable self, such transformation is teleological and unidirectional. Before-bodies become After-bodies, end of story. (*Makeover TV*, 15)

The “end of story” at the end of this passage is meant both ways, not just for emphasis, but also for stress on the apparent finality of the “after” body. The successful appearance of the “After-body” means the end of the narrative. And makeovers work hard to convince viewers that their makeovers are successful; the telos is achieved and clearly marked.

Weight loss makeovers certainly operate with this type of teleology as well. As discussed above, the After-body is not only conceived as a beautiful and gender-normative ideal, but also represented numerically by a “normal” goal weight. The continuum of improvement provided by weight loss is as unidirectional as one can get in a makeover. Moreover, weight loss makeovers, as will be discussed in particular examples later in this chapter, certainly conform to Weber’s observations about the revelation of an “authentic” self. The popular idea of the “thin person inside” illustrates this idea of an inner self that must be freed from the confines of a fat body. Jordan, one participant in *I Used to Be Fat*, is typical when he describes his fat as a heavy winter coat that hides his true identity; as he says, looking into the mirror, “I see someone that isn’t who I am inside. I see the outwardly figure and the inwardly person two different people.” (1.05, 3.07). Weight loss thus promises to unify the spatial disconnect between inside and outside, but

also creates another disconnect in temporal terms, which is forever divided into “before” and “after” transformation.

Weber’s further explanation of her understanding of makeover’s goal, however, introduces a certain ambiguity. Instead of a fixed point that is actually achieved, she instead posits makeover along a continuum: “The point here is not change for change’s sake, but modification along the teleology of improvement, a continuum along the horizon of perfection that anxiously approaches but can never fully achieve its goal” (*Makeover* TV 58). Rather than a point that can actually be achieved, then, the “telos” of makeover is understood here as an asymptote, that is, a limit that is approached but never fully reached. If we accept this point, however, then Weber is perhaps not as far from Jones as she claims. If makeover’s movement toward its goal is asymptotic, then how can we say the After-body is ever fully achieved? Presumably, as Jones contends, the body is always open for more work. It is just that Jones fails to articulate fully how this “work” is always caught up in other kinds of cultural work—producing gender, citizenship, race, etc.

Perhaps what is necessary here to resolve the apparent tension between Jones and Weber is simply a distinction between the *makeover as television genre* and *makeover culture* more generally. Makeover narratives necessarily operate with a telos because, as Patrick Keating argues, “narratives are not naturally found objects but purpose-driven constructions” so that we naturally “make sense of narratives teleologically—that is, in light of the functions that narratives perform” (Keating 56). Moreover, unlike a fictional series that privileges open-ended seriality, RTV makeovers have a rigid and closed format, following their subjects for pre-determined amount of time, whether that time is packaged in an individual episode or season. To justify their own logic, then, the makeover will always emphasize the change produced, bookending the transformation with “before” and “after.” The “Before-body” will be shamed; the “After-body” will be celebrated.

The Biggest Loser, the prototypical weight loss makeover, illustrates the before/after trope at work. This framework is most obviously evident in the grand finale of each season in which all contestants are brought back to reveal their transformations. Instead of simply walking out on stage, however, each contestant is placed in relation to an image of their “before” body. This is



Ashley interacts with the hologram of her “before” self at the finale of *The Biggest Loser* (USA), season 9.

most dramatically shown in season 9, for example, when they break through a paper sheet with a life-size “before” picture; the old self is metaphorically destroyed as the new self emerges. Next, the show returns to a traditional side-by-side before/after; the “new” version of the person is contrasted with a picture taken at the beginning of the season in which the contestant’s neutral or negative expression stands in sharp contrast to his or her new, ecstatic face. The baggy pants and exposed bellies of “before” are exchanged for sleek formal wear that cleverly hides remaining pockets of fat and excess skin. Additional elements, like a new haircut, tan, or cosmetic dental work may have been performed to enhance the appearance of the contestant, but these adjustments are not acknowledged in the finale. In line with the visual logic of this transformation, the “before” picture is projected as a hologram on the left while the person stands to the right.¹⁸ In many seasons and versions, *Biggest Loser* contestants interact in some way with this image to highlight the contrast, either shaking their heads in mock disapproval or shooing it

¹⁸ This arrangement is reversed in versions produced in countries with languages that are read right to left, such as the Arab version of *The Biggest Loser*, *Al Rabeh Al Akbar* (The Biggest Winner), so that the contestant’s “after” appears to the left of the “before.”

away with their hands. Interviews with the contestants, in which they constantly stress the positive effects of their new embodiment, also emphasize the sense that a real transformation has taken place, complete with narrative closure. Koli, for example, says “It’s been a long journey. [...] Before the ranch, before the show, I didn’t know who I was. I had no self-worth. I didn’t value myself one bit, you know, and I had to go through this journey to find out who *I* am, and to be proud of myself” (9.19, 8.20).

Of course, not all makeovers are successful and not all weight loss makeovers hit their targets. In fact, many contestants on *The Biggest Loser* end the season still in the “overweight” or even “obese” category of BMI, but this information is available only through extratextual sources like the meticulous chronicling on Wikipedia; for the sake of narrative closure, *The Biggest Loser* celebrates each pound lost and presents each journey as a true transformation. Visual and verbal cues present a transformation that is apparently seamless and fully realized, even if the contestant has not reached his or her goal weight. This narrative framing sometimes produces awkward moments, though, if weight loss is modest and characters remain visibly fat. These contestants must still be fit into the “before/after” frame, subjected to a final weigh-in in the celebratory atmosphere of the finale. Ambiguous results leave both contestants and hosts hovering uncomfortably between praising the weight already lost and assuring the audience that the person is still “working” to lose more weight. In its depiction of the still-fat body’s chafing against the makeover format, these moments highlight the residual anxiety that is produced in makeover, even as its greatest successes are highlighted. The material resistance of some bodies to desired change is evident at the same time others demonstrate its incredible plasticity.

While the makeover show must necessarily declare makeover finished, though, this is not the real “end of story.” Makeover culture, as it permeates into non-televised lives, is unlikely to be satisfied with declaring makeover finished. Weight loss, especially when it is extreme, does not necessarily grant the loser a perfect body. Instead, as a growing number of people publicly admit, being “ex-fat” is likely to leave its mark. Procedures designed to address the issues produced by weight loss, such as apron surgery to remove excess abdominal skin, are increasingly popular. These procedures are also now increasingly depicted on television, folding the ex-fat body into another narrative of makeover. Even these processes, though, leave the body with visible

imperfections in the form of scars. In this way, the “after” body continually points back to the transformation process, marked by the narrative of change.

More importantly, we must acknowledge that, in the larger temporal context of history, the “telos” of makeover—be it racial, gendered, etc.—is always a moving target. What satisfies the conditions of being appropriately feminine or appropriately masculine in one cultural moment may not satisfy it in another. We can note this shift in the different bodily ideals that men have undergone just in the most recent decades in North America and Europe—from the aesthetics of metrosexuality at the turn of the century to a new emphasis on “spornosexuality”—a term coined by journalist Mark Simpson to denote the masculine aesthetic that combines the ideals of sports and pornographic bodies and importantly entails lean muscularity. As Simpson writes, in “second-generation” metrosexuality, mens’ bodies take center stage, becoming “the ultimate accessories” to “share and compare in an online marketplace” (Simpson). In contrast to other recent phenomena such as the “lumbersexual,” which recalls a more traditional image of the male body as big, muscular and hairy, the aesthetics of the spornosexual are all about being lean, toned, and relatively hairless. The spornosexual aesthetic, then, potentially changes the process of achieving a masculine ideal to include weight loss rather than bulking up.

In all this theorization of “before” and “after,” however, we should not forget the “during.” Both Weber and Jones, after all, make the point that “During” is really the heart of makeover, whereas the “before” and “after” simply frame the “period of becoming.” As Weber writes, the “big reveal” moments so important to makeover “are largely significant for their narrative emphasis on During”; in other words, the “After-body” is valued because it points back to the work that was done to produce it (30-31). Likewise, Jones stresses the “labour revealed” of makeover’s “during” stage. As Weber also concedes, “TV’s dramatizations of labor, suffering, punishment, and reward constitute almost the entirety of the reality makeover’s textual time, positioning the During as the heart of these programs” (Weber 31). Yet while each stress the importance of this during, neither adequately describes exactly how this during proceeds, especially in regard to the production of temporality.

The “during” itself is difficult to describe, and is thus often further subdivided to create additional structure. In fact, moments within the makeover are even structured according to

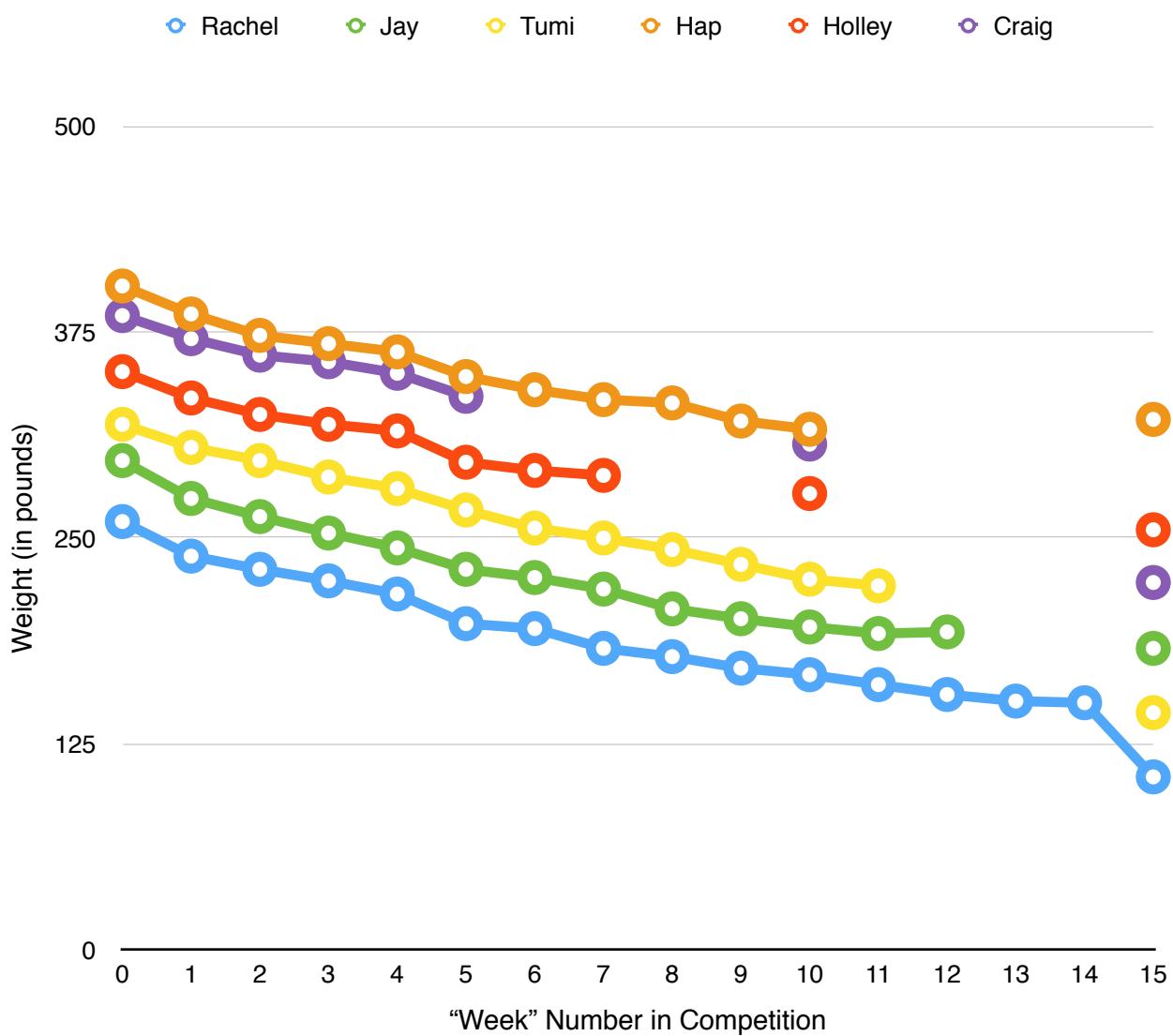
“before/after.” This is particularly evident in *The Biggest Loser*; each episode ends with a weigh-in, which refers to the contestant’s weight from the previous week as the “before” and the current weight as the “after.” Even the program *I Used to Be Fat*, which compresses a full summer’s transformation into one episode, uses intermediate weigh-ins to structure the progress of the makeover. In each case, before the number appears, an intertitle is inserted to give information, referring both to the beginning of the whole transformation and the most recent weigh-in for near-temporal context, e.g. “At the beginning of the summer, Gabriella weighed 253 lbs. Two weeks ago, she weighed 239 lbs.” (20.37). In this way, a previously achieved weight which was once an “after” becomes the “before” weight of another weigh-in, creating an endless temporal chain of “before” and “after.”¹⁹

The temporal framing of “before/after” ensures that even in the “during,” participants are continually placing themselves, and being placed in, narrative arcs that reflect the teleological drives of the makeover. This means not only looking forward to the “after” but also looking back to the “before” to mark the progress already being made. One moment that illustrates this “threefold” moment well is episode six of *The Biggest Loser*’s season 15. At this point, the season is nearing the midpoint of the time allotted to candidates for staying on the ranch. To mark the time elapsed, the contestants are shown their audition videos from “just six short weeks ago” (16.30). To mark the distance from that time, contestants speak of their former selves in third person, “that man” or “that girl.” One contestant, Hap, provides an especially useful image to read the temporality of the moment; instead of talking about the contents of that original video, he emphasizes the view of his own reflection as the screen goes black: “The best part of all of it was when the screen went black and I could see my own reflection in the computer and I see a skinnier me. I know that sounds funny, but in the last six weeks I’ve changed so much physically and mentally, I can now see the person I’m becoming rather than who person I was.” (19.59). Hap’s expression of his temporal position in the makeover process is illustrated by the camera’s capture of this very moment. Importantly this realization is mediated by the screen; the screen as reflective surface allows the “skinnier me” to emerge on the same site where the

¹⁹ This recalls in some sense Bauman’s formulation: “Each lived-through moment is pregnant with a new beginning and the end: once sworn antagonists, now Siamese twins.” (LL, 77). Each end becomes another beginning, so that they are inseparable.

fatter Hap had been only moments before. Meanwhile the material Hap is also visible to the viewer. In this moment, both Haps, skinnier and fatter, are visible to the viewer, but Hap is only able to see the skinnier version emerge when the image of the fatter past is extinguished. In its creation of this image, the *BL* demonstrates a rare moment of self-reflexivity. Hap's narration of the event creates the bridge to the future, the image to come. Yet what this moment also

Six Different Trajectories in *Biggest Loser* Season 15



demonstrates is that Hap's position in "during" can only be understood on the arc from "before" to "after."

While the narrative arc of "before" and "after" is important for each character in the weight loss makeover, it should be said that the competitive elimination format of *The Biggest Loser* also produces different arcs for different characters. Although these stories all (generally) bend in the same direction, to the same telos of a successful "after," the multiplicity of these narratives should be emphasized. Rather than being uniform, they rise and fall at different moments, ensuring that contestants are highlighted at different times. Moreover, the competitive structure of the show means that some character arcs necessarily last longer than others. While nearly all participants appear at the finale, they are eliminated at different times. This means that the arc of a particular character is destined to be cut off before it reaches the end; there is a necessary gap between the solid arc and the telos. As one can see in the graph, the data stops as each person is eliminated; it is only at the end (or if they are brought back for a chance to re-enter the competition) that they again appear. If a character is abruptly eliminated, it has the potential to disturb the narrative. To smooth this transition, then, the episode in which a certain participant is eliminated often is edited to spend more time on this character and create a small telos, a moment of success that marks their progress before the contestant leaves. Before Craig is eliminated in season 15, for example, he is shown overcoming his fear of swimming. Likewise, before Bobby is eliminated, he speaks about coming into his own as a gay man and resolving to come out to his father. This moment of apparent development emphasizes the success of the contestant that is not apparent on the scale and assures the viewer that the person will continue to progress in the makeover. The temporal gap between elimination and finale is also partially filled by an update on the previously eliminated contestant in the episode following their dismissal. Finally, there is a temporal gap of a couple months for all contestants between the final weigh-in "on the ranch" and the finale. This ensures that the final results are even more dramatic.

Temporality and Mortality

The temporality of the weight loss makeover is important as well for the ways it expands beyond “before” and “after” to fit into larger biotemporalities, particularly in relation to mortality. Among makeovers, weight loss stands alone as a transformation that is viewed as a “life or death” necessity. Trainers, doctors, and contestants themselves emphasize this view, imagining a future early death that is to be avoided at all costs. This distinction is also made to legitimize the weight loss makeover in the larger field of television; as *Biggest Loser* trainer Jillian Michaels says in the very beginning of season 15, “People think this is a TV show. It’s not. It’s a life-or-death intervention.” (1.38). Shortly thereafter trainer Bob makes a similar point, saying “what you have to remember with this reality show is that it’s not some *talent contest*. What it is is people pouring out their heart and soul” (2.39). Just as coach Detlef from *Biggest Loser Teens* suggests that the show is “objective” in contrast to other, unnamed “subjective” programs,²⁰ Bob’s disapproving stress on “talent contest” indicates how *The Biggest Loser* seeks to present itself as “real” and “serious” in contrast to talent competitions that are presumably about appearances; the contestants on *The Biggest Loser* pour out their hearts and souls to make substantive change in their lives, not (only) to become famous and beautiful. What this view neglects, of course, is the reality that the participant in the televised weight loss makeover is constituted as a performer just like any other person on reality television—losing weight is made into a talent. Using the linkage of fatness with mortality, though, gives the weight loss makeover a way of distinguishing itself from both other makeovers, and other competitions.

The connection between “obesity” and mortality is one of the key arguments made in favor of weight loss by medical practitioners and public health officials, and much of the “moral panic” over obesity is tied to this perception. Marilyn Wann addresses this claim in her programmatic foreword to *The Fat Studies Reader*, noting that the oft-cited figures of “three hundred thousand” or “four hundred thousand” additional annual deaths from obesity in the United States was debunked by a more comprehensive study by Flegal et al. (Wann 16). While there were additional deaths in the “obese” group, they were much fewer than previous estimates (111,900) and there were even fewer deaths in the “overweight” category than those in the

²⁰ See earlier section “Health and the Tyranny of Numbers.”

“healthy” range. In a typical polemic flourish, Wann concludes that “[w]ith no giant pile of dead fat bodies, death threats about fatness sound like wishful thinking” (16).

In the popular imagination, however, the link between fat and death remains. Weight gain is viewed as an acceleration of aging, thus pushing people closer to death. Weight loss, in contrast, promises to restore people to their “rightful” ages. Dina Mercado, season 8 contestant on *The Biggest Loser* (USA), makes this explicit comparison of her actual age and her “biological age” in the *Biggest Loser* book *Six Weeks to a Healthier You*. The apparent disparity between these two numbers, identified by the show’s physician Dr. Huizenga, is cited as a source of motivation for her to work out and lose weight. As she says, “When I didn’t feel like going to the gym, I remembered Dr. H telling me that at age 28, my biological age was really 43. That kept me going.” (165). Dr. Huizenga’s diagnosis draws on recent ideas in biology and genetics that suggest a difference between “chronological” and “biological” age, creating a strange temporal disconnect between the body’s aging and our more commonsense understanding of time, which, as discussed above, is generally in tune with “absolute” time. It is not explained, however, how the number 43 as Dina’s actual “biological” age was derived, nor what health markers led to this pronouncement. Instead, this use of numbers reveals itself to be a scare tactic that draws on a fear of mortality to motivate weight loss makeover participants to lose weight.

The possibility of an early death due to obesity is particularly stressed in the stories of young adults in relation to their parents. During the first episode of *Biggest Loser UK* in 2009, for example, the issue of mortality forms a key part in the stories of three parent-child teams. Parents emphasize the necessity of their children losing weight to prevent an early death. This is particularly drastic in the case of Raz and Lisa, who report that Lisa (24) had been told by doctors that she has “one year to live” if she does not lose weight. In the weigh-ins of other contestants, this issue also surfaces. Carol takes pain to emphasize that she is proud of her 21 year-old daughter Katey, but that she needs to win the battle with her weight because “5, 10 years down the line, [she] might not be here.” Likewise, Dave, when asked why he has come to *The Biggest Loser*, expresses his worry about the health of his 22 year old son, Jamie, saying he has chosen this path “[b]ecause no parent wants to see their child die before them.” In all these pairs, the children are heavier than their parents, producing a perceived mismatch between their age

and weights. Katey directly compares these numbers, pointing to the disconnect between her weight (over 22 stone) and age, saying “Who wants to weigh more than their age?” Likewise, Jamie faces the perceived contradiction of age and weight, being both the youngest and heaviest of the contestants in that season. Fat, then, seems to disrupt the “natural” generational order by making children heavier than their parents and threatening to kill them before their parents die.

The weight loss makeover thus presents itself as a necessary intervention, derailing a process of unbridled weight gain that ends in death and initiating a reverse development toward health and happiness. At the same time it lays out a path of positive transformation, it often visualizes this movement in relation to the shadowy alternative trajectory of accelerated age and death. This is most clearly evident in the beginnings of shows such as BBC3’s *Honey, We’re Killing the Kids* in which producers use an “advanced graphic software process” to simulate what the children of families will look like at the age of 40 in the hopes of giving their parents a “wake-up call” about how their habits are literally “killing” their children. The host, Kris Murrin, argues that they are able to predict “very accurately” how the children will develop; the screen begins with a picture of the child at the current age and morphs until the ever-more-horrifying simulation stops at 40. As a website describing the German version, *Liebling, wir bringen die Kinder um*, writes, “impressive computer morphing visualizes the consequences: illnesses and early death are suddenly drastically visible.”²¹ While the degeneration of health is not only linked to fatness in this particular program, and thin children may also be targeted for intervention based on their eating habits and lack of activity, fatness is one of its key concerns. Fat children are predicted to have limited life expectancy and a variety of ailments. The simulation recurs in the episode each week, when the parents must return to meet with Kris Murrin. Finally, the change in habits allows another simulation that (hopefully) corrects the dangerous futures of the children.

Contestants may also view their transformations in relation not only to their own mortality, but in relation to the deaths of others. In *BL* 15, this aspect was emphasized in a few stories, especially those of Craig and David. Craig speaks of his father’s early death and his desire to avoid that fate for himself. The number 32 gains particular significance here as the age at which

²¹ “Ein eindrucksvolles Computer-Morphing visualisiert die Folgen: Krankheiten und frühzeitiger Tod sind plötzlich drastisch sichtbar.” (Fernsehserien.de)

his father died; Craig, approaching that age, feels the weight of that number growing. After losing weight, though, he apparently has the strength to face his father's death and also defy his own mortality. In the update after he is eliminated, Craig is shown visiting his father's grave, supposedly the first time since his death. At this point, he says, "The fact that I'm here today, I feel like I can do anything. I felt like this was the door I was not willing to walk through. I'm through that door." (15.6, 2.00). "Here" in this moment means both the cemetery and his current weight; walking through the "door" of weight loss has allowed him to confront his father's death and avoid his own. Paradoxically, the focus on changing one number, his weight, has allowed him to disavow another; he no longer has to dread 32, because, as he says, "32 is just a number." This statement is akin to Weber's observation about *Extreme Makeover* participant Amy, who becomes "empowered with the ability to transcend those very standards" that had motivated her makeover (*Makeover TV 2*).

The story of David, one of the most visible and popular contestants from the beginning, is also intimately tied to mortality. Having cared for his wife through a long battle with cancer, David is painted as a tragic figure as he tearfully affirms that he needs to lose weight to fulfill the promise he made to his dying wife to care for their daughters. Weight loss appears to allow him to "be there" for his family and prevent his own early death. The tragic aspect of his personality is seemingly confirmed by his failure to complete the first workout. Jillian follows him outside the gym to confront him about adopting a more positive outlook and says to the camera in interview: "I won't allow the gym to become a part of his victim story, and become associated with his victim behavior. That gym needs to represent a new David" (14.03). Jillian's insistence that the gym should not be part of his "victim story" is ironic, though, given that the show *makes* his victim story central to his trajectory on the *BL*, editing his tearful recounting of Andrea's death into nearly every episode; it is impossible to see a "new David" without this background. Moreover, this victim story is so powerful that the show largely elides his happy and successful marriage to his second wife, failing to even acknowledge her existence until far along in the season. The viewer is astonished to find out in the eleventh episode that he has actually been happily remarried for *nine years*. It seems only possible to reveal this information at this point because the arc has bent toward the resplendent "after" and the positive aspects of David's life

story can be brought out. David also self-reflexively frames his story in explicitly narrative terms when he says, in episode 14, “I came here with a sad story. I’m leaving a winner. The story’s been changed, and I get to write a new ending. That’s the best feeling in the world. (39.31). This “new ending,” though, only makes sense in the context of his previous grief. In this way, David’s story is a prime example of how the narrative demands of the weight loss makeover produce paradoxes and tensions; David is supposed to deal with mortality, to shed his victim image, but his transformation can only be read in relation to tragedy to make the “before” and “after” work.

While the teleology of weight loss pushes the change in one direction, the specter of weight gain and mortality never fully disappears. It is always lurking, ready to be raised at a moment’s notice to scare makeover participants back down the scale. In one season of *The Biggest Loser Germany*, for example, simulations return in the final episode at the camp when the remaining contestants are invited to watch first a video of themselves from the first workout and then a simulation of their bodily change. The trainers frame this exercise as a way of giving the contestants a way to recognize the change they have already gone through. As coach Detlef argues, contestants cannot grasp the “rein optisch” (purely visual) change their bodies have undergone; they must be able to see themselves “von außen” (from outside) to appreciate the transformation. Paradoxically, Soost suggests, they must stand outside the body to fully appraise the body; the *feeling* of change in the body must be supplemented with its *appearance*. As when the *BL* contestants in the USA season 15 view the images of their first workout, the German contestants express their disbelief and distance from their past bodies; Stefan, for example, describes his former self as a “sick alien pig” (“krankhaftes Alien-Schwein”). Instead of just showing the past that was, though, the simulation acts to show both what could have been and what will be (if the makeover continues). Taking their initial photos as a starting point, the simulations show first how the negative trajectory—movement up the scale—could have continued and then the movement back down, crossing the current weight of the contestant and continuing to a thin goal. The contestants identify themselves with the future thin self projected by the simulation, fervently asserting that they will never again go back to the previous weight. Whether they will actually reach the targets set by the simulation, though, is questionable, especially given that this target image is sometimes incredibly thin, as in the case of Martina.

Stefan: What Could Have Been and What is to Come



Große Veränderungen! | The Biggest Loser 2015 | SAT.1



Große Veränderungen! | The Biggest Loser 2015 | SAT.1

Weight Loss and Becoming an Adult:

I Used to Be Fat and Jung und Dick! Eine Generation im Kampf gegen Kilos

Another important biotemporal scheme for weight loss makeovers is the transition from childhood to adulthood. This movement, from dependent to independent person, seems particularly suited to the weight loss makeover and its general emphasis on learning self-discipline and personal responsibility. Moreover, the transition from child to adult provides a perfect occasion for the staging of a new identity to emerge from the body's transformation; teens are eager to establish themselves anew as they begin a new life phase. Teen weight loss makeovers, then, capitalize on this desire by promising participants a new body and new lease on life as they enter independent adulthood. Weight loss becomes a rite of passage performed in the liminal space between childhood and adulthood, school and college, home and away.

Young people provide particularly ripe targets for weight loss makeovers as well because childhood fatness is especially politicized in the moral panic of obesity. As treatment of obesity shifts to prevention, the move from adult bodies to children's bodies is logical; by arresting weight gain in childhood, we are told, we can prevent children from "suffering" from obesity in adulthood. Children's bodies also become targets of the state, which employs a wide range of strategies to combat "childhood obesity"—everything from developing programs like Michelle Obama's Let's Move to even removing children from homes where parental neglect is deemed to produce obesity.²² In her article, "Fat Kids, Working Moms, and the 'Epidemic of Obesity': Race, Class, and Mother Blame," Natalie Boero illuminates the ways in which the discourse of childhood obesity often relies on blaming "bad" mothers for their children's embodiment. As Boero argues, citing Ladd-Taylor and Umansky, the stereotypes of the "bad mother" are all implicitly based on the "normative conception of good mothering that assumes that good mothers are heterosexual, white, middle class, and do not work outside the home" (136). In blaming mothers, then, the debate obscures the larger structural issues that impact families and

²² See Sondra Solovay, *Tipping the Scales of Justice: Fighting Weight Based Discrimination*. Amherst: Prometheus Books, 2000. Solovay cites a number of examples in which parents are charged with child abuse or neglect, or lose custody of their children because they are "too fat."

their health, and disproportionately targets “ethnic” mothers for their supposedly “unhealthy” habits: “Like the social construction of the ‘obesity epidemic’ in general, the blaming of mothers for their kids’ ‘excess’ weight draws attention away from the very real structural inequalities in health care, education, and employment that are often felt hardest by women and minorities” (140).

Weight loss makeovers thus capitalize on this particular fear of childhood obesity, incorporating such themes in their narratives and intervening in the lives of children who have apparently not received the right support from their parents to maintain a “correct” weight. While *The Biggest Loser* focuses on adults, for example, it picks up on this theme by identifying “kid ambassadors” (season 14) who are encouraged to lose weight and thus inspire other children and even working with the state to promote public health initiatives. In season 15, an episode featured Sam Kass, senior policy advisor on nutrition to president and executive director of Michelle Obama’s Let’s Move! Campaign, giving the contestants a cooking challenge that was judged by the kid ambassadors from the previous season (15.5). In other programs, though, changing the weights of young people is the core focus. This section will therefore analyze two of these, the US *I Used to Be Fat* and German makeover documentary *Jung und Dick! Eine Generation im Kampf gegen Kilos (Young and Fat! A Generation in the Fight Against Kilos)*.

I Used to Be Fat

One program that particularly highlights the transition from childhood to adulthood is *I Used to Be Fat*. Produced by MTV and aired in two seasons, in 2010-2011 and 2013, respectively, *I Used to Be Fat* targets its protagonists in the liminal temporality between finishing high school in the spring and going on to other things, usually college, in the fall. The temporal space between these two moments—the summer—functions as a symbolic gap between the care of the parents and the care of larger society. This gap is presented as a special moment in which teens can develop newfound autonomy before moving on and leaving their families. In this way, the program closely follows the pattern of Arnold van Gennep’s rite of passage—separation, liminality, and re-integration. Newly gained responsibility and self-determination is enacted

through weight loss and visualized by the body's change. Like related series such as *MTV Made*, each episode of *I Used to Be Fat* focuses on one teen who, with the help of a "coach," attempts to make a radical transformation within a few months. The coach, in this case a personal trainer, does not only train the body, but also acts a sort of intercessor between the teen and his or her family, gently encouraging the eventual split from their care.

Teleological drives are very apparent in *I Used to Be Fat*, both in the structure of the temporal framework and the naming of a numerical "goal" weight for each protagonist. The title of the series itself also demonstrates its teleological focus, albeit with a strange double temporal dislocation—pointing forward in time to an imagined future time in which the current fat state will be in the past. In the opening sequence of each episode, however, this dislocation is not only temporal, but also spatial. In this beginning, which usually lasts about a minute, each protagonist narrates his or her story, but from an outsider's point of view, i.e. in third person. In the episode featuring Tanner, for example, the opening voiceover goes like this:

See that guy. He has a beautiful cheerleader girlfriend and was a gifted athlete. But then he gained weight and quit wrestling at his dad's gym. His dad thinks it's his girlfriend's fault. But he doesn't care what his parents think, because he wants to start his adult life on his own terms. He wants to lose 80 lbs, make his girlfriend proud of the way he looks, and overcome the bad habits that keep him from having a fun and active life. He has one summer to turn himself into the man he's always wanted to be, to be able to say "I used to be fat." How do I know?

Because that guy is me. (1.8)

In between the various sentences of this monologue, we see clips illustrating each point and showing what will come in the episode e.g. Tanner with his girlfriend, Tanner at his father's gym, etc. These visual cues reinforce the message of each sentence. It is only at the end, however, when the narrating voice and the subject on screen are revealed to be the same person. In a way, the show uses the narration and image of this introduction to represent the dissociation between the "inner" subjectivity of the person and their outer representation; the disembodied voice can only locate itself and claim the body after weight loss is achieved and the sentence "I used to be fat" is true. In this way, *I Used to Be Fat* confirms the perceived disconnect between identity and

body as expressed by many fat people, and promises a unification between “inside” and “outside” through weight loss.

These introductions also tell us what to expect from the episode, not only the goals the protagonists will strive for but also the points of potential conflict and tension. The primary goal listed is always weight loss, which is quantified in a numerical “target” weight loss (80 lbs or 100 lbs or whatever), but other goals are also listed. Among these is generally a statement related to the desire for independence from parents and becoming the “man” or “woman” the person always wanted to be. The striving for this goal, however, implicitly sets the protagonist up for conflict with his or her parents, who are often unwilling to cede control in their children’s lives. In Tanner’s case, although he wishes “to start his adult life on his own terms,” it is clear that he and his parents have conflicting views of his future life and his girlfriend’s role in it. This introduction, then, sets up all the major points that will be elaborated in the episode. The stakes of the transformation are highlighted by the apparent uniqueness of the temporal moment—Tanner has just “one summer” to effectively become a mature adult. If he fails at this juncture, it implies, he will not have another opportunity to make it.

I Used to Be Fat elaborates its theme of personal transformation and self-reliance in a very structured temporal framework. When the trainer visits the episode’s protagonist for the first time, he or she brings both a scale and a calendar. These two measuring devices—one to mark time and the other to measure weight—are called upon to measure the progress of the makeover along both temporal and spatial axes, respectively. Instead of counting forward in time like other series (e.g. *The Biggest Loser*), *I Used to Be Fat* counts down; the calendar displays the number of days left to the end of the summer (usually between 90 and 110), rather than the number of days since the beginning. The teen participant is instructed to tear off a page of the calendar each day, making this action a ritual and marking time for both him/herself and the viewer. The calendar motif also appears in intertitles that appear between beats and especially after each commercial break, telling the viewer how many days remain e.g. “75 days left,” before each new moment. This countdown ensures that the number of days and the numerical weight decrease together over time.

The calendar motif is also significant in that it provides an interesting and informative index for how time proceeds in the makeover, or, more accurately, how the various temporal scales of the makeover interact with each other and in tension with quantified weight to produce narrative interest. Instead of the time between “before” and “after” proceeding uniformly, it is strategically expanded at some points and contracted at others. In fact, the time of “during” is often stretched closer to either “before” or “after” pole, and condensed in montages in the middle. Of course, within this framework weigh-ins are also crucial. Two major weigh-ins bookend the episode’s period of transformation, functioning as the “before” and “after” moments that allow us to judge the change; the first appears in the opening act, while the last one begins in the penultimate act and is interrupted by a “curtain” (cut to commercials) that heightens the suspense; this suspense is resolved at the beginning of the final act when the “after” number on the scale is revealed. In the meantime, other weigh-ins are dispersed throughout the episode, one in the second act and two in the third. Each of these minor weigh-ins is also structured as a “before/after” moment; the viewer is reminded via intertitle how much the character weighed the last time and how much time has passed since then; then the number on the scale appears to demonstrate how much weight has been lost. While the two large bookending weigh-ins nearly always produce a quite dramatic change, the minor weigh-ins offer more conflict and thus potential for narrative interest. Generally, at least one weigh-in in the third act is disappointing and discouraging, and is followed with a confrontation of the protagonist with a parent or with the trainer. This moment acts as a climax for the episode, when the entire makeover project itself seems to be in danger; from this point, the action generally falls, ending with resolution and a successful confirmation of the “before/after” frame.

The “after” of *I Used to Be Fat* is not just about reaching the goal weight set at the beginning of the episode. In fact, many participants do not reach this numerical goal. Instead, the true success of the makeover is presented as not only about weight loss, but rather independent and responsible living. The narrative structure ensures that the final weigh-in coincides with the protagonist leaving home and living independently. Moreover, each episode extends beyond the last day of the summer, providing an update between one and three months after the final weigh-in to show how the protagonists have transitioned to adult life; this is the stage of re-integration.

Often participants who had not reached their goal in the final weigh-in have lost more weight and have another weigh-in; this creates another final weigh-in and becomes the resplendent “after.” In this way, *IUTBF* clearly links the bodily transformation of its protagonists with a narrative of increased self-sufficiency and independence; they are presented as twin developments that rely on each other.

Independence means independence from family, which is often presented as a negative influence on the protagonist’s health and well-being. Taking on the makeover process becomes a way to achieve something on their own and overcome the difficulties they have with their parents, forging on in the process of weight loss even if their parents are skeptical or discouraging. Within this process, the trainer functions as a contrasting authority figure to the character’s parents, often mediating between them and sometimes even becoming an ersatz parental figure. In one episode (1.3), for example, protagonist Dominick is caught between his trainer, Saran, and his “big Italian family,” represented by his mother, Joann. In an early scene, Saran implores Dominick to throw away some pasta that is not whole-grain while his mother resists; the pasta represents not only his mother’s cooking, but also their Italian identity. Dominick, momentarily caught between mother and trainer, then chooses to listen to Saran. Later in the episode (fourth act), Saran again presents a contrast to Dominick’s family when she supports Dominick’s decision to go to culinary school and live away from home rather than studying at a local community college as his protective family wishes. While his family seems to want to prevent him from completing the rite of passage and keep him as a dependent child, Saran encourages him to separate and live independently. Importantly, she does this in the language of self-determination; she consistently tells him that it is his decision, his life—that what he wants matters. Moreover, she explicitly links Dominick’s ability to break away from his family’s grip to the process of weight loss, saying in a one-on-one with the camera that he would not have taken a stand against his mother nine or ten weeks before i.e. before losing weight. In the end, of course, both Dominick’s bodily transition and his adaptation to a new life are successful. In the final scene, Dominick returns to the family home one month after moving out; he has undergone a fashion makeover and gotten a haircut, and his family welcomes him with open arms. Here we see clearly how the two story arcs and conflicts intersect and complement

each other—weight loss and independence go hand in hand, but family harmony is not sacrificed. In fact, the family relations appear to be healthier in contrast to the earlier relationship structured by the smothering protection of the mother. Even Joann is won over in the end, not only letting Dominick lead his own life but also losing weight herself.

Paradoxically, of course, the newfound “independence” gained by the protagonist relies on the absolute obedience to the “higher” authority of the trainer and the societal norms of healthy living that she represents and advocates. This authority is never questioned. Instead, the show uncritically presents weight loss as the solution to all sorts of problems fat people face in the world. For example, it celebrates weight loss as a way to literally fit into the built environment. Gabriella, for example, expresses her happiness that she is now allowed to go rock-climbing because she is now under 250 lbs (1.1)²³, while Jordan, who previously did not fit in the seats of a ride at an amusement park, can be treated to roller coasters now that he has lost weight (1.5). As Joyce L. Huff notes in her discussion of the debate over fat people being forced to pay for two seats on Southwest Airlines, such presentations rely on the assumption that the body is adaptable, while the division of public space is fixed; “[i]t is passenger size, not seat size, Southwest implies, that is malleable” (Huff 201). It is up to the individual consumer to change his or her own body, rather than the service provider’s responsibility to provide access to all. In celebrating its protagonists’ ability to mold themselves to the built environment, *I Used to Be Fat* implicitly endorses the social authority that allows for the exclusion of fat people. Being confident and independent thus requires a level of compliance with the bodily norms of society, even if it entails independence from the control of parents.

Jung und Dick! Eine Generation im Kampf gegen Kilos

Jung und Dick! Eine Generation im Kampf gegen Kilos (Young and Fat! A Generation in the Fight Against Kilos) differs from the previous programs in that it is not a series, but rather a feature-length documentary produced by Süddeutsche Zeitung TV and aired on the channel Vox

²³ It is not specified why exactly Gabriella would be prevented from climbing. I would speculate that either the company does not have a harness strong enough to support a weight above 250 pounds, or they refrain from doing so due to liability issues.

in 2011. *Jung und Dick!* nevertheless addresses many of the questions about weight loss in similar ways to other programs. In its particular targeting of young people, it provides an important complement to series such as *I Used to Be Fat*. Whereas *I Used to Be Fat* focuses on young characters in a clearly delineated stage of their life—in the gap between finishing school and becoming independent adults—*Jung und Dick* follows protagonists from very diverse age groups, from 7-year old Justin to 31-year old Nina. In addition, while *Jung und Dick!* follows a number of patterns of the weight loss makeover, it defies simplistic narrative conventions by weaving many stories together in a complex pattern. The film begins with teenagers Gamze and Dominik, who are completing a residential weight loss program in a clinic, then introduces the story of 7-year old Justin, who has already been identified as “obese” (“adipös”). These two stories alternate until the character of the Swabian Nina appears after about half an hour (1/3 of the way). Nina is older than the others, 31, and has already undergone a period of extreme weight loss (140 kg) following a gastric bypass surgery; now she is shown visiting a plastic surgeon for a series of operations to remove the excess skin left on her body. After about an hour and more development in the stories of the four protagonists (2/3), Dominik and Gamze fade out as two new characters (Lisann and Diana) are introduced—both young women who wish to have a gastric bypass surgery (“Magenschlauch-OP”). In the course of the documentary, one (Diana) will complete the surgery while the other (Lisann) still waits. If the multiplicity and overlapping of these stories makes the documentary harder to follow (and perhaps confusing to explain), it also presents a fuller picture of weight loss, incorporating stories of different age groups, different weight loss methods, and different settings.

The documentary is most concerned with teenagers, but presents Justin and Nina as sort of bookends; Justin, still in the “growth phase” (“Wachstumsphase”) of childhood, implicitly shows how fat teenagers such as Dominik or Lisann are produced, while Nina represents a phase after the “after” of the weight loss makeover—having lost the weight, her character shows how the consequences of extreme weight gain and loss must still be reckoned with beyond the achievement of a “target” weight. In this way, the documentary reconfigures the stages of makeover, including “before” and “after,” to be reflected in different characters, rather than as phases in the transformation of an individual protagonist.

While the overarching frame of “before” and “after” is deemphasized by its introduction of characters at different times, the documentary nonetheless relies on the conventions of makeover. This means that whenever a character is introduced for the first time, it is in the context of a visit to an expert that begins with a weigh-in. The documentary then presents a “before” picture of the protagonist with name, age, height, weight, and “excess weight” (“Übergewicht”). As each narrative comes to a close (again at different points), the “before” picture is contrasted with an “after” picture of the same format. For Nina, who has already lost weight, her picture acts as both “before” and “after,” marking the weight she has lost as well as highlighting the bodily imperfections that remain and will be corrected by her plastic surgeon. In all cases, the before and after pictures show a clear contrast, except in the case of Lisann, whose progress in her quest for weight loss cannot (yet) be measured in kilos. Instead, Lisann has paradoxically come closer to her goal of having a gastric bypass surgery by *not* losing weight; only this way can she prove that the surgery is necessary. Nonetheless, the documentary chooses to place her in the same before/after framework.

While *Jung und Dick* seems to provide a multiplicity of narratives, some of which even go beyond the typical frame of the makeover, it retains a large investment in narrative and medical authority. This authority is manifested on multiple levels. First of all, the documentary has heterodiegetic voiceover narration; whereas *I Used to Be Fat* is narrated by the protagonist him- or herself and presents a more personal, less technical perspective, the narrator of *Jung und Dick!* is an unidentified male voice who assumes a position of great authority, providing a large amount of information and commenting on the actions and words of the young people being profiled. These statements include rather alarmist pronouncements, taken from the World Health Organization, about obesity among children and youth as “an alarming worldwide epidemic” (“eine besorgniserregende weltweite Epidemie”), as well as about the fatness of German children in European comparison; the very first sentence of the voiceover, in fact, makes the documentary directly relevant to Germans by claiming that German children are the fattest in Europe after the Italians. The voiceover also makes statements directly related to the protagonists themselves and the perceived consequences of being fat. Shortly after introducing Gamze, the voiceover says that the “deadly quartet” (“tödliche Quartett”) of obesity, high blood pressure,

high fat levels in the blood, and insulin resistance “würden bei Gamze früher oder später zum Herztod führen.” (3.44)—would, sooner or later, lead to Gamze’s heart death. The lack of nuance in this statement is troubling. Similar fatalism is evident in the documentary’s attitude toward bullying, which it views as an inevitable result of being fat. The only cure to prevent both ill health effects and social ostracism, according to the documentary, is weight loss.

In addition to the voiceover, *Jung und Dick* is very much expert-centered; this is consistent with my observations of other German programs on weight. The title of another program, *Alexa: Ich kämpfe gegen Ihre Kilos* (Alexa: I fight against your kilos), is symptomatic in the way it places the expert (in this case, a nutritionist) center stage as the agent of makeover rather than the person losing weight; presumably the people being helped are too fat and lazy to fight for themselves, making Alexa’s valiant intervention necessary. While *Jung und Dick!* is more ambiguous in its designation of agency—“a generation in the fight against kilos” does not tell you exactly who is fighting—experts here assume a large role within the narrative. There are repeated scenes of nutritionists, doctors, and other experts talking directly to the camera at length while their patients stand, patiently and silently by, often only partially visible and sometimes exposed (e.g. when the plastic surgeon discusses Nina’s body and upcoming surgery). In this way, the flesh of the fat person is rendered a passive object of both the doctor’s and the viewer’s gaze. Often, the head is missing, making a number of shots from the documentary into examples of what Charlotte Cooper calls “headless fatties.” Unlike most of the images she cites, however, in which the person is photographed without their knowledge, the shots in *Jung und Dick* show subjects who are aware, sometimes painfully so, of the camera’s presence.

Nevertheless, the consequences are the same: “As Headless Fatties, the body becomes symbolic: we are there but we have no voice, not even a mouth in a head, no brain, no thoughts or opinions. Instead we are reduced and dehumanised as symbols of cultural fear: the body, the belly, the arse, food.” (Cooper). A particularly brutal example of this in *Jung und Dick* comes when Dr. Ralf Senner speaks to the camera while patient Diana sits across from him. Discussing Diana’s high BMI in third person (that is, to the camera and not to her), Dr. Senner says “And that is naturally a stage at which one asks what one can still save from the person” (1.06.35).²⁴

²⁴ “Und das ist natürlich ein Stadium wo man sagt, was kann man aus dem Mensch noch retten?”

Senner implies that whatever subjectivity left in Diana is nearly hopelessly lost in a sea of fat and barely perceptible; the only way to rescue her humanity is to undertake a serious operation and remove the “hunger center” (“Hungerzentrum”) in her stomach. Moreover, as Cooper goes on to write, these images “reek of a surveillance culture with which fat people – whose bodies are policed by glares, and disapproving looks – are all too familiar.” (Cooper). While the subjects of *Jung und Dick* have agreed to submit themselves and their stories to this surveillance culture, their frequent framing at the margins of the narrative rather than the center indicates the documentary’s reluctance to let them tell their own stories.

The narrative tussle between the voices of authority and those on whom this authority is exercised continues throughout the film. It is most obvious in the insertion of the third voice of authority that appears in a voice from off (most likely a producer), who interviews and prompts the characters throughout the narrative. In a way, the inclusion of this producer’s voice can be read as a self-reflexive nod to the constructed nature of such documentaries; the producer’s intervention demonstrates to the viewer how such productions are made. At the same time, this voice also shapes, and sometimes refuses, the protagonists’ ability to tell their own stories. In certain moments this voice even pre-empts the voices of the people he is interviewing, as when he asks Gamze, “What bothers you about being fat?” Before she can answer, he suggests the typically gendered reason, “Maybe that you can’t buy clothes...?” and she affirms.²⁵ The narrative later picks up this thread again and shows her apparent inability to find clothing that she likes when she visits a shop near the clinic. While Gamze is introduced in a medical context, her motivation for weight loss is thus mostly represented as the correction of an aesthetic problem; her “ambitious goal” (“ehrgeiziges Ziel”) is to drop a number of sizes so that she can fit into clothes that she likes (15.30).

Another important layer of narrative content is provided by the subtitles accompanying the characters when they appear on screen. As Patrick Keating and others have noted, this type of subtitle is frequently used in reality television to recap and remind casual viewers who the characters are and what is at stake. In *Jung and Dick!*, however, these subtitles also often provide new information that does not appear in the voiceover or interviews. The use of these subtitles in

²⁵ “Was stört dich denn daran? Dass du vielleicht die Klamotten nicht kaufen kannst...?”

JuD! is particularly interesting in the case of Gamze in that they present a particular picture of her and mark her social position as the child of Turkish immigrants. While the experts are always designated with their profession, Gamze is first labeled by her education level; she has a degree from the lowest school in the three-tier system (“hat einen Hauptschulabschluss”). Next she is identified as “unemployed”/“looking for work” (“arbeitssuchend”). At one point the voiceover states that a significant number of fat children come from families that are “socially disadvantaged” (“sozialschwach”) and “educationally deprived” (“bildungsfern”)²⁶ while showing a close-up of Gamze’s face. These moments serve to place Gamze in a particular social milieu in the minds of viewers. After some time, she is also labeled with “was born in Germany” (“wurde in Deutschland geboren”) (39.55). Paradoxically, it is this affirmation of her German-ness that marks her migrant background (*Migrationshintergrund*); she was born in Germany but her parents or grandparents were not. Because the other young people are assumed to be German, there is no such subtitle for them. Instead, this designation is used to mark the apparent contrast between Gamze’s behavior and her German birth. This subtitle appears after she has refused to get in the pool for swim therapy and as she states that she hardly ever goes to the outdoor pool (“Freibad”). Trainer Evi’s reading of her behavior, presented in a one-on-one interview with the camera, attributes it to her Turkish heritage and ideas of modesty, while Gamze herself says that she does not want to because she feels self-conscious about her body in her bathing suit in front of the boys. This incident not only posits Gamze’s body in terms of her heritage and implies that her modesty is “un-German,” but fails to account for the very understandable ways that fat shaming produces discomfort for people, especially women, whatever their ethnicity.

Like in the cases of Latino and Pacific Islander contestants on the *Biggest Loser USA*, to be illuminated in a later section, Gamze’s fatness is linked explicitly to her ethnic identity. Gamze makes this connection herself when she is asked about how she eats at home. In response, she says—“At home, well, we eat mostly Turkish food and in Turkish food there’s a lot of oil and fat

²⁶ The translation of these terms is imprecise in that it does not quite convey the slightly pejorative nature of these euphemistic designations. While similar terms in the US emphasize the lack of social capital and education as something that has been denied (i.e. “disadvantaged” or “deprived”), these German terms mean literally “socially weak” and “far from education.”

and all sorts of things. And that's the main problem, yeah, that we cook with so much fat.” (6.35).²⁷ Dominik, who is standing next to her, also talks about the fat in food at home, which is dominated by heavy “Aufläufe” (casseroles), but neither he nor the various levels of narrative authority link these food habits to a larger food culture, neither to his presumably Polish/East Prussian heritage (evident in his last name, Borkowski), nor German culture as a whole. Instead, it is only Gamze who is seen as fat as a result of a dangerous immigrant food culture. Rather than addressing the structural issues of immigration and educational policy that have limited Gamze’s possibilities, the documentary suggests that Gamze’s upward mobility is dependent on her own choice to reform problematic eating habits and embrace weight loss. This presentation of Gamze not only reinforces the makeover plot of the documentary, promising her more secure femininity and improved health, but also makes her weight loss emblematic of becoming a responsible German citizen and accepting its values, norms, and duties. As she nears her goal, her labeling begins to reflect a more positive picture as well, saying that she “wants to train to become a hairdresser” (“will eine Ausbildung zu Friseurin machen”). While a hairdresser is certainly not a high-status career, this subtitle demonstrates her ambition to be a “good immigrant”—a self-sustaining, tax-paying adult who does not depend on government assistance.

Gamze’s immigrant story is thus quite similar to those of parallel characters in other weight loss makeovers; the implication that integration and upward mobility can be achieved by one’s own initiative overlaps clearly with the makeover’s larger ethos. *Jung und Dick* sets itself apart from most weight loss makeovers, though, by articulating larger structural critique at times. This critique, however, is not directed at medical authority or social norms, but rather at the bureaucratic healthcare system in Germany and its supposedly inadequate response to obesity. Unlike *The Biggest Loser* or *I Used to Be Fat*, which spend very little or no time at all discussing the practicalities of medical therapies, *Jung und Dick* reports the costs of each procedure depicted and the coverage to be expected from the *Krankenkassen* (public health insurance companies) for various therapies. Taking a statist position, the documentary argues that the government should do more to address obesity and eliminate the bureaucracy that prevents quick

²⁷ “Zuhause, also, wir essen meistens nur Türkisch, ja, und im türkischen Essen ist sehr viel Öl und Fett und alles mögliche drinne. Und das ist halt das Hauptproblem, ja, weil wir so fettig kochen.”

response. The voiceover, for example, bemoans the fact that patients wishing to have a gastric bypass financed by their health insurance must endure a “clearance marathon” (*Genehmigungsmarathon*), getting the signatures of seven different health experts. Likewise, nutritionist Barbara Dohmen comments on the unfortunate temporal constraints placed on her therapy; only a few visits to Justin and his family are financed, limiting the follow-up care (*Nachsorge*) she can provide.

The documentary, however, vacillates in its attribution for the obesity “crisis” and how much to blame or shame fat people themselves. At the same time it critiques the state for not doing enough in its public health policy, the documentary implicitly makes its protagonists responsible for the costs that must be born. In the case of Justin, his weight problem is clearly attributed to being spoiled by his grandmother, who shamefully admits that she feeds him cake and other sweets. This split is also evident in its praise for Diana and her family, who choose to finance her weight loss surgery themselves, and its rather ambivalent treatment of Lisann, who desires the same operation but attempts to go the official route by gathering signatures from various health experts. The quest for nutritionist Barbara Dohmen’s signature puts Lisann in a complicated position. To get the signature for the surgery, she must paradoxically prove that she has *not* lost weight through diet and exercise, although that is her ultimate goal. While the voiceover mentions that this a result of strange “Krankenkassenlogik” (logic of the health insurance companies), Dohmen presents it as a paradoxical reward of bad behavior: “Provocatively formulated you could say that because Lisann has *not* lost weight, she will be rewarded with a gastric bypass surgery” (1.20.38).²⁸ Lisann, faced with the weigh-in that will determine whether Dohmen signs, is visibly uncomfortable when the producer asks her if she hopes that she has lost weight or not, knowing that if she has lost weight she will not be approved for the surgery. After a few awkward moments, Lisann responds that of course she hopes that she has lost weight because “common sense says that losing weight would be better.”²⁹ She also wants to make clear that she is not choosing the surgery out of

²⁸ “Böse formuliert könnte man sagen, weil Lisann *nicht* abgenommen hat, wird sie mit einer Schlauchmagen-OP belohnt.”

²⁹ “...der gesunde Menschenverstand sagt ja schon, abgenommen wäre besser”

“convenience” (“Bequemlichkeit”). Lisann’s dilemma reveals the hierarchy of weight loss methods; knowing that WLS is viewed by many as the “easy way out” rather than the “hard work” of diet modification and exercise, Lisann must struggle to justify her decision. The skeptical voiceover asks rhetorically if her statement is true, leaving it open as to whether we should believe her or not. Implicitly, though, it supports her decision, presenting her dedication to weight loss and dealing with the bureaucratic system as a type of labor; she may not be running marathons, but her participation in the “Genehmigungsmarathon” for the sake of weight loss is valued as makeover work that will ultimately improve her health and reduce costs for the greater society.

While *Jung und Dick* never questions the necessity of weight loss, it is also more cautious than other programs about presenting weight loss as a complete transformation. While each character is introduced with the amount of their supposed excess weight (*Übergewicht*) in a sort of “before” picture, none of the characters lose this entire amount before the end of documentary. When the story of one protagonist comes to an end, there is a sort of “after” picture inserted into the narrative; this picture resembles the “before” and marks the amount of weight loss, but the documentary does not juxtapose “before” and “after” within the same frame. So while the documentary assumes that weight loss is indeed inherently positive and necessary, it does not invest much time in presenting a dramatic transformation with the familiar “before/after” trope. Likewise, the documentary occasionally gives voice to words of caution about weight loss surgery, as when Barbara Dohmen describes the risks involved with permanently altering a healthy organ like the stomach. In a similar vein, the plastic surgeon operating on Nina to remove her excess skin stresses that the surgery also leaves its mark: “I always say, you are trading the skin for a scar and new shape” (27.47).³⁰ In the same moment, though, he continues to explain that his patients nevertheless choose the surgery: “And then they all say, the scar doesn’t matter, doesn’t matter at all, just get rid of the skin.”³¹ In a way, though, the relative fluidity of its presentation makes *Jung und Dick* a prime example of makeover culture, in which

³⁰ “Ich sage immer, Sie tauschen die Haut gegen eine Narbe und eine neue Kontour ein.”

³¹ “Und dann sagen sie alle, die Narbe ist mir völlig egal, ist mir echt egal, machen Sie einfach die Haut weg.”

transformation is perhaps never completely finished. This will be discussed in more detail in the section “After the ‘After.’”

III. COMPETITION AND BODILY MERITOCRACY

The following section seeks to identify the particular dynamics of an important and globally successful subgenre of the weight loss makeover: the weight loss competition. While the previous sections have already drawn heavily on examples from *The Biggest Loser*, it is important to address it in its particularity, derived primarily from its competitive format. Weight loss as competition presents direct comparisons of contestants and thus offers interesting contrasts to show how narrative arcs of characters from different racial and ethnic groups are presented. In addition, the competitive format shapes the gender politics of the show in particular ways. While the teleologies of makeover entail transformation in the direction of normalized gender and dieting feminized, competition itself is masculinized. Female contestants, then, must often adopt a more masculinized attitude toward competition, at the same time they work toward a clearly located and feminine gender position. Following the analysis of these trends in *The Biggest Loser*, the section moves to address a weight loss competition that produces a different makeover aesthetic: *Dance Your Ass Off*. In placing weight loss in the aesthetic framework of the dance competition, this program temporarily upsets the affective relationships of the weight loss makeover even as it ultimately reinforces the teleology of the makeover.

The Biggest Loser: Competition, Social Difference, and Redemption

Few RTV programs have had as much success as the weight loss makeover show *The Biggest Loser*, which premiered in 2004 on the major U.S. network NBC. Soon to be in its 17th season in the United States, *The Biggest Loser* has also been exported to a number of countries in the world, producing over thirty distinct versions so far (see Appendix A). Some of these have been more successful than others; while many (like *Biggest Loser Jeetega*, the Indian version)

have not lasted beyond one season, others have thrived. Generally, the most successful and mainstream versions have been produced in English-speaking countries, like Australia, with a high proportion of citizens considered overweight or obese, or European countries like the Netherlands and Germany. Other relatively successful versions have been produced in Israel (*Laredet Begadol*), the Arab world (*Ar Rabeh El Akbar*), and Sweden (*Biggest Loser Sverige*). New versions are still being created (e.g. in Vietnam).

The Biggest Loser's format is one of competition. Candidates are pitted against each other to see who can lose the most weight over the course of several months. In this way, the show attempts to turn "losers" into "winners"; as the pun of the title suggests, it is paradoxically the person who "loses" the most who in the end wins the grand prize, usually monetary in nature. The format of the show varies widely from season to season and from version to version; while earlier seasons tend to focus on individual competitors, some later seasons have taken up couples teams. In the US, the sheer number of seasons has forced the show's producers to constantly innovate to maintain interest; there is always another "twist" to be discovered. What all seasons and most locations share is the basic premise that contestants are brought to a remote location to begin their weight loss transformations. Here they endure intense workouts with the show's trainers for a period of several months; each week culminates with a weigh-in and the threat of elimination for one or more contestants. This may be determined by a hard "red line" which automatically eliminates the contestant with the least weight loss, or a softer "yellow line"; in the case of the yellow line, the two candidates with the least weight loss are pitted against each other in a voting procedure similar to other reality TV competition formats, such as *Survivor*. When the number of candidates has been reduced to three finalists, the candidates are sent home, where they train in secrecy and under supervision of the show for a couple additional months; these months are not depicted, ensuring that the season finale, when all candidates return for a final weigh-in in front of a live studio audience, is granted even more dramatic effect.

In addition to its popularity in terms of traditional indicators like ratings and number of programs, RTV shows like *The Biggest Loser* can claim to be popular in another important sense; by using "ordinary people" as its protagonists, RTV would seem to be more "of the people" than traditionally popular formats made "for the people" like the soap opera or primetime drama. The

suggestion that any person could potentially become a star is an important element of RTV. *The Biggest Loser*, like much of reality television, stresses this “popular” appeal by using “ordinary” people as protagonists. In *The Biggest Loser*, participants are recruited from “all walks of life,” representing not only different genders, ages, and ethnicities, but also geographic regions of the country or countries in which it is filmed and broadcast. The “ordinariness” of contestants is also stressed by their general sampling from middle or working class professions. In selecting a variety of subjects and placing them in a competitive format, the *BL* sells itself importantly as a meritocracy in which winning is determined first and foremost by the amount of hard work done by the contestants. Bodily constraints or other factors are neglected in favor of contestants’ apparent self-determination for success.

In addition to the more marked differences of ethnicity and gender, it is also useful to distinguish two groups of contestants in *The Biggest Loser*: those who have always been fat and those who were once athletic but have since gained weight. While other makeovers such as *Jung und Dick!* also draw attention to the difference in lived experiences between these two groups, the *BL* relies on the implicit distinction between these groups to structure its competition. The *BL* appears to be particularly geared toward those who belong to the latter group; many contestants have been former athletes and this fact is often highlighted in the show as well as in paratextual resources (e.g. the online profiles of contestants). A paradigmatic example would be Rachel of season 15, who was a competitive swimmer before giving up her career “for a boy” and gaining weight. This group of people seems particularly suited to the program and its themes of redemption and competition. While those who have always been fat are encouraged to discover themselves in entirely new ways, the former athletes are assumed to retain a competitive spirit buried in the flesh that only needs to be reactivated and brought out. This distinction is important in the way that it complicates Brenda R. Weber’s arguments about the subject positions provided by the makeover. While she argues that before-bodies are marked as lacking subjectivity which only the makeover can grant, this category of former athletes is presented as recovering a part of subjectivity that has simply been lost or gone missing. For these people, then, it is more about redemptive subjectivity than discovering a whole new identity. The implications, particularly temporal ones in the context of characters’ life narratives, are significant. These contestants are

motivated by “getting their lives back” rather than inhabiting a “normal” subject position for the first time. This means that they may look to a certain moment in the past when things went wrong and work to return to that moment, while those who have always been fat are more likely to be future-oriented. Importantly, the show positions these former athletes as more suited to competing and winning the show as they are able to draw on previous experience and mental resources to get through workouts and the extreme self-discipline of diets. In short, these former athletes are assumed to be more capable of the hard work necessary to win.

The Biggest Loser, in its emphasis on hard work and ostensible meritocracy, is easily read as a particularly American take on weight and weight loss. The belief in upward mobility through merit and work endures in the US even as politicians on the right and left decry the threat this way of life appears to be under. But, as a 2015 article in *The Economist* argues, the growing problem with meritocracy is that elites increasingly find ways to excel within its constraints; investing their extra resources in education and testing ensures that the rich can create an “hereditary meritocracy”—“More than ever before, America’s elite is producing children who not only get ahead, but deserve to do so: they meet the standards of meritocracy better than their peers, and are thus worthy of the status they inherit.” At the heart of this issue is that merit itself is tied to cultural values—elites can always change the rules to define merit differently and maintain status. This type of move is evident in the shift from positive valuations of fatness to negative; as the popular anthropological theory posits, thinness only becomes desirable in societies as a vast majority of people gain access to nutrition and are able to stave off starvation. In response, fatness, once a privilege of the elites, is discarded in favor of a self-controlled body, whose thinness becomes a sign of bourgeois values and effective management of modernity (see Farrell). Populations that tend to heavier weights, such as African-Americans or Latinos, are thus at a disadvantage in this new meritocracy. For a series like *The Biggest Loser*, then, which purports to transform subjects in adherence to bourgeois self-discipline for the sake of upward mobility, minority targets are both perceived as most in need of intervention and least likely to win, or to be considered as “worthy” of winning.

In general, however, the *BL* follows the trend identified by Weber and downplays racial, ethnic, and gender differences for the sake of a larger, democratic narrative. In its claim to

represent the larger country or region from which it comes, the *BL* importantly posits its competition as both a microcosm of a nation and as a vehicle to effect wide-ranging social change by expanding beyond the boundaries of its own narrative. *The Biggest Loser* (USA), for example, is particularly active in this regard, creating a veritable empire of franchise products and services to be sold nationwide. This includes not only developing weight loss books and exercise videos, but also starting Biggest Loser weight loss resorts or organizing “Biggest Loser RunWalks.” These extratextual products are then incorporated back into the narrative itself, in various segments such as “Challenge America” or product placement advertising all associated weight loss products, services, and events.

Of course, there are reasons to be skeptical of this apparently democratic impulse. For one, while the choice of contestants would appear to be representative, the pool of winners is often not. Of the seventeen winners of *The Biggest Loser* (USA) so far, only six have been women, and none dark-skinned; nine of the winners have been white men. A cynical reading of this trend would suggest that the cultural work being done by the show is primarily that of lifting white men out of shameful fatness, which is associated with femininity, poverty, and racial otherness, rather than rewarding everyone. Aside from this obvious disparity in results, the *BL* also belies its supposedly democratic impulses in its differential treatment of people, particularly certain groups such as African Americans, Latinos, and Pacific Islanders. In these cases, the show presents the fatness of the contestants belonging to these groups as intrinsically tied to their food cultures. While white contestants’ stories are individualized, these characters are represented as embedded in their group identity. This is evident, for example, in the profiles of season 9 contestants in the book *The Biggest Loser: Six Weeks to a Healthier You*. In their profile of mother-daughter team Miggy and Migdalia, for example, the text begins “Coming from a Puerto Rican culture, mother and daughter Miggy and Migdalia realize their eating habits have a lot to do with their weight gain.” (10). This seems absurd given that for all candidates, eating habits are depicted as contributing to their weight; in this case, however, the unhealthiness of the habits is attributed directly to their Puerto Rican culture. Likewise, the profile of “gray team” leads with a critique of their “home” culture: “Koli Palu and Sam Poueu were inspired by the successful weight loss of another pair of Tongan cousins—Season 7’s Sione and Filipe Fa. Coming from a

culture rife with obesity-related diseases, Sam and Koli know they have their work cut out for them” (7). Again, one could argue that the “culture rife with obesity-related diseases” referred to could just as easily be the US, but it is clear that this is not the intention of the sentence. Not only are particular minority contestants seen as representative of their cultures; they are also expected to be ambassadors to their communities to promote weight loss. This profile quotes Sam, who insists that he will sit down with his family and “have a long talk about nutrition, the kind of food [they] should eat, and the 50-pound bags of rice in the house” (7). Filipe Fa echoes the sentiment when he says “If I can inspire someone in my community to make healthier choices, that’s what it’s all about. Diabetes is so common in my community. I’m not trying to change a whole culture; I’m just trying to inspire some of the people in it.” (57).

The critique of food cultures tied to racial minorities and immigrants is nothing new. In fact, the *BL*’s rhetoric here echoes recommendations made to immigrant groups in the US from at least the Progressive Era onward to abandon the “unhealthy” habits of their home countries and adopt the dietary practices of Americans (see Gabaccia). The form of these recommendations stays the same even as the groups targeted have changed. In reforming such subjects, the *BL* does not suggest that their cultures must be abandoned entirely, but that their material consumption should be adapted to “healthy” values. This is evident in the book when various testimonials about adapting recipes are made by former contestants. Latina Dina Mercado, of season 8, says “When I used to eat out, I always ate fajitas sautéed in oil. Now I order the grilled chicken fajita...” (93). Likewise, black Mo DeWalt, also of season 8, says

Down south, we deep-fry our fish. It tastes wonderful, but it’s horrible for your arteries. That same fish can be baked with added seasonings—like dill for salmon or lemon pepper for flounder. If your palate needs adjusting, remind yourself that you’re eating for your *health*. Your palate will adjust” (97).

“Health” here is implicitly loaded with other connotations—eating for health makes you not only a better person but a better citizen and role model for your community. Adjusting your palate becomes a metaphor for a certain kind of assimilation to mainstream values. Importantly, it is not a total erasure of difference, but adaptation to upwardly mobile values of health, that is important. The *BL* thus preserves a vision of America as a country that allows the limitations of

its source cultures to be superseded at the same time the variety and diversity of cultures is celebrated. Individuals maintain their ethnic identity while also become actualized individuals in search of the American dream of independence.

Redemption and Difference

Differences in race are also evident in the way that the theme of redemption is handled. Redemption, paramount to the makeover, is particularly emphasized in some seasons of *The Biggest Loser* by introducing the theme of “Second Chances” as in season 15. In this season, the theme of redemption was made even more evident by the introduction of the “trainer save.” This meant that each of the three trainers—Bob, Jillian, and Dolvett—would have the option of saving one of their team from elimination. In theory, this would allow each trainer to wait until the optimal time to save the person most “deserving.” In practice, however, each trainer simply saved the person who would have been eliminated first, not affecting the game in any significant way except elongating the initial phase of the season (and ensuring that dramatic double eliminations would be necessary to keep the season to its designated length). While the introduction of the save did not mark particular candidates as more deserving than others, its framing for various participants varied. The three contestants saved—Tanya, Craig, and Matt—each represented a different demographic and a different trainer-trainee dynamic, and thus a comparison of these various incidents is useful in untangling the relationship between race and gender in the program.

In all cases of the trainer save being used, the trainers insist that the potentially eliminated players do not deserve to leave despite their low weight loss. While trainers may insist that “the scale doesn’t lie” in other instances, they often discount disappointing numbers by arguing that they do not reflect the amount of work actually done by the contestants. This was evident in Jillian’s reaction to the first weigh-in, in which Craig, an African-American man on her team, was to be eliminated for losing “only” thirteen pounds. Jillian flatly responds to the possibility of his elimination by saying “You’re not going home tonight. It’s not gonna happen. Not gonna happen. There’s no way. You don’t deserve it. You worked your ass off. That is not a reflection of

anything that you did this week.” (39.43). Jillian, in essence, suggests that the scale has made a mistake and Craig is, in fact, deserving. In response, Craig is clearly grateful. Throughout the rest of the season, this gratefulness is highlighted; the viewer is continually reminded that Craig has been “saved” by the program and this moment becomes a key feature in his whole narrative. Craig’s story is important in how it stresses that weight loss enables him to be a good father, hopefully averting the early death his own father experienced. Craig thus becomes emblematic for black fathers everywhere, symbolically achieving the redemption through presence—“being there”—that black fathers are assumed to lack.

In the second instance of the “trainer save,” redemption is also linked to a larger narrative of the individual and the black community. During the week when she is almost eliminated (week 3), Tanya, an African-American woman from urban Chicago, is shown to be struggling both in and outside of the gym before losing no weight at all on the scale. Her “0 lbs” functions metaphorically as a sign that she has stalled in her emotional progress. Dolvett, however, decides to save her anyway, not because she has done the “hard work” necessary but because he feels she still needs his help. Tanya, in turn, places Dolvett’s decision in the context of her life and personal history, and the episode highlights this connection both before and after the weigh-in. When Dolvett and Tanya discuss her history, she tells him about being abused by her drug-addicted mother and essentially abandoned by her extended family, who left her in the harmful home environment knowing that she was being hurt. As she says, “I was worth saving, but they didn’t save me.” (15.03, 19.35). Dolvett’s decision, then, makes him a stand-in for the family that did not come to her rescue when she was growing up, offering her the support in the present that she lacked in the past. The fact that Dolvett himself is African-American is also important, making his decision legible as a show of solidarity within the community, rather than a “white savior” narrative. Like Craig, Tanya continues to express her gratitude throughout the season. Her redemption is also linked to a larger racial narrative that promises to revitalize the black community. Tanya’s weight loss and embrace of a “healthy” lifestyle becomes symbolic of a greater need for the black community to care for its own health. This is represented metonymically in Tanya’s shift from owning a fried chicken restaurant to opening a new restaurant for “healthy soul food” after the show. Just as Dolvett’s save offers redemption for



Fan-made meme with still of Tanya and quotation from episode after she is “saved” by trainer Dolvett (15.4). Source: girlsgotsole.com

Tanya, her engagement with changing the eating habits of her community promises redemption for a presumably impoverished black urban population.³²

In the final case, though, there is an important variation on the redemption narrative. This time it is Matt, the white man from Boston, who receives the trainer save. Unlike the previous cases, however, both trainer and contestant are shown to be reluctant to have this decision made. Leading up to the weigh-in, Matt expresses his desire to be above the red line so that Bob does not have to “save” him; in this way, the show foreshadows his eventual rescue while also showing Matt’s independent spirit. Likewise, Bob is unhappy about the situation, stating honestly that he had hoped to keep the trainer save for Chelsea, a white woman on his team, whom he feels both deserves it and may need it. Nonetheless, Bob chooses to “save” Matt when

³² It is worth noting also that “soul food” itself is much contested in African-American history, especially with the rise of Nation of Islam and the subsequent rejection of foods heavy in pork fat as not only representing a racist plantation history but also as an unhealthy cuisine unsuited to racial uplift. The choice to prepare “healthy soul food” thus caters both to a marked black identity while attempting to escape the negative connotations of “traditional” soul food. As Kimberly D. Nettles writes, a new movement among soul food chefs and cookbook authors to modify the cuisine in the image of “health” is an attempt “to ‘save’ soul food by encouraging the retelling of narratives that honor family, love, and community while simultaneously advocating personal responsibility and restraint” (Nettles 111).

his low weight loss threatens to have him eliminated. In justifying his decision, Bob suggests that he has realized that Chelsea does not actually need his protection. Matt, in turn, feels humbled and wounded in his pride, although also grateful. In its foregrounding of Matt's desire to be independent and proud, the show suggests that he, as a white man, has more to lose by being "saved" than either Craig or Tanya, who must be unequivocally thankful. Likewise, Matt's story is highly individualized, unlinked to any greater narrative of white male identity. In this sense, this moment may illustrate the tendency of the makeover to grant more agency and room for "talking back" to (white) men, as Weber notes (*Makeover TV*, 205). However, this moment also importantly shows that even the white man needs to be humbled into accepting the help of the makeover and submitting to its logics. In contrast, the white woman, represented by Chelsea, proves herself to be more resilient.

Gender and Competition

As many scholars have noted, the makeover works in particularly gendered ways, to particularly gendered ends. This is true in the weight loss makeover as well. Given that fatness, as Cecilia Hartley has argued, makes female bodies and male bodies appear more similar, thus blurring the gender binary that persists in society, weight loss is seen as a corrective that produces bodies that more easily and obviously read as "naturally" female or male. Many participants in the weight loss makeover express the desire at the beginning of the show to fulfill their gendered roles more adequately, and their transformations are celebrated in their supposedly newfound ability to act in (heterosexual) relationships.

The distinction between genders is highlighted by the visual language of *The Biggest Loser* as well. For most of the season, contestants are dressed in similar *Biggest Loser* t-shirts, distinguished more by color and team affiliation than anything else. At weigh-ins, they are slightly differentiated by gender, in that women wear bras and men are bare-chested. Toward the finale, however, this changes; whenever the competition shifts from team competition to singles, the women begin to wear more fitted tank tops for weigh-ins. Their bodies are slimmed, highlighting small waists and smooth curves, an effect presumably aided by shapewear to hide

excess flaps of skin or bulges. The men, however, wear looser t-shirts. Somewhat paradoxically, as the contestants lose weight and presumably have less to be ashamed of, they are more covered up. This can be read in various ways—either as an acknowledgement of emerging selfhood and offering of dignity previously deemed unnecessary or simply a way of preparing the viewer visually for the after-body, which by definition cannot admit flaws such as excess skin that would weaken the makeover logic. In terms of gender, this difference serves to further differentiate bodies as they approach gender-normative contours. Former contestant Kai Hibbard writes about this disparity in similar terms.

They make the fat women walk out in sports bras and spandex shorts. That's only for the ladies, of course —guys don't have to stroll out in nothing [sic] but the classic jock-'n'-socks combo; they get normal exercise clothes. On the "plus" side, once you dumped a bunch of weight, you got to wear a tank top again. Once we're skinny, we've "earned" the right to wear a tank top and dress like a human being who might like to have sex someday. (*Cracked*)

As this phrasing comically indicates, to be considered sexually viable on the show one must have first lost weight. Later in the season, during makeover week, the contestants are encouraged to embrace stylish gendered clothing which is presumed to have been out of reach before the transformation. By the time of the finale, when contestants emerge for their “after” moments, they have fully inhabited gender-differentiated clothing—women in dresses and men in suits. Women become “real women” and men become “real men.”

In *Makeover TV*, Brenda R. Weber importantly argues that the makeover, in this insistence on shaping bodies to reflect a clear gender binary, fails to allow for performativity in gender. The body may be modified, but only “in the service of drawing closer to one’s authentic sex-based essence” (149). Again this reinforcement of the binary relies on the distinction between inner and outer selves. The inner self is assumed to be constant and gender-normative; the outer self must simply be modified to express this inner identity without ambiguity. As Weber states, “[s]uch a code sets up a discourse of the normative, wherein gender is not a matter of performance but of residence” (149). *The Biggest Loser* rarely allows characters that challenge this discourse by being more gender-fluid. Homosexual desire is allowed as long as it is again located as an



Jan assesses his body in the mirror (*De Afvallers*).

essential identity; gay characters like Bobby (USA, season 15) are encouraged to embrace their “true” sexual identity, but more substantive challenges to gender are not given much room.

The transgression of gender boundaries by the fat body is clear from the beginning of the weight loss makeover. At this stage, both men and women are asked to assess their own bodies and identify what they do not like about them. Often these complaints reflect gendered expectations of the body. For men, for example, having a large belly and breast tissue (i.e. “man boobs”) is viewed as feminizing. In the Dutch version *De Afvallers*, for example, contestant Jan looks at his body in the mirror and asks rhetorically which bra cup size he would have.³³ The shot also cuts off his head, so that his bearded face is offscreen. In a similar shot from *Biggest Loser UK* (2009), we see contestant Jamie talking about his discomfort with his “man boobs” or “moobs.” Again the shot moves to a close-up of his chest area, both emphasizing the size of his bulk and disconnecting it from his masculine face. In a defensive, feminine posture, Jamie moves his hands to cover his nipples. The trope of asking participants to assess their own bodies and identify their own insecurities is particularly risky in gender terms for men, given that bodily insecurity and scrutiny themselves are linked to femininity. This exposes men in particular ways that are unexpected in gender terms, as when *De Afvallers* contestant Hendrik admits, in view of

³³ “Wat voor cup zou ik hebben? C’tje, D’tje?” (“afvallers xxl 2011 jan en hendrik” 13 Oct. 2012. YouTube)

his large belly, that he does not feel “prettig” (comfortable) naked.³⁴ This bodily insecurity extends into the emotional insecurity of tearful confessions about their relationships; Koli, a candidate from season 9, is emblematic when he says in Episode 1 of that season that while he has had relationships with women, they have never been successful because he pushes them away, never believing that “anyone could really, seriously love a 400 lb. man” (09.01, 44.00).

Beyond the social stigma, though, men’s fatness in the makeover is linked to a deficiency of the biological body that fails not only to *signify* as masculine, but fails to *act* as it should in terms of virility. This is especially the case when issues such as fertility come into play. Craig of season 15 speaks during casting about the shame of having to use in vitro fertilization technology with his wife to conceive their child because of his low testosterone levels; told by doctors that the testosterone problem was attributed to his weight, Craig says that this moment was important as “the first time that my weight has affected my life, [...] affected my family” (2.30). In a similar moment of *BL UK 2009*, Rick tearfully admits on the scale during the first weigh-in that he has been unable to conceive a child with his wife because his weight has lowered his sperm count. Beyond this admission of bodily deficiency comes an admission of emotional vulnerability; Rick is afraid that if he cannot give his wife what she wants, then she will leave him. In this way, the perceived weaknesses of the body spill over into emotional weaknesses. Weight loss, the show promises, will not only give Craig and Rick more virile bodies capable of doing their part in reproduction, but also anchor them in their relationships with their wives. In this way, the weight loss competition becomes a way of producing redemptive masculinity.

In the case of women, *The Biggest Loser* also reveals gendered expectations, no matter where the version is produced. In contrast to the masculinized (and lesbian) female trainers such as Jillian Michaels (US) and Angie Dowds (UK), female contestants are usually typically feminine women who express desires to fit into their roles as mothers and wives better or seek a heterosexual partnership. Particular shame is attached to women, like Jennifer and Tanya of Biggest Loser 15 (USA) who are “bad” mothers by virtue of their unhealthy habits and transmission of fatness to their children (a clip of Jennifer tearfully admitting her daughter Taylor is “70 pounds overweight” is repeated many times over the season, while Tanya confesses that

³⁴ “Als ik naakt ben, dan voel ik me niet echt prettig.” (“afvallers xxl 2011 jan en hendrik”, 13 Oct. 2012, YouTube)

her child was born “obese” because she gained so much weight during pregnancy). For others, weight loss is seen as enabling to take on the role of mother in the first place, to become pregnant and have children. For Marie of season 15 (USA), having a baby is her chief motivation for losing weight. In the same season, Tumi professes upon being eliminated that she now wishes to have children; having lost so much weight, she feels confident that she can escape early mortality and provide for offspring.

However, there is a certain tension between the competitive frame of the program, coded as masculine, and the gendered expectations of women who compete. Weber argues that makeover in general masculinizes experts, as bearers of a critical gaze and powers of intervention, and feminizes participants, who must submit to the demands of makeover as passive objects (*Makeover TV* 190). In a number of cases, however, *The Biggest Loser* defies the more clearly feminine values of cooperation and care for the sake of competition, encouraging its female contestants to work as hard as men to win. In this sense, the *BL* somewhat contradicts the imperative of other makeover shows, especially those employing cosmetic surgery, that produce a narrow and traditional vision of femininity and female bodies. This tendency to push women to adopt more competitive values has especially intensified given that women are proven to be very capable of winning the title. While the winners of the first several seasons of *The Biggest Loser* USA, both the grand prize and the at-home prizes, were men, a shift happened in season 5 when Ali Vincent won the prize. Although Ali was not the first female winner globally, Ali’s win ushered in a new era of the US version, leading more women to win the show. As of now, six women have won in sixteen seasons. Interestingly, there is also a gendered difference among these winners, not only in number, but in kind; male winners tend to have been very heavy, whereas female winners tend to start at a lower weight and succeed by winnowing themselves down even further.

Season 15 of *The Biggest Loser* (USA) offers a variety of interesting examples in respect to women and gender. These include two women who are portrayed as quite athletic and competitive—both Holley, who is a champion and Olympic competitor in a typically masculinized sport, weight-lifting, and Rachel, an ex-swimmer who consistently wins challenges on and off the scale. Holley’s story is perhaps the most interesting because it contradicts many of

the logics of the makeover. Unlike the many contestants who are “fallen” athletes, Holley is an active athlete at the time of her casting; her narrative thus falls out of the typical redemptive pattern in some ways. Easily seen as a “manly” woman, Holley argues for losing weight to help her better compete for an Olympic medal, rather than gain any other typically feminine benefits like beauty or becoming the object of heterosexual desire. Likewise, she is often portrayed as hesitant to embrace makeover logic. Perhaps because Holley resists these tropes so clearly, the makeover must work even harder to convert her to its logic, and it does so with implicitly gendered messages. To overcome Holley’s anxiety about losing muscle in the process of losing weight, her trainer, Bob, works to convince her that she can be “smaller *and* stronger.” In one particularly important scene in the fourth episode, Bob invites a number of female weight-lifters to the ranch to train with her in the fourth episode “to show Holley that she can be smaller and stronger. Weight goes down, strength goes up” (18.00). These women are all thin and easily viewed as feminine despite their evident strength; one is even wearing a tutu. They are introduced as competing at 165 lbs. Holley, skeptical, reminds Bob that if she wanted to get into the next weight category she would have to get down to that weight; at this point, she is over 300 pounds and 165 is quite far away. When Bob suggests this is a possibility, Holley responds sarcastically “I’ll just have to cut 130 pounds, whatever.” By the end of the segment, however, Bob’s efforts to “reprogram her mind” seem to have been effective; after working out with the other women, Holley reports that her anxieties about losing muscle with weight loss have been allayed.

Subsequent clips of Holley emphasize her mental shift from skepticism to belief in weight loss. When she is eliminated in the seventh episode, for example, she says: “When I started doing Olympic weight-lifting, I thought well, it’s ok that I’m large, because I’m a weightlifter. And since I’m a super heavyweight, I can be as big as I want. And I don’t think that way anymore. I think I can be healthy and fit while being a competitive weightlifter.” (40.50). Notably, Holley also stresses her agency and internal motivation: “And now I have motivation from within. I’m losing weight because *I* want to, because *I* think it would be a good idea for me, my life, and my career. And I think that’s a huge difference.” Instead of admitting she is giving in to external social pressure to be thin, Holley argues that it is her personal choice and for the sake of her

career rather than any feminine ideal. When she is shown in an update in the following episode, Holley, now 260 lb., again emphasizes her mental shift, saying, “Before I came to *Biggest Loser*, I loved the fact I was big, and that was who I was, and I had succeeded at being big, so I never felt like I had to change it.” Through *BL*, she says she has made that “mental shift, that just because I’ve always been big doesn’t mean that I have to stay big.” At this moment, it seems that fat phobia has shown its power, converting even a woman who succeeded being large and was proud of her size. One can almost hear the sad sighs of fat activists as Holley says these words.

Even at this moment, however, it seems unlikely that Holley will entirely give in to the demands of the weight loss competition and emerge at a traditionally feminine weight. While the other female weight-lifters brought on the show to train with her indeed exhibit strength, none of them lift anything close to the 225 lbs that Holley manages. And indeed, her weight at the finale is 255, heavier at her “after” than many of her female competitors in their “before” bodies. While she professes belief that the weight loss has helped her career, it is clear that Holley will not continue to push further for the sake of a reclaimed femininity if it conflicts with her ability to lift. In a way, while she is temporarily subjected to the gendered demands of the makeover, she is ultimately granted a reprieve by virtue of her status as an athlete and Olympian. As Bob emphasizes in his tearful farewell to her when she is eliminated, Holley’s status subverts the power dynamics that place experts/trainers above BL contestants; as he says, “Being able to work with you, you have taught me so much. This has been such a joy every single day to talk to you not only as a contestant on this show, but as a peer [...]” (39.46).

But, if the makeover of *BL* works to maximize Holley’s femininity by making her smaller, it also works to enhance the masculinized values of competition in those women who already easily read as feminine. These include Tumi and Marie of season 15. In a scene that precedes and parallels Jillian’s exhortation to Jay to “get mad,” she has a similar encounter with Tumi. In episode four, the same episode in which Bob encourages Holley to become “smaller and stronger,” Jillian confronts Tumi after she performs poorly in a boxing exercise. Instead of reading Tumi’s lack of energy as simple fatigue, Jillian interprets her hesitation as an overmanagement of aggression out of fear: “There’s no fire in Tumi. Tumi’s afraid of the fire” (21.01). Paradoxically, her positive qualities (“cutesy” manner and agreeability) are read

negatively. Jillian, speaking directly to the camera in interview, continues to say that she feels there are “old historical issues” coming up and that Tumi must deal with these issues “so that she doesn’t just lose weight physically, but she heals herself emotionally.” Confirming Jillian’s interpretation, Tumi tearfully speaks of her past in the following conversation with Jillian outside the gym. This past, complete with early death of her mother and abandonment by two father figures, is clearly tragic. For healing, the show suggests, this tragedy must be brought to light and expressed freely. As Jillian continues to say, “The first thing Tumi needs is permission to feel her true feeling without consequence of guilt or shame. When she begins to do that, she’ll stop stuffing down these feelings with food and start dealing with these issues.” (22.49). Jillian’s reading demonstrates a common trope of fat people as turning to food to deal with negative emotion, burying both sorrow and fat under the skin. In this case, it is less a case of expressing too much emotion, but rather mismanaging it through suppression. A healthy dose of aggression, Jillian suggests, is not only necessary for healing but also essential to success in the competitive atmosphere of *The Biggest Loser*. To lose weight and be a winner, Tumi must take on and express more masculinized emotions.

This moment with Tumi is also interesting for its racial implications. Tumi, in contrast to other African-American women who have been featured on the show, is not presented as the stereotypical “sassy” black lady. In fact, it is quite the opposite; while another contestant, Tanya, checks a number of stereotypical boxes, Tumi has, up to this point, escaped this framing. It is possible to read her friendly but relatively quiet demeanor as a resistance to being pigeonholed as an aggressive, loud black woman. But when Jillian mentions the “old historical issues” this is not what she means. Instead, Tumi’s issues are reduced to an individual level. Her story, in its featuring of abandonment by her fathers, nevertheless follows a common narrative about the inadequacy of black fathers, which links her personal story back to her group identity. The makeover, in encouraging her to express her anger and hurt, is thus implicitly figured as a means of empowerment for black women who have been hurt by black men, rather than a system and history of oppression that puts strain on black families.

Marie’s story is also interesting. Marie, sweet and quiet from the beginning, coasts under the radar for much of the season. Her goal to become a mother makes her less threatening to a

gender binary than others. At some point, however, Marie begins to discover a competitive spirit. Discussing her trajectory with Jillian in a later episode, she posits two possible paths going forward, each with different goals—either trying her best to win the competition or just losing enough weight to go home and start a family. As she says, “My thing is this—it’s either a) I make the decision and I say, ok, I’m in this to win it, or b) I make the decision to lose enough weight, go home and start a family. There’s a difference.” (15.11, 55.55). Jillian affirms the difference and says she always thought Marie would choose the latter, but that she is willing to push her harder to give her a chance of winning; to the camera, she says that Marie needs to “show” her rather than “tell” her about her will to win. Marie, in turn, says that “seeing that competitive drive come out—it’s exciting” and the she will go “balls out” to reach that goal (15.11, 57.08). Later in the episode, Marie makes a gesture of showing her desire to win by prioritizing strategy over affective ties and voting out her own teammate, Tumi. The transformation of Marie from passive participant to active competitor is also particularly evident in one moment from episode 12; here Marie and Bobby are on the same team and one must carry the other to complete a challenge. Marie, frustrated with Bobby’s inability to carry her, insists on carrying him, although he is both taller and heavier. In this moment, Marie demonstrates her strength by reversing the gender hierarchies.

For Marie, then, going for the competitive option means (temporarily, at least) eschewing the roles of wife and mother, a decision the show celebrates. This is reflected in the later makeover episode as well; when Tim Gunn says that he hopes she fulfills her dream of becoming a mother soon, she says “Hopefully not before the finale” (15.13, 14.40). This suggests that even if she is eliminated before being a finalist, which is what indeed happens, she will follow the makeover to the end before attempting to become pregnant. This does not mean that she is entirely willing to surrender the markers of her femininity. In fact, later in the makeover episode, Marie expresses anxiety about the upcoming haircut and relinquishing control to stylist Ken Paves, saying “I just hope he doesn’t make me look like a boy, because that’s my biggest fear.” (24.25). Of course, a short haircut is exactly what Ken has in mind, arguing that it will free her from baggage. Marie, however, says that she had envisioned that losing weight would help her again look good with long hair and thus finds it difficult to accept his idea for her. In this

moment, we see the contrast between Marie's vision for herself through the makeover and the vision provided by the show's experts. Eventually, after a much-hyped conflict, Marie cedes to Ken's opinion and eventually emerges happily with a very short haircut. Here we see again how the show pushes Marie to modify her narrow idea of femininity to accommodate other things, at the same time that it produces her body as clearly feminine through weight loss.

Beyond the Telos: Rachel

The particularly conflicting demands of women in the weight loss makeover, as well as the contradiction between *The Biggest Loser*'s competitive teleology and normalizing impulses, become particularly evident in the case of Rachel Frederickson. Rachel stands out as the only contestant in *Biggest Loser* history to end his or her transformation in the "underweight" category according to BMI; at the finale of season 15, Rachel weighed only 105 lbs, to the shock of fellow contestants and trainers alike. This result not only secured her the title and the winnings, but also occasioned a greater controversy about the show and its dangerous methods for producing weight loss. Thus Rachel's trajectory is interesting in that her arc overshot the target, showing how the teleology of weight loss pushes the narrative beyond "healthy" goals and how ideas of gender, competition, and change interact within the weight loss makeover.

From the beginning of the season, Rachel is positioned as a dominant competitive force. Dolvett, trainer of her initial red team, recognizes her talent from the beginning, saying that she is the "person to watch this season" in the very first episode (11.07). As the scene continues, we see Dolvett training her, telling her "I see an athlete. Bring her out." Rachel, in response, says "She's coming." And come out she does. From this moment, Rachel not only consistently loses weight in excess of her competitors, but also wins a number of challenges, beating out women and men alike. In the triathlon, she easily beats the competition. It is no wonder, then, that she wins the entire season.

As with all stories on *The Biggest Loser*, Rachel's story has a strong redemptive bent. Rachel argues that she needs to lose weight as redemption for wasting her opportunity to become a professional swimmer. In the first episode, she introduces herself in this context: "My name is

Rachel Frederickson. I used to be a national-level swimmer, and so much was on the horizon: sponsorships, scholarships, you know, I had a really bright future in swimming...and I gave it up for a boy. I've lost a huge part of my identity, and I want a second chance to take control back of who I want to be." (5.53). Rachel evokes the bright future she could have had to show the necessity of weight loss, saying that it will provide her the "control" she needs to get back that important part of her identity. The body is essential in this project because, as she says later, she feels her current weight is "broadcasting to the world [her] failure" (11.14). The object of weight loss then is the reclamation of a thin body that proclaims her as a winner. Rachel's statement here points to how the body becomes a virtual confessor; the fat body "broadcasts" failure.

Interestingly, this story contradicts the gendered expectations of most women in the makeover, though; Rachel's failure is not tied to being a "bad" mother or wife, but rather putting romance above her own potential, giving up her dreams to move to Germany and pursue an ultimately failed relationship. As the season progresses, we also learn that swimming was the glue in her relationship to her father; after giving it up, their relationship has been strained. Her only "friend" is food.

Rachel's weight loss is then presented as an opportunity not only to regain her athletic body, but also to repair her relationship with her family and redeem herself for opportunities she let slip by. While the competitive swim career cannot be recovered, that energy can be channeled in other directions; weight loss becomes the perfect outlet for Rachel's competitive spirit. The tie-in is made explicit in episode 8, when Dolvett takes Rachel to the pool for training. When Rachel sees her time of 1.24 after a short lap, she is disappointed and returns to the pool to beat it. Dolvett expresses his admiration for her determination: "Here's your girl who hasn't swam [sic] competitively in six years. And instead of accepting her time as job well done, she's ready to challenge herself and do even better." (18.15). In the absence of competitive swimming, weight loss becomes the competitive sport that Rachel excels at.

By the time that the time on the ranch ends in episode 14, Rachel is already at 150 lb., very close to a "normal" weight according to BMI. When she appears in the finale, however, she is very thin. As she walks out for the first time, the shock is visible on the faces of the trainers, Bob and Jillian, and also other contestants like Holley. Rachel appears to be ecstatic, however, saying

Exclusive: Rachel Frederickson, Biggest Loser Winner, Gains 20 Pounds: "I'm at My Perfect Weight!"

CELEBRITY BODY APR. 3, 2014 AT 9:00AM BY ALLISON TAKEDA



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[ZOOM IN!](#) 

Rachel and her new “after” image after the makeover (*US Weekly*).

of her transformation that “It’s that moment where I just say I’m going to embrace being me, and being different, and just choosing to own my path.” (1.07.31). When she is weighed, we learn that she is 105 lbs and has lost 59.62% of her body weight, making her the winner of the season.

Rachel’s “own path” was not without critics. Twitter and Facebook erupted in statements that she had gone too far. Jillian Michaels, in interviews, admitted that she agreed: “I thought she had lost too much weight and I was immediately concerned and wondering how this happened, how no one had said something to me” (Bricker). Jillian argued that Rachel’s extreme weight loss was a failure of the “checks and balances” that the show has in place to protect contestants. In

response, Rachel admitted that she had gone as far as possible just to win and would not stay at 105, but rather gain weight after the finale. In the months after the finale, a spate of articles appeared reporting that she had gained twenty pounds to get to the “healthy” weight of 125. In an article on *US Weekly* in April 2014 (two months after the finale), for example, Rachel showed off a new “before” and “after”—her body from *The Biggest Loser* finale and her body at the new “perfect weight” of 125 (Takeda).

Rachel’s story has several important implications. First of all, it illustrates how the teleological pull of weight loss, combined with the competitive framework of *The Biggest Loser*, has the power to stretch weight loss narrative arcs beyond the “healthy” range of weights. The establishment of weight loss as a competitive sport thus often undermines its ostensible concerns with “health.” The problem is not really, as Jillian Michaels suggests, that the show failed in its premise, but rather that it *succeeded too well*. As Caitlin at the blog *Fit and Feminist* wrote, “what I will say is that it is not surprising to see that this has finally happened. Fredericksen [sic] took the game to its logical outcome. She played the game and she played it hard, and in doing so, she laid bare the show’s messed-up, disordered premises for all the world to see.”

Secondly, it shows the policing of bodies that occurs on both ends of the weight scale. Both fat and extremely thin women’s bodies are criticized in the name of health and beauty; Rachel, in her experience moving from one extreme to the other, felt negative social feedback on both ends. At the same time, the ascription of an eating disorder to Rachel’s body at her “after” weight but not before demonstrates the different standards with which we judge bodies. As Caitlin at *Fit and Feminist* argues, “we as a society have a hard time understanding that heavier people can and do have eating disorders [...] the implicit understanding surrounding a lot of weight loss talk in our society is that if you are fat, you should be willing to do whatever it takes to not be fat anymore.” Given that thinness is the norm, it would take a very low weight such as Rachel’s to ring alarm bells.

This contradiction is very closely tied to gender. For women, the line between “attractively slender” and “ugly skinny” is thin indeed. Other female winners of *The Biggest Loser* (USA) have ended up close to the underweight line of 18.5 BMI at their respective finales: Ali Vincent (20.3), Helen Phillips (18.9), and Olivia Ward (19.5). While these women all achieved BMIs just

above the official “underweight,” their bodies were not criticized in the same manner as Rachel’s. Male contestants, meanwhile, often start and end at heavier weights, and their bodies are not criticized in the same manner, even if their thinness was achieved by similar obsessive behavior. This paradox reflects a larger trend in popular culture, ensuring that it is not uncommon to see castigation of women for being fat in the same publications that criticize bodies for being too thin. Below the *US Weekly* article celebrating Rachel’s return to a “perfect” weight through weight gain, for example, we see two links to photo slideshows: one is “Biggest Loser Body Makeovers” and the other “Scary Skinny Bikini Bods,” which of course are only of women. Both point to a surveillance of bodies and pathologization of everything that does not fall within a narrowly defined norm. In this way, Rachel’s story not only illustrates the harmful teleological push of the weight loss competition, but also the unfair censure one might face as a woman for overshooting the telos.

Another Aesthetics of Competition: *Dance Your Ass Off*

Another series that merits closer analysis is *Dance Your Ass Off*. This series premiered on US network Oxygen in 2009, becoming the highest-rating series on the network. Thereafter, it was developed in a number of versions around the world, from Thailand to Estonia and South Africa, in the period of 2010 to 2012. *DYAO* is unique in being a blend between popular dance competition formats (e.g. *So You Think You Can Dance?*) and the weight loss makeover. *DYAO* preserves the numerical focus of the weight loss makeover, but adds another category of value in the rating of dance performances. In the course of each week in the competition, contestants train and rehearse a dance routine, which is performed in front of a live audience and a jury of three judges, who rate the performance. Directly after receiving these scores, they are weighed in. Rankings are determined by the combination of the dance score and percentage of weight lost. In adding the dance competition element, *Dance Your Ass Off* transcends the narrow limits of the weight loss makeover but also reveals a fundamental conflict between modes of depicting the fat body—as unhealthy, incapable, and disgusting on the one hand, and capable of conveying confidence and producing aesthetic pleasure on the other.

In its hybridity, *Dance Your Ass Off* reflects not only the ubiquity of the weight loss makeover in reality television, but also the extreme popularity of dance competition formats. Dana Heller, in her article “Calling Out Around the World: The Global Appeal of Reality Dance Formats,” takes this popularity as a cue, arguing for scholarship that considers the dance competition as a global genre. Moreover, she argues for reading dance as an important “discourse of the body” and addressing “questions of kinesthetic action and the semiotics of human movement” (39). Dance, as Heller notes, is a medium that is both particularly transferable across linguistic borders, but also “especially vulnerable to stagings and interpretations that essentialize difference in terms of fixed nations such of ethnicity, culture, and nation” (41). While dance competition shows borrow heavily from globally popular styles, they also perform styles that are perceived to be “indigenous” and “essential” to the culture in which they are produced. Likewise, dance often assumes particular roles for men and women, wherein the man often leads and the woman follows. This bodily performance of identity within a global format, Heller argues, thus deserves more attention, because, as it is tied to “other vectors of identity, such as race, gender, class and sexuality, dance serves not only as critical social text but one in which various discourses of difference converge and crystallize.” (41).

In light of Heller’s observations, *Dance Your Ass Off* reveals much about the convergence of different discourses of the body, across disciplinary as well as cultural boundaries. The dual goals of the show—weight loss and dance performance—draw on different modes of representation, each offering different pleasures for viewers. For the frequent viewer of weight loss makeovers, *Dance Your Ass Off* offers a refreshing contrast to the medicalized and solemnly dramatic narratives of *The Biggest Loser* et al. While medical discourse inserts itself sometimes, especially in the initial weigh-ins, the shame and humiliation of the weight loss makeover is downplayed; contestants are exuberant and joyful in their performances from the beginning, and appear to actually enjoy what they are doing, rather than grimacing through yet another excruciating workout. One comment on a YouTube video of the first season performance of “Disturbia” by Trice and Jesus sums it up:

Whilst I wouldn't actually watch this show, from what I've [sic] seen this appears to be a decided improvement over the Biggest Loser. Of course, it still has that

whole undercurrent of, "Lol, let's make fun of the fat pigs" to it, but unlike the Biggest Loser, where they basically ran the contestants into the ground, this show, like most dancing shows, is more upbeat and enthusiastic in tone, which I think is much better for the contestants. It's mostly positive rather than mostly negative.

(Sir Broadsword, 6 years ago)

While this commenter distances himself from actually watching the show, noting the public ridicule that still undergirds the spectacle of the fat body in it, he argues that it is ultimately superior to *The Biggest Loser* because the atmosphere of positivity is better for the contestants.

The upbeat positivity and enthusiasm that this viewer notes in *DYAO* is indeed crucial to the show, not only granting it a celebratory tone but also influencing the course of events. While *BL* and other weight loss makeovers care only about the scale, enthusiasm and energy in a dance performance on *DYAO* are necessary to receive a positive rating from the judges. One might wonder, however, if this positivity is really an expression of participants' positive experience or rather more of a performance for the sake of the judges and viewers. It is not uncommon, for example, to see evident pain and discomfort on the faces of *DYAO* after their performances because they have performed while injured. In this case, the performance becomes even more impressive for its ability to conceal the pain of the performer.

I would argue that *DYAO* is important not because it is necessarily better for contestants—any reality television show with such a rigorous schedule and bodily regime is bound to be very stressful—but rather in the way it restructures the performative identity of its protagonists, and thus the relationship of viewer to performer. While, as Fremlin argues, one's performative identity in the *BL* or other weight loss makeovers is dependent on the ability to lose weight alone, *DYAO* adds a different bodily dimension in dance. While success in weight loss and dance performance may require some similar things—physical endurance, bodily discipline, dedication in repeated trainings/rehearsals—they also entail very different kinds of being in the body, with different aims. Contestants on *DYAO* must not only learn how to discipline their bodies to execute certain movements effectively, but also how to communicate diverse affects and aesthetics through the body. They must convey confidence in the body, even when it is still fat.

On the viewer's side, *DYAO* is significant because it encourages viewers to take aesthetic pleasure in viewing fat bodies rather than reacting with disgust or judgment. Dance performance expands the ways that fat bodies can be presented; contestants wear tight, form-fitting clothing for their performances, often exposing body parts like the belly or legs that would usually be modestly covered. Instead of the shaming exposure of *BL*'s weigh-in outfits, these costumes are used to enhance the aesthetic experience of the dance performance, adding color and allowing flexible movement. While viewers may still respond with disgust at the sight of these bodies, as YouTube comments amply illustrate, the show itself does not present the fat body in these moments as something that is inherently shameful.

The paradox of *DYAO* lies in the fact that while it stresses that weight loss is necessary, it also proves that dance performances by fat people can be entertaining and impressive, and values these performances. This means that while *DYAO* shares the clear teleological downward push down the scale, this telos is not as clear. There appears to be a confusion of means and ends; while some contestants use dance to lose weight, others report wanting to lose weight to become better dancers. The association of lower weight and better dancing, though, does not necessarily hold up; often heavier dancers receive better marks than lighter ones. Moreover, the dual focus allows contestants to compensate weakness in one area with stronger performance in the other. In fact, the scoring of the show seems to be weighted toward the dance component, which usually makes up a significantly greater part of the score; dance scores range from 5 to 10, while percentage weight loss rarely tops 3%. For example, when Shayla performs "Proud Mary" with her partner Mario in the first week of the first season, her average dance score from the judges is 7 and her percentage weight lost is 2.37%; these numbers are added together to produce a final score of 9.37.

Perhaps *DYAO* is ultimately more appealing than the *BL* for some viewers because the inclusion of the dance component seems to make the protagonists more active in deciding their own fate. Rather than just seeing the body as the passive object of measurement in the weigh-in, *DYAO* allows the body to do something, to express itself actively. This message is strengthened by the format of the episode. The final two performers are always those who have lost the least amount of weight; identifying them thus allows them the opportunity to give even more effort

and thus compensate for their poor weight loss. The passionate dance performance, then, is given the space to trump the performance of weight loss and becomes a heroic last effort to save the contestant from elimination. In this final emphasis on the dance performance, *DYAO* complicates the teleology of the weight loss makeover.

While *DYAO* complicates the usual teleologies and depictions of fat people on television, it also reveals itself to be caught up in the representations of racial, gender, and national identity, as Heller suggests. Like *The Biggest Loser*, for example, *DYAO* attributes fatness in some people to their ethnic food cultures; when Latina Pinky is introduced, she says that she is fat because of “grandmother’s cooking” and proceeds to list a number of Mexican dishes like tamales and enchiladas. This attribution is a bit questionable, given that Pinky says she has two brothers who are thin and have a dance crew despite presumably being exposed to the same food culture, but it is powerful coming from Pinky’s own mouth. The fact that it is edited in, however, suggests that the producers feel it is important.

Dance also becomes the site of intricate identity negotiation. It is hard not to notice this complexity, for example, in the performances of someone like white male contestant Andrew on the South African version of the show, *Dance Your Butt Off*. Like any dance contestant, he must perform a variety of globally popular genres, from Latin ballroom to hip-hop, with his (black) partner throughout the season. When Andrew performs more local, racialized styles like kwaito, however, he is faced with the challenge of performing dances that are both his own—by virtue of his South African national identity—and not his own—by virtue of his race and social position. When he performs hip-hop in episode six, for example, combining moves from global dance styles of hip-hop and rave with more local moves like the ngwazi, the judges respond positively. The first judge, choreographer Somizi Mhlongo, begins his critique by saying whoever believes white men do not have rhythm is wrong; he praises both Andrew’s showmanship and his weight loss, saying he now looks “hot.” Mhlongo’s praise gains both a racial and sexual undercurrent, however, when he goes on to say that he usually drinks his coffee “black, rich, and strong” but Andrew’s performance has made him reconsider this preference. The host of the show follows up this exchange by saying “Andrew, I think you are now officially South Africa’s new coffee creamer.” The trope of Andrew as “coffee creamer,” the white element that mingles with a black

substance and adds something to it, recurs in the season; even his family use this term, albeit jokingly. The mild exoticism of this metaphor parallels comments on other versions of *DYAO* that praise minority performers for the extra “heat” or “spice” they bring to the competition (e.g. Latina Pinky in the US version).

Andrew’s performances appear to meld both global aesthetics and black South African aesthetics in a white body, but when Andrew performs a dance to Johannesburg kwaito music in episode 12, the ultimate paradox of dance as a performance of identity becomes clear. Having danced energetically and well, Andrew is again praised by the judges. Judge Sibusiso Leope, himself a kwaito DJ, gives Andrew great praise when he says (according to subtitles) “One can’t tell you are white; you dance this style like a black person. It even feels like you understand me when I speak IsiZulu. But I’m sure you don’t understand me.” Because this speech itself is given in Zulu, however, it soon becomes obvious that Leope is right about Andrew not understanding. Confronted with his obvious lack of comprehension, the host says “just nod your head” and Andrew responds in good humor, “I’ll see the subtitles...” Here the paradox becomes clear; while Andrew has apparently mastered a bodily performance of black Zulu identity, he still lacks the cultural and linguistic skills to take on this identity outside the narrow confines of dance performance. As much as Leope “feels” like he should understand, he does not, and Leope himself knows this; Andrew cannot even understand the praise and its paradox at this moment because of the linguistic barrier.

In terms of gender, the teleologies of makeover are also quite complicated in *Dance Your Ass Off*. While physical competition stressing fitness and endurance like *The Biggest Loser* is masculinized, dance tends to be feminized. At the same time, the roles within partner dances are often clearly delineated according to gender. *DYAO*, like other dance competitions, highlights binary gender by pairing contestants with professional dancers of the “other” gender; men are often expected to lead and perform feats of strength like lifts, while women generally follow and are the ones lifted. Comments from judges may also reinforce gendered ideas, as when Trice is praised for her “feminine” moves or eventual winner Ruben is praised by judge Danny Teeson for his “strong” moves one week after being criticized previously for movement that was too “delicate.”

African-American women, in particular, seem vulnerable to racialized teleology that reigns in their energy and apparent sexuality. Exuberant Trice is criticized by Danny Teeson in her first performance for not fully containing her energy and appropriately channeling it into her dance moves. Combined with weight loss, the disciplinary regime of dance thus serves to minimize the threat of black women's sexuality, often literally reducing the physical markers of femininity, breasts and hips. Former cheerleader and contestant Shayla, for example, expresses her desire to lose weight from her large breasts, saying in the clip leading up to her first performance, that "I know that it may seem like that's what all the guys want—no! It's fat is what it is, and it hurts" (1.17). Shayla's desire to lose weight thus reflects a desire to reduce the hyperfeminine signification of her body, a desire the weight loss makeover is all too willing to indulge.

Dance, however, also sometimes offers contestants the ability to subvert binary gender. In the Thai version of *DYAO*, called *Dance Your Fat Off*, for example, one of the most impressive contestants is a very masculine woman; paired with a small man, she is the one who performs the tricks and lifts. Likewise, one very successful contestant on *DYAO* in the US second season is Adamme, whose performative persona was often energetically hypermasculine, but whose appearance was often quite androgynous. Even as his weight loss gave him a more masculine silhouette, Adamme retained the feminine aspects of his look. In this case, dance appears to allow a separation between performative persona and personal identity; this is a distinction that is not allowed to contestants on straight weight loss makeovers because their performative identity is constituted solely by weight loss.

In these ways, *DYAO* sometimes subverts the more obvious affective and gendered strategies of other weight loss makeovers. Nevertheless, one should not overstate the complication of teleology in *DYAO*. In the end, transformation in both matters of weight loss and dancing proceeds toward teleological ends; finalists lose significant amounts of weight as they improve their dancing and the judges often comment on the apparent improvement they have made, ascribing it to weight loss rather than the intensive dance training. In the end, *DYAO* produces a new aesthetics but neither drastically alters the teleology of the weight loss makeover, nor escapes the paradoxes of identity one finds in all reality television dance competitions.

IV. AFTER THE “AFTER”: THREE TRAJECTORIES

Every new beginning comes from some other beginning’s end.

- “Closing Time,” Semisonic

Despite the sense of finality conveyed by the final scenes of all RTV weight loss makeovers, in which each contestant’s body is revealed and presented as a triumphant “after” to be contrasted with a shameful “before,” the stories of makeover participants are not really over. It is not always “end of story,” as Brenda R. Weber contends. Instead, the makeover’s end betrays a future orientation to answer the viewer’s implicit question—“what now?” Of the various possibilities, I identify three main trajectories.³⁵ Of these, by far the most common is what I call “The Saga Continues.” This means that change is still emphasized, albeit often channeled into other types of personal development. A second possibility, particularly on display in *The Biggest Loser* series, is “The Student Becomes the Master”; former contestants flip over to the other side of makeover, becoming the experts who can share their experience and inspire others to take the same path. This trajectory has religious overtones in its structure; successful participants become “converts,” testifying to their faith in makeover and encouraging others to convert as well. Finally, a third, more rare but not entirely discountable trajectory is “Joining the Rebel Alliance.” This trajectory encompasses the weight loss makeover’s discontents, who either refuse to participate in its teleology or voice their critique of its premise. While their critique is unlikely to be shown in makeovers themselves, these people appear in paratextual and extratextual sources—in news media, on blogs, etc.—to voice their opinions.

A. The Saga Continues

³⁵ Certainly there are other possibilities here, but these are the three that are most visible in the narratives themselves and popular media. I would speculate that there are a number of former participants who have regained weight and have ambivalent feelings toward the makeover, but remain out of the public eye, making their stories less visible.

As mentioned above, this trajectory is by far the most common for makeover participants. Even when these protagonists appear to fully inhabit their visions of themselves in the “after” moment, like in the spectacular *Biggest Loser* finales, participants and producers also take pains to suggest that the transformation is not entirely complete. Reconciling the contradiction between the before/after trope and the desire for ongoing self-improvement, the show channels the makeover impulse into other veins. Contestants, often prompted by the host to share their future plans, suggest that personal growth continues after being on the show, whether that means continuing weight loss to a target weight, focusing on career advancement, or developing an enhanced relationship with family or partners. Stephanie of season 9 (*BL USA*) is typical when she describes how she has found love with Sam, another contestant, and says, directly into the camera, “I’m with someone who drives and motivates me to become better, every day” (9.19, 28.27). This trajectory can even be seen in the rehabilitation of contestants who have apparently regressed in their makeovers; even participants who have regained weight are brought back into the fold. This was the case with Erik, winner of season three (*BL USA*). By the time he appears in the audience at the finale of season 9, he has not only regained significant weight, but also rededicated himself to weight loss, losing a substantial part of what he has regained. While Erik’s movement up and down the scale seems to undermine the teleological drives of the show, in another way he is the ideal subject of makeover culture. His body can be appropriated and re-appropriated multiple times to perform spectacular weight loss, which the show prizes even more than permanent weight loss.

In substantial ways, however, the weight loss makeover continues beyond weight loss itself. This can be seen in the way that cosmetic surgery makeovers and weight loss makeovers, having developed into distinct genres, now increasingly cannibalize each other. In the following sections, this connection will be explored, both as plastic/cosmetic surgery becomes incorporated into weight loss and weight loss becomes incorporated into cosmetic surgery.

Plastic Surgery in the Weight Loss Makeover: Nina

Jung und Dick! is remarkable in the wider field of weight loss makeovers for its unflinching portrayal of the bodily consequences of extreme weight loss. Through the story of



Photo of Nina's excess skin after extreme weight loss as shown in *Jung und Dick*

Nina, the documentary presents an “after the after” that integrates a different field of bodily work (cosmetic surgery) into the weight loss makeover, delaying the ultimate goal of makeover. This means also that the narrative admits that the perfect body is not achieved by weight loss alone. This is apparent from the beginning of the documentary, when the characters are being introduced. About Nina, the voiceover says, “Even someone who has lost weight successfully, like Nina, is not yet at the goal, because 140 kg weight loss also means extra folds of skin all over the body. These can only be removed by surgery” (1.42).³⁶ When Nina is properly introduced, she is shown visiting her plastic surgeon for a consultation. Parts of her excess skin have already been removed, while more operations await; the immediate one has the dual goal of removing skin from the upper thighs and inserting breast implants.

Before Nina can talk about herself, however, Dr. Ulrich Ziegler takes the center stage, explaining the changes in Nina’s body with the help of photos of her naked flesh on his computer as she sits across from him. These spectacular, grotesque photos isolate parts of her body to demonstrate the volume of excess skin, from the hanging “Fettschürze” (the abdominal “fat apron”) to wobbly arms. While weight loss throughout the documentary is presented as a way to avoid early mortality, Dr. Ziegler’s descriptions reveal how Nina’s post-weight loss body is

³⁶ “Selbst wer erfolgreich abgenommen hat ist noch nicht am Ziel, so wie Nina, denn 140 kilo Gewichtsverlust bedeuten auch überschüssige Hautlappen am ganzen Körper. Die können nur operativ entfernt werden.”

viewed as prematurely aged—the breasts are “ausgelutscht” (literally “sucked out,” saggy) and the upper thighs look like they belong to an “alte Oma” (old grandma) (25.24). Instead of relying on Nina to tell us about her experience of her body, the documentary foregrounds Dr. Ziegler as he describes the bodily discomfort his patients feel when they cannot put on a bra without getting their skin pinched, only looking to Nina for confirmation. The solution to all these problems, we are told, can only be surgery, because, as the voiceover tells us, these flaps of skin cannot be dieted away (25.53).³⁷

Nina herself indicates her feeling that her transformation is not complete. Her unsightly excess skin prevents her from wearing the things she would like to wear—she explains that she still covers her body, saying “In principle you dress the same as with 205 kg, just in smaller sizes.”³⁸ These problems were not altogether unexpected but nevertheless surprising to her: (25.58). “I was prepared for what awaited me, that it’s ugly, that the skin hangs, that so many remnants are there. But I only really realized it as more and more went away.”³⁹ Even after this excess skin is removed, though, the body will not be perfect—as her plastic surgeon says, “I always say you are trading the skin for a scar and a new shape.”⁴⁰

After showing us Nina’s leg and breast surgery, though, the narrative again emphasizes the newness and finality of the change, suggesting that now, finally, Nina is in her “after” body. With these surgeries, the documentary suggests, begins a new life phase (“Lebensabschnitt”) as a “normal” person. This phase is completely new to Nina because she was always fat; as she explains early on, she was “a chubby kid, a fat teenager, a huge twenty-something” (27.11).⁴¹ Nina’s transformation, then, allows her to inhabit a completely new subject position for which she has no frame of reference. While Nina’s “after” pictures for Dr. Ziegler are being taken by his assistant, she discusses the benefits of her weight loss process. Nina particularly emphasizes

³⁷ “Hautlappen und Fettschürzen kann man nicht weghungern.”

³⁸ “Also im Prinzip zieht man sich an wie mit 205 kg, nur in kleineren Größen”

³⁹ “Ich war daraufgefasst, was mich erwartet, nachdem ich soviel abnehme—dass, das unschön ist, dass die Haut hängt, dass einfach viele Überreste da sind. So richtig bewusst geworden ist das mir aber je mehr weg ging.”

⁴⁰ “Ich sage immer, Sie tauschen die Haut gegen eine Narbe und eine neue Kontour ein.”

⁴¹ “ein pummeliges Kind, ein dicker Teenager, ein fetter Mitt-zwanziger”

the new mobility she has gained as well as the ease with which she can accomplish both social and physical tasks: “everything is simply easier” (1.28.28).⁴² Dr. Ziegler, in contrast, makes more explicit statements about the benefits of her huge weight loss, stressing that it is a “whole new life” (“ganz neues Leben”) for these patients, complete with better career and romantic possibilities. Even though he stresses the completeness of the change, Ziegler seems reluctant to completely close the book on makeover, though, saying “she will always have a little bit of something where she says, sure, here I could do something or there something could be improved, but in general it is a completely new life for these people” (1.29.14).⁴³ These scenes, as both Nina’s story within the documentary and the documentary itself come to a close, again emphasize the “before/after” frame of reference while also leaving the body open for more work. This not only incorporates plastic/cosmetic surgery into the weight loss process, extending the weight loss makeover beyond weight loss itself, but also argues for self-improvement as a valuable but long and arduous process that is never quite finished, even after a new life has been started.

Weight Loss in the Cosmetic Surgery Makeover: *Botched*

In addition to the increasing inclusion of plastic and cosmetic surgery in the weight loss makeover, we can trace a parallel movement to incorporate weight loss into the cosmetic surgery makeover. Of course, weight loss has long been part of full-body transformation programs like *The Swan* and *Extreme Makeover*, but a number of more recent programs differ significantly in that they incorporate weight loss in temporal dislocation rather than as just another technique of the makeover employed simultaneously. This is evident in the show *Botched*, for example, in which Dr. Terry Dubrow and Dr. Paul Nassif correct cosmetic surgical procedures that have gone wrong. *Botched*, on E!, is a particularly interesting case because it is presented as both a corrective to failed makeovers, but is also a makeover show itself. In this respect, although both

⁴² “es ist einfach alles einfacher”

⁴³ “Sie wird immer noch ein bissl was haben wo sie sagt, klar, da könnte man noch was machen oder da könnte man was verbessern, aber insgesamt ist es ein komplett neues Leben für diese Menschen.”

doctors may criticize their colleagues who “go too far” or perform operations poorly, *Botched* does not actually undermine the premise of makeover itself. However, this premise creates a different power structure, in which both patients and doctors seek redemption—patients for themselves, and doctors for their profession and the “sins” of their fellow plastic and cosmetic surgeons.

Weight loss has been an important part of a number of stories on *Botched*. Even though the actual process of weight loss is not depicted, weight loss becomes an important element structuring the narratives and their temporalities. One episode suffices to illustrate how this happens. In episode 2.2, “Boob-Watch,” *Botched* follows the stories of two women who frame their desire for the doctors’ help in relation to weight loss. One is Katina, who seeks the help of the doctors to correct a badly done apron surgery following weight loss; the apron surgery, to remove excess abdominal skin, resulted in necrosis and the loss of her belly button, as well as the creation of a large area of scar tissue. Katina expresses her frustration with the surgery’s effects as they interfere with her feeling that her makeover is complete. Having lost over 100 lbs the “old-fashioned way,” through diet and exercise, Katina feels that the botched surgery and resulting issues have prevented her from being able to show off the “work” that she has done. In short, she has never achieved the “after” that she had hoped for. Dr. Dubrow helps her achieve this by removing a large amount of scar tissue, retrieving (by chance) her umbilical stalk, and reshaping her navel.

The other woman is Nicole Eggert, an actress once known for her “beach body” on the television show *Baywatch*. Nicole complains that when she chose to replace her breast implants after twenty years, she was pressured by her surgeon into getting bigger implants than she wanted. These overly large implants, she argues, prevent her from projecting the appropriately maternal image she desires and also impede her ability to lose weight. Dr. Dubrow agrees to give her a smaller option, but they disagree on the size; she wants much smaller, while Dr. Dubrow argues that especially small implants will not fit her body, given that she has gained weight and her skin has stretched. Away from Nicole, Dr. Dubrow comments to his colleague/co-star Dr. Nassif that Nicole wrongly assumes that she can have her “old body” back. While he cannot do

that, he tries to give her what she wants by doing a bit of extra liposuction at the edges of her breasts, inserting smaller implants, and doing a lift.

What do these two stories, combined in one episode, tell us? First, they show that weight loss can be integrated in the cosmetic surgery makeover from both temporal positions, both “before” and “after,” the already-lived past and the anticipated future. That is, it can be seen as the necessary prerequisite for surgical intervention, just as surgical intervention can be seen as an enabling for weight loss. Secondly, while the show focuses on cosmetic surgery, it still privileges losing weight the “right” way—through the “hard work” of diet and exercise—rather than by surgical means. Katina’s performance of weight loss through her apparent self-control make her worthy of help from the doctors, who can give her the “after” body she has desired and worked for. Nicole, on the other hand, has a less compelling story, but her fame is enough to grant her a spot in the show. At the same time, Dr. Dubrow’s insistence that she cannot have her old body back runs counter to the dominant narrative in many weight loss makeovers, such as *The Biggest Loser*. The insistence that weight loss does not automatically return one to a previous thin and fit body may seem to undermine the premise of weight loss makeover as a whole, but in fact it simply opens the door to more post-weight loss surgical intervention. In this way, weight loss is sutured into other makeover processes, ensuring that the “after” can act as another “before.”

B. The Student Becomes the Master

This second trajectory beyond the “after” is particularly evident in *The Biggest Loser* in the United States, although also visible in other versions. The franchise often recycles its old contestants back into future seasons for new promotions or endeavors; firmly integrated into makeover culture, these participants come to assume the new role of expert and give their advice to others. This trajectory importantly illustrates the exchange of roles that is made possible by reality television, in which undergoing a makeover oneself grants one authority to guide someone else’s. This pattern connects this trajectory to self-help literature, which often functions according to a logic of “I did it and so can you.” The structure of this trajectory is also quasi-religious in that these “converts” to the faith of makeover testify to their experience in the service

of proselytizing others. This is not surprising given the use of religious metaphors and language in weight loss texts. One should, however, be careful about labeling this structure truly religious, as R. Marie Griffith reminds us in her book *Born Again Bodies* that these comparisons are perhaps too easy. For this reason, I prefer to rather identify it, as the title of this section suggests, as the “student” simply becoming the “master.”

The reference to epics like *Star Wars* is not incidental. As Kate Harding importantly notes, this weight loss narrative is a kind of “hero’s journey” story. Writing about her experience after losing a larger amount of weight the first time, Harding expresses her newfound feeling of authority: “After a long road of trials, I’d returned from the underworld of dieting with a new understanding of how to eat, exercise, and how to *be*. I thought I had achieved something major and acquired wisdom worth sharing.” Contestants on shows like *The Biggest Loser* profess similar feelings, and also express their desire to share their newfound expertise with others. This path is usually indicated in the finale of each season, when each contestant is asked about their future plans. While most, as enumerated above, stress the continuation of personal self-improvement, a significant number of contestants also emphasize their plans to “pay it forward” to their families and communities.

The first target for intervention is the immediate family of the contestant. This family weight loss may even begin during the season, as in season 15 when Dolvett begins to coach contestant Jennifer’s daughter Taylor to lose weight. In the finale, Jen says she’s proud of her family—Taylor has lost 30 lbs and her husband has lost 50. Likewise, in *Peso Pesado*, finalist Vanessa’s family is interviewed and each family member reports their weight loss. This process is assumed to continue after the show, with the contestant-turned-expert as the coach. On another level, contestants express their desire to rejuvenate their communities through weight loss. This aspect is especially emphasized in the stories of ethnic minority contestants. As argued above, in the framing of the weight loss makeover Latinos, African Americans, or Pacific Islanders are likely to have their weight attributed to their ethnicity and ethnic food culture. In this context, the promises of contestants like (African-American) Tanya to open a “healthy soul food” restaurant or (Pacific Islander) Sam to talk to his community about adopting “healthy” food are significant

in demonstrating how contestants view themselves as responsible for improving the health of their communities.

This rejuvenation may even extend beyond the immediate community to encompass the entire nation. *The Biggest Loser* draws on former participants to promote its products and initiatives, which are often presented as a way of transforming the entire country. For example, former *Biggest Loser* contestants and mother-son team Jackie and Dan Evans travel the country as spokespeople for “Biggest Loser Run Walk” events. According to their website, the “Biggest Loser RunWalk is a non-intimidating race series designed to challenge America to get fit. You’ve been inspired by the hit reality show ‘The Biggest Loser,’ now it’s time to get off the couch and hit the pavement and achieve your fitness goals. This race series will include a challenge for everyone.” Here again we see the interchangeability of roles that RTV affords; former contestants become coaches, while viewers are encouraged to “get off the couch” and become active participants themselves in the *Biggest Loser* phenomenon; anyone and “everyone” can play a role. Other former contestants play similar roles in the health and fitness industry by launching their own brands, becoming personal trainers, or advertising for health campaigns such as “Got Milk?”

Onscreen, former contestants appear with regularity on new seasons of the show. In season 15, different older participants appeared in nearly episode. Often these contestants arrive to do some product placement, as when season 12 contestant Vinny Hickerson promotes Progresso and Yoplait (ep 3) or season 14 winner Danni Allen brings a round of Subway sandwiches to the contestants (ep 6) or talks about her love of Lärabar (ep 11). They also appear to promote *Biggest Loser* products, as when season 11 winner Olivia Ward appears in the second episode and season 8 contestant Abby arrives in the eleventh to promote the *Biggest Loser* resorts. Alternatively, they are recruited to promote *Biggest Loser* events like the Run/Walks. In addition to product placement and promotion, these contestants are ostensibly brought back to give their advice and encouragement to the new contestants. Beyond simply indicating their expertise, though, their appearance in the show marks them as celebrities on the same plane as other famous people who appear—Olympians like Apollo Ohno, actresses like Eva Longoria, or even First Lady Michelle Obama—to promote their various causes. The appearance of these former contestants also makes

important visual testimony to the *Biggest Loser* makeover; years after their *BL* competition, the show suggests, these people are not only *still thin*, but even doing more to promote health and wellness to others.

The continuation of the weight loss makeover in this direction often spills into paratextual media, such as the various books produced by the *Biggest Loser* franchise. The earlier cited *Biggest Loser* book *Six Weeks to a Healthier You*, published during season 9, for example, combines the stories of contestants from that season with testimonies from older “alumni.” Updates on former contestants often include information on their activities related to inspiring others to lose weight. Pete, of season 2, for example, is quoted as saying, “I believe that I’ve been given a unique gift—my health, my life back. So I’m paying it forward to enable other people to have a new lease on life. I’ve developed a 10-week series of classes called Lose it Fast, Lose it Forever. [...] There’s a certain amount of pride in being able to share this with others.” (45). Many other contestants report involvement in fitness pursuits—organizing community fitness events or teaching exercise classes. These former contestants also offer practical advice, share their favorite foods or exercises, encourage readers, and talk about their transformations. None of the advice offered is particularly revolutionary—related to well-known techniques such as portion control or finding exercise you enjoy—but the tone is conversational, as if related from one friend to another. Importantly, this advice has authority because it comes from people who have undergone the change themselves and faced the struggles with keeping the weight off at home as well.

Such weight loss books tied in to television makeovers also exist in other cultural contexts, such as the United Kingdom, where they follow much of the same design principles and content. In Germany, by contrast, these books tend to follow the pattern identified earlier in which the experts are placed more in the center, rather than the participants. The top hit on [amazon.de](#) for a *Biggest Loser* book, for example, is *The Biggest Loser—Besser Leben, Gesund Abnehmen* (The Biggest Loser—Living Better, Losing Weight Healthily) featuring *BL Germany* host Dr. Christine Theiss on the cover. While the book includes pictures of contestants, it does not provide nearly as much testimony from these people themselves, instead focusing on the “expert” Theiss and her advice. Other similar books include those by other TV weight loss

experts Silke Kayadelen (trainer on *The Biggest Loser Germany*, seasons 2-6), Alexa Iwan (host of her own weight loss makeover *Alexa!*), and Detlef D! Soost (coach on *The Biggest Loser Germany* and *Biggest Loser Teens*). All of these tend to build rapport directly between expert and reader, rather through the chummy encouragement of the formerly fat contestants.

C. Joining the Rebel Alliance

This third trajectory is by far the least represented (numerically, at least), but its stories have particular weight and salience because they contradict the main narratives and logics of makeover culture. These are the rebels, the participants of the weight loss makeover who reject the instructions, and even legal injunctions, they have been given and either speak out against the conditions in which their weight loss was produced or the way their stories continued after the end of filming.

The most well-known figure in this trajectory is probably Kai Hibbard. A finalist of *The Biggest Loser* season three, Kai lost a whopping 118 lbs. in 2006. Since then, however, she has written or contributed to a number of online articles sharply critical of *The Biggest Loser* and its producers. One of these was the 2010 Jezebel article “Bigest Loser Finalist Says Show Gave Her an Eating Disorder.” Several years later, in 2014, there were articles such as “The Truth About Life After The Biggest Loser” by Laura Duca (*Huffington Post*) and the [Cracked.com](#) article “5 Details They Cut from My Season of The Biggest Loser” featuring Hibbard and written by Evan V. Symon. In all these articles, Hibbard critiques both the methods used to produce weight loss and the representational strategies employed by the show, giving the reader a rare inside look at how the show is produced.

Hibbard counters the twin teleological promises of the show to make contestants both “healthier” and “happier.” In the *Cracked* article, for example, she claims that the top two things left out of the series are “You Are Physically Ruined Afterward” and “You are Mentally Ruined Afterward.” On the first of these points, Hibbard heavily criticizes the way the show presents itself as a necessary medical intervention that is all about improving the physical health of participants. She notes, for example, that producers often disregarded the medical advice of the

very experts they had hired: “There was a registered dietician that was supposed to be helping [the contestants at the ranch] as well... But every time she tried to give us advice . . . the crew or production would step in and tell us that we were not to listen to anybody except our trainers.” (*Jezebel*). Likewise, she recounts an incident in which trainers told them not to drink something that was prescribed by the show’s doctors. Moreover, she charges that the constant pressure from the show’s producers to lose weight and maintain a low-calorie diet damaged her health, so that by the end she was in bad shape: “And my hair started to fall out. I was covered in bruises. I had dark circles under my eyes. Not to get too completely graphic, but my period stopped altogether and I was only sleeping 3 hours a night.”

This criticism, in itself, is not surprising; many news reports on *The Biggest Loser* have cited medical experts who express skepticism and concern about the rapid weight loss propagated by the show. Yet Hibbard’s critique is particularly valuable, because she has the authority, as an actual participant, to reveal the “real” practices of the production. This firsthand experience also allows her to show how the competition is constructed. She notes, for example, in the *Cracked* article, how the contestants were often not even allowed to follow “healthy habits” propagated by the show. In one anecdote, she relates how they were asked to film a segment about drinking milk for health (presumably as part of product placement); contestants were then immediately told to spit out the milk, as it would endanger their weight loss.

The second of these points, however, is perhaps more important. Weight loss is presented as desirable precisely because it is supposed to make you “happier.” For Hibbard, however, this was not the case. As the title of the *Jezebel* article suggests, Hibbard maintains that the show gave her an eating disorder, one that she still battles; as she says, “it also messed up my mental body image because the lighter I got during that T.V. show, the more I hated my body. And I tell you what, at 144 and at 262 and at 280, I had never hated my body before that show.” The teleology here is revealed to be the opposite of what the show claims; instead of getting happier and feeling better in her body, she began to hate it more.

Along these lines, Hibbard also critiques the way in which the show uses shame to force compliance in the contestants, and the subsequent negative framing of those who do not “play by

the rules.” In the *Cracked* article, for example, Hibbard recounts one episode’s gimmick, a horse race:

The obese are already seen as something less than normal humans, so the show-runners thought it would be perfectly acceptable to put us in horse stalls and make us run on a horse track, because hey, maybe that small percentage of personal trainers that believe yelling in your face while you’re on a treadmill are right and shame *does* burn calories.

Taking issue to the equation of fat people with animals, she decided to protest, but her objection was left out of the episode: “To protest, I simply walked the course, refusing to run until they asked me to at the end, hopefully ruining the competitive spirit of the challenge [...] I felt like maybe I’d be able to preserve a little dignity by not running. But in retaliation, they acted like I was just *too fat and exhausted to finish*.” As a result, viewers expressed their displeasure and even threatened her online. She also refers to other incidents with other contestants, who could not perform because of injuries but were treated by the editing as if they were simply throwing a tantrum. As she writes, “If you didn’t act grateful enough, or you had the audacity to demand to be treated like a human being, they made you look like a huge jerk on TV.” Hibbard’s testimony here is consistent with Weber’s observation that gratefulness is emphasized in all makeovers. Not only must participants submit themselves to being part of shameful spectacle and the rigid regimes of makeover, they must show their gratitude at every turn. Temporary displeasure or skepticism may be allowed (see the case of Holley discussed earlier), but only as long as the participant is eventually converted and thankful. True rebels are encouraged to leave the competition quietly, or must emerge only after the “after.”

A key part of Hibbard’s critique hinges on the way that “good television” is apparently incompatible with “healthy weight loss.” As she writes, “The healthy way to do it is to lose weight slowly by eating well and exercising. But turning down the second slice of pizza and going for a walk doesn’t exactly make for dramatic TV, does it?” (*Cracked*). Likewise, the framing of shame as a spectacle mentioned above is seen as a way for the show to heighten dramatic tension at the expense of contestants; running on a horse track may provoke negative reactions in contestants, but it thrills audiences.

While Hibbard is the most vocal of the BL's contestant-critics, other contestants have expressed dissatisfaction with the producers, particularly in their failure to provide after care. This is the main point made by Laura Duca's *Huffington Post* article, which argues that "the most crucial failing of the show is its unrealistic expectations about life after the ranch and the relative abandonment of contestants once the finale has aired." Gary Deckman, of season one, reports that it is difficult to maintain weight loss in everyday life, especially for those contestants who do not "receive promotional deals or head into health industry careers." In other words, if one does not find a life in the second trajectory I have outlined here ("the student becomes the master"), then it becomes incredibly difficult not only to maintain the weight lost, but also to keep the faith in the makeover. The article also cites Mike Morelli, a season 7 contestant who also found it difficult to find his way after the end of the season, vacillating between "unrealistic expectations" and inevitable failure; "[i]t wasn't until he stopped trying to set such strict rules for himself that Morelli found a balance." The problem, Duca concludes, is that dieting itself is "aggressively unsustainable" in the way that it sets up rules and regulations for the body that cannot be followed in the long term. This point is supported by Marissa Sappho, an NYU professor and psychotherapist who treats eating disorders, who argues that strict diets disconnect people from their intuitive eating process.

While this article provides important critique, it still leaves untroubled the assumption that weight loss is a valuable and healthy goal, instead suggesting that the problem with *The Biggest Loser* and diets in general is their means, not their ends. A more radical approach is that advocated by fat activists and the health professionals involved in the Health at Every Size movement. These people argue for letting go of the goal of weight loss itself, detaching food from shame, and encouraging movement for pleasure rather than punishment. This focus allows people to see health as an ongoing process, rather than something that can simply be achieved by a makeover process strictly bounded by "before" and "after." As Kate Harding argues, "The 'ultimate boon' wasn't reaching my goal weight, but gradually and deliberately losing any interest in the very concept of a 'goal weight.'"

The rumblings of the rebellion against the weight loss makeover may be low at the moment, spearheaded by a few key figures, but the growing success of Health at Every Size

suggests that there is a great demand for different paradigms, especially since so many weight loss programs (according to a popularly cited figure, 95%) prove unsuccessful over time (see Gaesser). As more and more “alumni” of television weight loss makeovers are produced, it is likely that more and more people will come forward to share the challenges of the experience, both while the cameras were rolling and after the “after.”

CONCLUSION

In its placement among other reality television makeovers, the weight loss makeover shares many of the characteristics and paradoxes identified by Meredith Jones and Brenda Weber. Unlike other makeovers, however, the weight loss makeover is dominated by quantitative change, and a general fascination with numbers and figures. In this way, it typifies and yet defies the teleologies of other makeovers, which generally proceed asymptotically—toward a place that is vaguely better, more feminine or masculine, healthier, etc. but cannot necessarily be reached. The telos of weight loss, on the other hand, can be achieved, or even exceeded, as the case of Rachel Frederickson illustrates. While the weight loss makeover claims that this change is produced for the sake of health, even as a life-or-death intervention, however, it relies on the spectacularity of weight loss. The demand for spectacular revelation of the fat body and its transformation often comes into conflict with this stated goal, threatening the physical health of participants by demanding high numbers on the scale and endangering mental health through the strong emphasis on shame. This treatment of the fat body works toward the makeover’s “affective domination,” as Weber indicates. Bodily reformation and affective change appear to go hand in hand, exorcising the body of its fat and the repressed emotional issues it is supposed to reflect.

The structure of the weight loss makeover can be represented in the two objects presented to each participant of *I Used to Be Fat* on their first day—the scale and the calendar. Each measures an axis on which the makeover can be charted numerically—the change in weight can only be understood in relation to time. The weight loss makeover is caught up in a variety of temporalities, which it both reflects and produces. These include not only the typical distinction

between “story” and “discourse” to be found in classical narratology, but other temporalities such as the “time of filming” vs. “the time of broadcast.” The makeover genre itself is predicated on a “before” and “after”; between these two poles, the “during” is stretched, showing the “work” of makeover. Even between these poles, however, the protagonists of the weight loss makeover are always looking backwards and forwards in time, situating themselves in relation to “before” and “after.” The narrative does this as well, providing flashbacks to mark progress and using simulations to project future bodies.

Yet time in the makeover, as elsewhere, is quite slippery; in its quiet movement below the dramatic events of episodes and seasons, it appears to flow uniformly, in contrast to the weight loss. In this relation, the moments of stalling and reversal in the progress down the scale function obviously as important events for the production of narrative interest. In its manipulation of time, however, the makeover often assures that these moments appear at strategically important points in diegetic time; in *I Used to Be Fat*, for example, a crisis typically occurs in the third act, often threatening to derail the whole process and making the final weigh-in all the more suspenseful. It is only after viewing several episodes, perhaps, that one becomes aware how the temporal frame is manipulated to serve these narrative ends.

Weight loss is also caught up in biotemporalities of reproduction and mortality, seen as a prerequisite for successful procreation, and subsequent parenting, as well as a way of preventing an “unnaturally” early death. Youth-focused weight loss programs such as *I Used to Be Fat* and *Jung und Dick!* capitalize on the fears of childhood obesity, producing narratives of young people overcoming the odds (and often their families) and enduring weight loss as a rite of passage to responsible adulthood. In becoming independent from family and rejecting the unhealthy habits of their minority communities, these youth implicitly represent the responsible individual who, in a neoliberal sense, takes control of his or her own health for the sake of greater societal good. Likewise, contestants on *The Biggest Loser* often stress the relation to mortality, both their own as well as others. While the makeover always pushes toward the resplendent “after,” this path is often understood in relation to its opposite, an anti-makeover of weight gain that leads to disease and death. This shadowy alternative never full disappears, but instead is recalled periodically to motivate protagonists to continue to lose weight, swearing they

will never reverse the trend and return to fatness. This haunting of the previously fat body, the “before,” continues through the finale, illustrating the ultimate paradox of the makeover: while it promises participants a “whole new life,” its success can only be understood in relation to the previous state.

In the real world, this means that the praise one receives as a person losing weight soon fades as one settles into a thin identity; in the words of Kate Harding, increasingly being seen as simply “thin” rather than “ex-fat” means that the “steady flow of sunshine up your ass has ceased.” Other uncomfortable truths also abound in the “after.” It is well-known that people tend to regain weight, especially after embarking on an extreme diet and exercise regime that is hardly replicable in one’s everyday life. Likewise, the “ex-fat” body may not live up to the promised “after,” but instead be plagued by excess skin. These factors may make weight loss participants feel as if they have not really achieved the goals of makeover, or fear that they will easily regress into gaining weight again.

Managing the narrative of weight loss after the “after” is something that weight loss makeovers themselves are quite aware of. In response to the very reasonable desires of viewers to know what happens after the “after” and whether the weight loss is sustainable, they, especially *The Biggest Loser*, have developed a variety of strategies. These include stressing the ongoingness of the transformation, as well as using former contestants as experts in future seasons. These strategies form parts of the first two strategies I have outlined for the continuation of the makeover narrative after the “after”: 1) The Saga Continues, 2) The Student Becomes the Master. These are likely to be employed by programs such as *The Biggest Loser* themselves and their official paratextual media—books, DVD extras, online features. “The Saga Continues” ensures that weight loss is increasingly embedded in other processes of makeover, just as other forms of makeover (such as the fashion makeover) are embedded in the weight loss makeover, whereas “The Student Becomes the Master” allows makeover “graduates” to become experts themselves, passing on their knowledge to others while maintaining their “after” bodies. The last trajectory I have discussed, what I call Joining the Rebel Alliance, reflects a different path, one that is unlikely to be featured by the producers of weight loss makeovers, and may even be suppressed by legal means. This trajectory, composed of the weight loss “rebels,” however, is

particularly important in that it provides a counternarrative to the dominant representations of makeover. Rather than continuing to espouse the belief in makeover culture, these people reject its logics and tell others about their differing experience and views. In doing so, they pave the way for critical discourses about the representation of fatness and weight loss, and contradict the teleologies of makeover. And, as we shall see in the remaining sections, countering the teleologies of makeover not only shakes up the popular views of fatness, but produces some very interesting narratives indeed.

PART TWO

OF REVERSALS AND BOOMERANGS: COMEDIC GENRES AND THE SUBVERSION OF WEIGHT LOSS MAKEOVER TELEOLOGY

In the comedy sketch “Makeover” from her show *Inside Amy Schumer*, Amy Schumer turns her satirical energy on the makeover format. The premise of the sketch is that Amy was made over by the morning show *Get Up!* six months ago and is now being visited to give viewers an update on her look. So far, so good—the usual makeover narrative is apparent in the hosts’ presentation of Amy’s “before” and “after” pictures, which demonstrate a transformation from “hideous” (i.e. awkward, frumpy, and sad-looking) to radiant and glamorous. When makeover expert Lisa arrives at Amy’s door to check on her progress, however, she is in for a surprise. Instead of finding her still resplendent in her “after” state, Lisa is horrified to find that Amy has not showered or changed her clothes since the makeover, instead leaving everything as it was. Of course, she looks quite different from her radiant “after” picture; her make-up is smeared, her clothing is dirty, and, judging by the disgust on Lisa’s face, she smells. The twist, though, and the source of the sketch’s humor is that Amy acts as if she still believes that she is in the triumphantly beautiful post-makeover state, joking that she lives at “63 Supermodel Lane” and saying, “Oh my God, I knew that you would think I wouldn’t be able to keep this look going on, but check it out—I did it, girl!” When Lisa, horrified, asks what happened, Amy argues that she has not done anything to her body for fear that she would not be able to recreate the makeover’s effects. As she says in regard to her hair, “Well you know what I knew if I shampooed it I would lose this beachy wave thing that you guys created, so I’ve just been skipping it. I mean, you were right—I don’t have to blow-dry it, I don’t have to wash it! It’s so easy!” In these sentences, said directly in the camera and reminiscent of infomercial aesthetics, lie the paradox at the heart of the sketch—maintaining an “after” state is not, in fact, easy. The “after” moment of makeover does not represent a finished state, but instead one that requires constant vigilance and upkeep. Attempting to permanently live in the “after” is not only a harmful form of denial, but produces a state of greater abjection than the “before” picture. In this

way, Schumer cleverly exposes the limits of the “before/after” paradigm and lampoons its temporal assumptions of finality.

In this way, Schumer also demonstrates how comedy, even within a short three-minute sketch, can point out the contradictions of a whole genre. In exploring the inability of living in the “after” of makeover in a world that tends toward entropy, Schumer ends up reversing the makeover’s teleology. Consistent with other sketches from her show, “Makeover” demonstrates Schumer’s concern with the problematic and contradictory demands that makeover culture and its various bodily obsessions make of people, especially women. In other sketches, like “Nutritionist,” “Slap Chef,” and “New Body,” Schumer exposes the various absurdities of weight and diet culture in the United States. Schumer is, of course, not the only sketch comedian to take on these targets. In fact, a variety of comedians have turned their attention to weight loss programs and other makeovers. On the sketch side, these include Oliver Kalkofe of *Kalkofes Mattscheibe* (Germany), the comedy team David Walliams and Matt Lucas of the BBC sketch series *Little Britain*, and duo Fred Armisen and Carrie Brownstein on USA’s *Portlandia*.

Likewise, other comedic genres have reflected on the makeover and weight loss in a humorous manner. In the sitcom, weight loss is often used in the plot of individual episodes, but ultimately fails, bringing the characters back to where they started from in accordance with the cyclical nature of sitcom plots. The sitcom *Mike & Molly*, in contrast, presents a particular case in that it builds the process of weight loss into its various premise, accompanying the two fat leads throughout the series. The reliance of the series on fat issues and humor creates a paradox, however, in which makeover culture is propagated but not performed—the characters continually want to lose weight, but do not. In this way, *Mike & Molly* exposes the inherent tension between change and stasis in the sitcom. On another level of self-referentiality, animated comedies like *South Park* and *Family Guy* use weight loss plots to demonstrate their extreme narrative elasticity, as well as their ability to flout the conventions of sitcom even while working within them. Characters return to their iconic shapes, but endure grotesque transformations of gain and loss (or loss and gain) along the way that allow these programs to temporarily flip hierarchies as in Bakhtinian carnival.

Tracing these comedic genres, the chapter will first turn to the parodic impulses and patterns of sketch comedy, then discuss the sitcom in detail, before examining the animated comedies that reflect both on the satirical nature of sketch comedy and the narrative conventions of the sitcom.

I. SKETCH COMEDY

The most obvious target for sketch comedy in weight loss is the plethora of diets, weight loss programs and products. In “Slap Chef,” for example, Amy Schumer parodies advertisements and infomercials for weight loss products with their low quality and wooden acting. Like a typical infomercial, “Slap Chef” begins with Amy being approached by a friend, who notes that she looks “amazing” and asks, “What are you doing, Weight Watchers? Jenny Craig?” Amy responds, “Yeah, right. Those take way too much self-control.” This set-up, of course, leads us to the product being advertised, which Amy introduces as a “new weight loss program that takes decision-making out of the equation.” This parodies the public’s desire for easy solutions that evade the personal responsibility that comes with making one’s own decisions, revealing that signifying one’s self-control through the thin body is more important than actually having that self-control. When her friend asks how it works, a male voiceover takes over, saying, “First, one of Slap Chef’s world class chefs makes you one of their signature dishes...” while we see beautiful images of diverse meals. As the voiceover continues to the second step, though, the conceit of the sketch is made clear: “...then, before you can say Slap Chef, they knock it out of your stupid mouth.” The principle is illustrated by a woman starting to eat something as the chef appears and knocks it away; at the moment of the slap, the slapping hand of the logo appears on the screen. Then we see a parade of similar images, illustrating the variety of foods they make as a hand comes from offscreen to knock them out of reach. Continuing the typical infomercial pattern, Amy answers her friend’s question “What if I fight back?” to say that all the chefs are conveniently trained in a (fictional) martial art tai chu moy. To illustrate this point, we see a violent confrontation between a woman attempting to eat a cookie and the chef who slaps it out; eventually the woman is put in a hold and subdued. This scene marks an escalation, prompting

the friend to ask a final question; “What about that mumbo jumbo I heard about Slap Chef just being abject violence against women?” Amy has no answer to this question, instead continuing to smile awkwardly in the camera without responding until the sketch ends. In this final unanswered question, the point of the sketch is revealed. Instead of being a reasonable dietary change, Slap Chef is revealed to be a violent attack on women. In this way, Schumer suggests that all diets are a form of violence against (mostly) women, curtailing their desires and autonomy for the pursuit of a thin ideal.

In another parody of a weight loss advertisement, Oliver Kalkofe takes on the existent “I Make You Sexy” weight loss program created and promoted by Detlef D. Soost, one of the coaches of later seasons of *The Biggest Loser Germany*. As is typical of his show *Kalkofes Mattscheibe Rekalked*, Kalkofe first shows a clip of the thing he is parodying. In this case, it is Soost addressing the viewer at home to say “You want to be thin and sexy. You want to feel well. You want to lose weight without starving.”⁴⁴ The tone is a bit ambiguous, somewhere between a rhetorical question and a pronouncement of the viewer’s desires. He goes on to suggest the “10 week body change program” he has developed, using his own weight loss (supposedly 20 kg in ten weeks) as evidence that it works and encouraging everyone to go to Imakeyousexy.com. At this point, the ad freezes and Kalkofe, dressed and in make-up to look like Soost, appears onscreen in front of Soost’s image, saying “The only problem is and remains the yo-yo effect.”⁴⁵ As Kalkofe puffs up his cheeks to emphasize his fatness, it becomes clear that he is using his own fat embodiment to critique Soost; as “fat” Soost, he illustrates the impermanence of weight loss. From this point on, Kalkofe does his own version of the advertisement, painting the weight loss program primarily as a way of hoodwinking the gullible to make money. In a parody of the “you” sentences Soost opens with, Kalkofe says, “You want to look like a bouncer in Wanne-Eickel?”⁴⁶ The designation “bouncer in Wanne-Eickel” is significant in that it points downward in class terms; instead of guaranteeing upward mobility, having a muscular physique like Soost is read as a way to become a low-level security employee whose only capital is his body. Wanne-

⁴⁴ “Du möchtest schlank und sexy sein. Du möchtest dich wohl fühlen. Du möchtest abnehmen, ohne zu hungrern.”

⁴⁵ “Das einzige Problem ist und bleibt der YoYo-Effekt.”

⁴⁶ “Du willst aussehen wie ein Türsteher in Wanne-Eickel?”

Eickel is not even an attractive metropolis, but rather a town in the middle of the industrial Ruhr region that boasts very little in the way of cultural capital, instead carrying connotations of economically depressed former industrial areas with high dependence on social welfare.

Kalkofe continues with another rhetorical question, “You want your hair to jump voluntarily off your head?”⁴⁷ At this point, Kalkofe changes “Ten Week Body Change Programm” into the Denglish-named “Shave Your Schädel Murmelmaker Programm” (Shave Your Skull marble-maker program), which he claims helped him lose 2 kilos of hair (“Scheitelfell”) in only ten minutes. In a parody of the incredulous statements of the infomercial, he continues, “You wouldn’t believe how much hair weighs!”⁴⁸ These statements not only make fun of Soost’s baldness, but indicate the absurdity of weight loss, in which any kind of net weight loss is celebrated, no matter what makes up that weight—fat, water, muscle, or even hair. In a reversal of the usual claim that the program advertised is both cheaper and better, Kalkofe goes on to claim that while this program is not any better than the others, it is more expensive. The program is less about the customers losing kilos than it is a way for Soost to gain money. As the testimony continues “I myself earned kilos of money in ten weeks with the Ten Weeks Body Change Lose Your Brain Fuck Yourself Program.”⁴⁹ Finally, he concludes, “Give me your money, until you don’t have any more to buy yourself something to eat.”⁵⁰ The new website becomes not Imakeyousexy, but Imakeyouarmandsexy (I make you poor and sexy). This final injunction to give him money draws attention to the paradoxical nature of the neoliberal economy that, as Julie Guthman notes, suggests “purchasable solutions” as a fix for the problems it has itself generated (“Neoliberalism...” 213).

Moreover, the positive valuation of not having any money to eat points to the ways that diets glamorize self-deprivation. This principle becomes especially evident in another Amy Schumer sketch, “Nutritionist.” In this sketch, Amy in her celebrity persona visits a dietitian, played by comedian Janeane Garofalo. The nutritionist’s initial assessment is telling: “I can tell

⁴⁷ “Du willst, dass deine Haare aus Frust freiwillig von der Rübe springen?”

⁴⁸ “Du glaubst nicht, was Haare wiegen!”

⁴⁹ “Ich selbst habe mit dem Ten Weeks Body Change Lose Your Brain Fuck Yourself Programm in zehn Wochen kiloweise Kohle verdient.”

⁵⁰ “Gib mir dein Geld, bis du nichts mehr hast, um dir was zum Essen zu kaufen.”

by looking at you you’re not the least you can be.” This phrasing is notable in that it exposes the core paradox at the heart of weight loss, which promises through reduction to make someone “the most” they can be. The nutritionist not only assumes that being “the least” one can be in weight terms is inherently desirable, but Amy also confirms it.

From here the nutritionist moves to typical elements one would expect from a consultation with such an expert—questions about Amy’s goals and habits, as well as recommendations. At each turn, however, Schumer subverts the viewer’s expectations, drawing laughs and exposing the contradictions inherent in the weight loss makeover. When the nutritionist asks about her goals, for example, Amy starts to say “Well, my goal weight—“ and she interrupts, saying “I don’t work in weight.” Instead of this being a feel-good statement about health beyond body size, however, she continues, “I work in celebrities. Which celebrity would you like to be the same as?” This question contradicts the usual rhetoric of makeover in which the discovery of one’s own “unique” authentic self is privileged; instead, it reveals that this type of diet is about copying the appearance of someone else. Amy, in response, disrupts the viewer’s expectations by choosing actor Christian Bale rather than a female role model. Bale is a telling choice, as he is known for modifying his body in extreme ways for different roles, losing an extreme amount of weight, for example, for *The Machinist* and gaining weight to play Batman. When asked which version of Bale, though, Amy chooses *The Fighter*, in which Bale plays Dick Eklund, who is thin due to drug addiction. Instead of choosing a thin, female role model, then, Amy goes for a masculine ideal, but not one who is thin for “healthy” reasons.

The nutritionist continues with standard questions about Amy’s eating habits. In the middle of her list, which includes only “healthy” foods like granola, yogurt, and salad, she is again interrupted by the nutritionist, who abruptly switches tone to berate her with the question, “Have you always been such a fucking trash heap?” This sudden shift in tone exposes the negative underside of all that rhetoric about health and empowerment, and it parallels a similar line in another sketch, “Workout Instructor,” in which the teacher declares, “This is not an exercise class. This is a funeral for the fat you.” After the nutritionist makes this accusation, though, she switches back just as suddenly, promising Amy to find her the “perfect diet” so she will stick to it and “become the perfect woman.” All the subsequent diet suggestions, however,

are either absurd or unappealing. For example, the first proposed recalls the Slap Chef principle of conjuring up delicious food only to reject it, with the added element of social media thrown in: “The Instagram Diet. That’s where you order whatever you want, take a picture of it, post it, throw it in the garbage. Tweet it, don’t eat it.” This diet skewers the increasing performance of “lifestyle” and “wellness” on Instagram, in which pictures of food have become ubiquitous, but reveals it to be more about appearances than substance—the food photographed becomes part of a public persona, but is not physically incorporated into the body. Second comes the “Beyonce diet. You find out what Beyonce eats and tell me all about it.” Amy objects on the grounds that she does not even know Beyonce. Her third suggestion is the “Chilean Miners Diet”; looking at the photo of the miners trapped underground, Amy exclaims that they are “so svelte.” But the search continues. Other suggestions include “The Tapeworm Experience”, “Kentucky Meth Cycle”, “Harriet Tubman in the Underground Railroad,” “Colonic Blast-off” and “The Great Depression.” Each of these evokes serious hardship and health risk. The only one that sounds inviting is “Git Motivated,” but Amy is dismayed to find that it is a play on Guantanamo Bay’s nickname “Gitmo” and requires being arrested without due process. In the sheer heaping of these ridiculous plans, this list reminds the viewer of the endless creation of new fad diets. If one of them actually proved to be the miracle weight loss method, of course, then none of the others would be necessary. More importantly, though, they encourage behaviors which in fact endanger one’s health.

Finally, a skeleton in a hat walks in and is introduced as “McClarty, the new Bond girl.” Amy asks her what diet she did and she responds that she just smokes. Enthusiastic about this possibility, Amy concludes the sketch by saying, “Tight. I’ll do that.” What begins as an ostensible search for “healthy” eating is revealed to be simply a means to weight loss for appearance, even at the expense of health. Moreover, it demonstrates how the self-deprivation associated with diets is glamorized even as it parallels actual poverty and hardship. The representation of McClarty as a skeleton not only highlights the extreme thinness of many Hollywood actresses, but also reveals that the push to thinness is a quest ending in death rather than health. In the entertainment business, however, the means to achieving thinness are unimportant, as even death is preferable to being fat.

Amy Schumer herself has become a sort of public persona representing a pushback against Hollywood body standards. She is known for being unapologetic for both her size and her sexual desires; while Schumer is well below the average size of a woman in the United States, her fatness by entertainment industry standards has made her a spokeswoman for fat women's desire, which is often denied in film and on TV alike. Her public declaration "I'm probably like 160 pounds right now and I can catch a dick whenever I want," is symptomatic.⁵¹ Likewise, her incredibly popular sketch "Last Fuckable Day" critiques the sexist ageism in Hollywood by gathering an impressive cast of three middle-aged comedienne who initiate Amy into the secret that each actress has a sort of expiration date related to their sexual attractiveness, while men remain "fuckable" until death. While Schumer has obviously garnered much praise and feminist credibility from her critical reflection on such body issues, she does not exempt herself from the pressures that women in entertainment face. In fact, she has spoken publicly about the pressure she is still subjected to, despite her success in flouting restrictive body ideals. In various interviews, for example, Schumer has spoken about the preparation for her first feature film, *Trainwreck*, and the pressure from producers to lose weight.⁵² This pressure was even more insidious because it was couched in the language of volition. Rather than expressing their expectations directly, the producers wanted to make it sound like her own idea, asking, "How do you want to look for the movie?" As Schumer contends, she was confused by the question, initially thinking it referred to her style, only to realize that it was a way of planting the seed in her mind to make her willing to exercise and diet. The resulting diet plan, she says, made her realize that the "Hollywood secret" to weight loss is "don't put food in your dumb mouth." Stripped of the self-empowering rhetoric, these diet plans are basically starvation. In this anecdote, Schumer shows how the neoliberal rhetoric of making bodily changes for oneself disavows the role of social expectations but in fact just packages them in a more palatable form. As we have seen in the previous chapter, this packaging is essential to the makeover and its "affective domination." As we will see in the next section, it is also what makes the weight loss

⁵¹ This statement was made while accepting a Trailblazer Award at *Glamour UK*'s Women of the Year awards and reported on website *Jezebel* on June 4, 2015.

⁵² See interview on *Live with Kelly and Michael*, YouTube, July 16, 2015.

makeover susceptible to accusations of hypocrisy and “concern trolling.” Schumer not only rejects the attempt to have her lose weight, but also calls out this practice in Hollywood, repurposing a potentially hurtful experience into comedy that deconstructs the sexist expectations of women’s bodies in Hollywood.

Little Britain

One of the most memorable depictions of weight loss programs in comedy is the series of “Fat Fighters” sketches of *Little Britain*. Airing on the BBC for three seasons in 2003-2006 and remade as *Little Britain USA* for HBO in 2008, *Little Britain* features the comedy duo of Matt Lucas and David Walliams. In their sketches, Walliams and Lucas play a variety of recurring characters of different ages, genders, and even races. Like many other comedy duos, such as Laurel and Hardy, Walliams and Lucas utilize their contrasting embodiments for humor. While Lucas is short and fat, with a prominent belly, Walliams is tall and thin. Lucas, in particular, utilizes his body for comedic effect, and indeed fatness is an important feature of many of his iconic characters. As Daffyd Thomas, the “only gay in the village” of Llanddewi Brefi, Lucas’s body is pressed into tight-fitting and short outfits made of leather and latex that highlight his belly and make his attention-seeking behavior clear. The surprise and potential disgust of the viewer at Daffyd’s appearance is contrasted with the apparent disinterest of his fellow villagers, who respond to his provocative clothing and statements with blasé friendliness even as he attempts to draw out their supposed homophobia. Meanwhile, as Andy Pipkin, Lucas plays a man who appears to be fat and disabled, confined to a wheelchair and dependent on the care of his able-bodied friend, Lou Todd (Walliams). In the course of each sketch, however, it is revealed that Andy is very well capable of leaving his wheelchair to get what he wants, but often prefers to manipulate Lou to do it for him. Here as in his portrayal of other iconic characters, such as Vicky Pollard, Andy’s fatness is important in that it links to his apparent laziness, as well as his clearly working class background. The fact of fatness is even more important in the depiction of fast-talking Vicky Pollard, though, as she represents the stereotypical working class “chav,” the tracksuit-wearing teen mother who indulges in petty criminal activity, prides herself on

ignorance, and relies on government benefits. Vicky's tendency to go off on long gossipy rants with irrelevant information when asked to account for her actions shows her fundamental desire to evade responsibility, and her fatness, linked as it is in viewers' minds to poverty and ignorance about middle class values of health and diet, appears to be a subtle outgrowth of this lack of responsibility. This portrayal has been criticized by writers such as Owen Jones for participating in the stereotyping of the working class in Britain (see *Chavs: The Demonization of the Working Class*). On the other end of the class spectrum, though, fatness may also be used for the creation of a comedic persona. As socialite Bubbles DeVere, Lucas's fatness is even enhanced with the use of a fat suit; for comedic effect, the nude fat suit is often revealed, as Bubbles, in her characteristic lack of self-awareness, tries to escape her debts by seducing her creditors. The joke is, of course, that no one is interested in seeing her naked. In provoking the shock and disgust of the viewer, *Little Britain* thus invites us to see the fat body of Bubbles as fundamentally grotesque; the fact that she refuses to see her own body as disgusting and undesirable serves to highlight her delusions of wealth and beauty. This revelation is paradoxical in that it both flouts the taboo on showing fat flesh, thus rejecting its "pornographic" signification according to Mosher, but also enforces it—Lucas's body is never revealed, safely ensconced in the fat suit. In this sketch, then, *Little Britain* plays with the spectacle of the fat body, both showing and hiding it.

In all of these various portrayals, the fatness of the characters has complex interactions with their class, gender, etc. Yet none of these characters attempt weight loss. In the recurring Fat Fighters sketch, however, *Little Britain* reflects on weight loss culture, skewering typical presentations of fat people and weight loss programs. The sketch once again features Lucas, this time as Marjorie Dawes, leader of the group. Marjorie is alternately patronizing and rude, dispensing fatuous diet advice and insulting the Fat Fighters participants in turn. In this way, Marjorie embodies the perfect "concern troll," someone who masks their critique and discomfort of someone else with apparent worry for their well-being or health. Of course, occupying Lucas's round body, Marjorie is herself fat, though the flowy outfits she wears tend to obscure this fact, and Marjorie herself insists that she is much lighter than her poor, pathetic charges. This insistence points to her basic hypocrisy; her body always implicitly contradicts her words.



Matt Lucas as Marjorie Dawes, group leader of Fat Fighters and professional concern troll.
(Source: "On the Fat Fighters trail with Marjorie Dawes" The Sturdy Soapbox)

Marjorie's character makes a larger argument about the hypocrisy of weight loss programs in general, which claim to shame their participants for the purpose of helping them. In the inevitable exposure of Marjorie's shaming of the participants just to gain a feeling of superiority, the sketch reveals the seedy emotional underside of the weight loss rhetoric of self-empowerment. In this way, the Fat Fighters sketch attacks weight loss culture on two levels, both on the corporate level and personal level, exposing the contradictions in the way that the fat body, and the fat person, is treated in these programs.

In its most obvious critique, the Fat Fighters sketch shows how weight loss programs are often unsuccessful and rely on questionable advice. Marjorie frequently promotes the Fat Fighters products, while her statements clearly reveal how little she knows about nutrition. In the very first sketch, for example, Marjorie introduces the "all-new Fat Fighters Half the Calories Diet." The principle is simple, and also inane; as Marjorie explains, "Take the food you like [...], cut it in half and it's just half the calories!" Moreover, she argues, "Because it's just half the

calories, you can have twice as much!” This process, of course, simply produces the exact same consumption as before. Likewise, in another episode, she is guiding the class in an exercise to label foods either high or low in fat. The first is crisps, to which Paul guesses “high in fat”; Marjorie praises him for the right answer, but says “High in fat BUT low in protein and low in fiber, so it’s not all bad news!” In these obvious nutritional fallacies and inanities, both Marjorie’s recommendations and the Fat Fighters program are revealed to be nonsense. Her favorite recommendation, of course, is that her students eat dust. Aside from its obvious absurdity, this repeated reference to dust is telling in its connection to the phrase “bite the dust.” In a sense, Marjorie is telling her students to die, or at least reminding them that their existence as fat people is supposedly linked to mortality. In a way, Marjorie’s insistence on dust recalls Marilyn Wann’s assertion that the alarmist statistics on “obesity” and mortality cited by medical experts amount to nothing more than “death threats” that “sound like wishful thinking” (Wann 16).

Inevitably, the characters do not lose weight; when weigh-ins are shown, they are usually disappointing. In the rare instances that a participant reports success, it is inevitably due to outside factors. Even Cliff Roberts, introduced as “Slimmer of the Year” in one episode, reports that he lost 3 stone and 9 pounds by just eating sensibly and exercising; when Marjorie prompts him about the “special Fat Fighters range” of products, he can be heard to say “they’re a waste” before she cuts him off (1.2). In an episode of *Little Britain USA*, one student, Jenny, loses five pounds in a week (1.5). Marjorie is surprised and taken aback by this event. Jenny reveals that after years of coming to Fat Fighters and not losing weight, she has now had a gastric band inserted on the recommendation of her doctor. Marjorie is nonplussed, saying flatly “You cheated.” As the scene escalates, Marjorie continues to accuse Jenny of giving her a “slap in the face,” finally reaching down Jenny’s throat and pulling the gastric band out herself in a grotesque display of power. What this scene with Jenny illustrates is not only the hierarchy of weight loss methods, which views diet and exercise as fundamentally superior to “easier” surgical methods, but also the fact that Marjorie does not actually want her students to lose weight. She is much more comfortable having them stay fat, so she can continually shame them in the guise of concern.

In this way, Marjorie is a clear example of a “concern troll,” someone who claims to have someone’s best interests at heart while expressing critique. Marjorie’s trolling is sometimes obvious, but it is most insidious when it is expressed as care. As Alexandra Petri writes in “Enter the Concern Troll,” this figure operates by being “condescending, insincere, manipulative.” The typical rhetorical moves of the concern troll are summed up in this monologue:

‘I’m with you,’ the concern troll says. ‘But surely you must see how this looks to people. Not me, of course. But other people. They might think horrible things of you. People might think you were self-centered, fat, slow, rude. Not me, of course. I’m with you. I have your best interests at heart. That’s why I want to warn you. I, you see, know how this ought to be done.’ (Petri)

Concern trolling is especially rampant in the case of fat people, as Kelsey Miller at Refinery29, among others, points out. While the concern troll appears in many discussions, especially online, Miller argues that “when it comes to overweight people, there’s a particularly insidious righteousness.” Citing the backlash to photos of “plus-size” models like Tess Holliday, Miller shows how concern trolling about “health” appears whenever fat people are depicted enjoying themselves or practically doing anything other than exercising. The concern troll often reads an image, without even knowing anything else about the health of the person or people in question, and worries aloud that it is somehow “promoting” an unhealthy lifestyle simply because the bodies are fat. In these examples, Samantha Murray’s discussion of the fat body as virtual confessor becomes once again quite pertinent; assuming the authority of a “lipoliterate,” the concern troll reads the fat body as unhealthy and the product of all sorts of dietary “sins.”

Little Britain makes Marjorie’s concern trolling evident in her hypocrisy, which is revealed in various ways. While she preaches self-deprivation to her students, for example, she often indulges in binges herself, sometimes even consuming the very food she has confiscated from them. While she is fat, she disavows her fatness continually, reminding people that she is the “group leader” and not a participant of Fat Fighters. In one episode, she learns that student Meera is not in class because she is having liposuction. While saying that “it’s such a shame the way people feel like they need to tamper with themselves,” she lowers a clipboard to reveal her own comically enlarged lips, presumably due to Botox. This moment also reveals the

contradictory attitudes toward fat in different parts of the body; fat in some places is encouraged, while it is discouraged in others. Technological processes may be used to both add or remove fat as desired.

In a similar hypocrisy, Marjorie is clearly racist while she paints herself as friendly and tolerant. One of the repeated gags of the sketches is that Marjorie claims not to understand the speech of the British Indian Meera, although she speaks quite clearly and refers to obviously British things like fish and chips, her family in New Malden, or the name “John.” Marjorie prompts Meera, whom she calls “Mary” or “Myra,” to repeat herself over and over again, until one of them eventually gives up and Marjorie makes a racist assumption related to India. For example, when Meera volunteers “fish and chips” as one of her cravings, Marjorie ends up assuming that it “must be some sort of dish we don’t get over here,” writing down “curry” on the board (1.1). The irony is double; not only does Meera refer to a stereotypically British food while Marjorie also assumes something stereotypically Indian, but this food is actually available in great abundance in the UK—it is hardly foreign, although Marjorie wishes to attach it to Meera’s “foreign” body. In these repetitive scenes, in which the phrases become increasingly fast and divorced from their denotations, the materiality of the language comes to the fore, highlighting the absurdity of the exchange. Here Meera represents the immigrant trying her best to participate and make herself heard over and over again, only to be met with the willful ignorance of the nativist who refuses to understand, rendering the encounter ultimately pointless. It is only when Meera wins the lottery that Marjorie tries to make an effort, pronouncing her name right and calling her “my beautiful Asian friend” in an effort to receive part of her winnings as a gift (2.3). Her hypocrisy and ignorance are clear, however, when she insists that “a lot of people say they [Asians] smell funny but I don’t think so,” asks Meera where she got her “safari” (sari), and assumes that her family is in India, while they are actually in New Malden. Finally, when Meera proves to be resistant to Marjorie’s patronizing interest, the facade breaks down; Marjorie declares, agitated, “I haven’t won a penny, and I’ve lived in this country all my life! Basically, Meera, it’s theft. What you have done is theft.” In her cloying sycophancy in one moment and raw xenophobia in the next, Marjorie embodies the hypocritical relationship to the immigrant.

Her accusation of theft is particularly telling in that it recalls the ways immigrants are painted as leeching off the system.

In the U.S. adaptation, the place of Meera is taken by Carmen, a Mexican-American character, whom Marjorie refers to as “my illegal friend” and deliberately misunderstands in the same manner. This suggests that British Indians and Mexican-Americans occupy similar spaces in the respective cultures of the UK and the USA as “problematic” immigrants whose integration is contested. While nativists often claim that these immigrants refuse to assimilate, these sketches show how it is the xenophobic native who deliberately refuses to accept the immigrant’s claim to belonging, assuming their allegiance and citizenship are outside their country of residence. Moreover, in making this commentary in the course of a weight loss sketch, *Little Britain* points to the racism and anti-immigrant bent in the rhetoric of obesity, which, as I have discussed in reference to reality television in the previous chapter, often pins the problem of fatness on cultural “others” and their “foreign” food.

Marjorie’s concern trolling, however, is most obvious in the series of sketches in the second season of the British version. While the sketches are usually episodic, this season builds up a serial plot in which two of the Fat Fighters participants, Paul and Pat, begin a relationship, get married and eventually conceive a child. At every step of the way, Marjorie expresses her “concern.” It begins when Paul responds to a weigh-in of Pat in which she has gained two pounds, saying it does not matter to him because he likes “something to hold on to,” (2.2). Marjorie does not get the joke, and does not hold back her disgust when she realizes that they have started dating, even asking offensive questions about the “mechanics of [their] love-making”—whether they use a “winch” or a “system of weights and pulleys.” While she concedes that “it does make sense, two fatties together,” she argues that “fat love” is dangerous because they tend to gain weight as there is no longer any “incentive” to become thin. Paul objects, saying of Pat, “Well, I think she’s lovely.” Before this sweet moment can be absorbed, though, Marjorie squashes it, saying, “Yeah, that’s not helping her. Look, I’ve said it before, and I’ll say it again, Pat is morbidly obese. [...] The kindest thing you can do is chuck her and tell her to call you when she’s lost a few stone.” When Pat sarcastically says “thank you,” Marjorie puts on her extra patronizing tone, saying as she guides her back to her seat, “That’s no problem, Pat. I’m

only thinking of you. Because I care about you...because you are now really an enormous fat pig." In this statement the hypocrisy of the concern troll becomes manifest, shaming the fat subject with epithets such as "enormous fat pig" at the same time as she insists "I'm only thinking of you" and "I care about you." Marjorie becomes determined to refuse any happiness to them, especially Pat, before they lose weight. In fact, she suggests that happiness cannot, and should not, be possible for fat people. In their evident satisfaction with each other, though, Pat and Paul contradict this assumption.

The ongoing conflict comes to a head at the end of the season, when Marjorie arrives to find a celebration set up, including a cake with "Congratulations Pat and Paul" written on it and other sweets (2.6). When Marjorie realizes that they are celebrating their engagement and have not invited her, she begins to throw the sweets in the trash on the grounds that they are unhealthy. Marjorie directs her anger at Tanya, who has brought a banoffee pie, by saying (in a typical malapropism) that she is "playing Russian roulade" with the lives of her fellow Fat Fighters; "if one of these fatties has a single bite of this, they could drop down dead. Shame on you, Tanya." Paul, as usual, is the voice of the group, saying "We're just trying to have a party, Marjorie." For a second, this appears to sink in; Marjorie says, "Yeah, you're right. What am I thinking? Let's not worry about Fat Fighters today. Have a lovely time and I wish you all the best for the future." This possible moment of reconciliation is dashed, however, when she flips over a table on the way out. In this way, the episode plays with potential closure, only to reject it.

In the next season, Pat announces that she and Paul are expecting a child (3.4). Marjorie is obviously nonplussed, asking if they intend to keep it and insisting that it is a "bit selfish" of them when they say yes. Again she engages in concern trolling, saying "I'm only thinking of the baby. You know, that poor baby's going to be born a cake addict. It's going to come out and straight away it's going to have to go through cold chicken." This rhetoric mirrors not only the connection of fatness with food addiction, but also the various elements of concern expressed in the debate over pre-natal health and childhood obesity. Of course, Marjorie's authority here is undermined by her ignorance of even the basic terms of addiction, as her "cold chicken" for "cold turkey" gaffe illustrates. Marjorie further degrades Pat when she says "You sure it's just the one? By the look of you you're going to have a whole litter." This comment not only stresses

Pat's size, but links her reproductive body to animals and reproduction out of control. Finally, Marjorie drives home the fact that she is not truly concerned with the child when she asks the class to brainstorm names for the baby. Rather than the ordinary English choices of "John" and "Michael," Marjorie suggests "Jabba."

What perplexes one after the viewing of multiple Fat Fighters sketches is not, perhaps, Marjorie's fat shaming, which is predictable and necessary for the sketch's humor, but the fact that her students keep coming to the class and taking her abuse. While they may grumble or express their displeasure with facial expressions, they rarely question her authority, assenting to what Marjorie says about them. Of course, part of this is the necessity of keeping the sketches going; on the other hand, it is a sad commentary on the way that fat people willingly submit themselves to such programs, even when they are shaming and degrading.

Little Britain does offer some possibilities for Marjorie to be dethroned, albeit limited. Paul often acts as a voice of critique, although he remains in the class. In choosing Paul to play this role, though, *Little Britain* also echoes the patterns Weber identifies in the makeover, in which men are usually given more room for rebellion. Pat, on the other hand, is often the object of Marjorie's worst comments and behavior, and yet bears it all until the end, even when Marjorie force-feeds her eclairs after she has successfully lost four pounds and even cuts off a lock of her hair. In a rare moment of rebellion in another episode, the whole class joins in, subtly mocking Marjorie's tan by referring to only orange foods (3.1). Other moments of critique come from celebrities who visit the group as spokespeople for Fat Fighters, but Marjorie always gets the last word. When Vanessa Feltz eventually calls Marjorie a "total cow," Marjorie spits in her face (2.1). Likewise, in the US version, Rosie O'Donnell appears; after Marjorie constantly asks offensive questions about her sexuality ("Are you fat because you're a lesbian or a lesbian because you're fat?") and degrades the other Fat Fighters, O'Donnell exclaims, "I can't believe how you treat people! You're absolutely rude! You're homophobic, you're racist, you're meant to help these people and you keep ridiculing them about their size. It's disgusting!" Marjorie, however, responds, "And licking another woman's vagina isn't?" The sketch ends with this line and the big laugh it produces.

The most important moments, however, come at the ends of seasons one and three, each as a sort of climax. In the finale of the first season, Marjorie is visited by a superior in the Fat Fighters hierarchy, who has been called to assess the class in response to complaints. This woman, Mrs. Harrison, makes Marjorie's hypocrisy manifest by reminding her that the group leader is supposed to weigh in first. Forced on the scales and thus subjected to the same measurement as her students, Marjorie's fatness is quantified at "15 stone, 11," far from her own assessment of "8 stone, 5" and even in the wrong direction relative to her previous weight of "14 stone, 4." As she furiously removes her clothing to bring the weight down, Marjorie's fall from grace becomes clear. Mrs. Harrison even suspends her until she has lost some weight, saying she is not a "good example" for her students. Marjorie, in her rage, yells, "Well, you can take your Fat Fighters and shove it up your fat ass! That's right, screeew you!" and storms out. Her defiant gesture is undermined, however, when she must come back to retrieve her clothing. This sketch, in giving Marjorie a "taste of her own medicine," gratifies the viewer's desire to see her brought down in the same way she has degraded her students. Likewise, her defiant gesture satisfies the viewer's longing for a disruptive move against the Fat Fighters program and the fat shaming it entails. Yet it provides no lasting solution, and indeed Marjorie is up to her old tricks in the next season.

A similar scene of questioning Marjorie's authority appears in the last episode of the British version. Finally, Pat stands up to Marjorie, demanding an apology for drawing her as a pig. As everyone begins to leave the room in protest, Marjorie looks as if she will give in, promising to deliver the apology. As expected, though, the apology begins well ("I'm very sorry...") but takes a negative turn, with Marjorie blurting out "THAT YOU'RE SO FAT!" Even in this moment, when it seems that Marjorie will finally lose her hold on them once and for all, she has the last word. This last word, tellingly, is FAT. While the sketches criticize Marjorie as fundamentally hypocritical, then, they also grant her the last word, usually a line that is directly offensive but funny. After all the patronizing talk, these statements are refreshingly open about their prejudices. In the end, the Fat Fighters sketches appear to revel in this offensiveness, much in the same way that *South Park* revels in its foul-mouthed villain Eric Cartman, even as he does and says the most despicable things.

In their play with the tension between repetition and development, these sketches also draw attention to their own construction and subversion of narrative conventions. In many ways, this reflects the pattern of the sitcom and its satirical animated cousins, in which the possibility of change is invoked only to be thwarted. In the following parts, this narrative pattern of weight loss will be discussed as it appears in individual episodes, as well as over seasons.

II. WEIGHT CHANGE AND THE SITCOM

Between seasons six and seven of *It's Always Sunny in Philadelphia*, series co-creator and star Rob McElhenney gained fifty pounds, going from 162 to 212 over five months. McElhenney insisted this weight gain was intentional and that he was doing it for the sake of his role. The strict regime of five 1,000 calorie meals a day, and the prominent belly gained as a result, were part of a master plan. In an interview about the weight, he reported that the idea "came when I was watching a very popular sitcom, and I noticed the people were getting better and better looking as the seasons were going on" (TV Guide, via Huffington Post). The idea to gain weight, then, was conceived as a way to push the "deconstruction of the sitcom," which he argues is the intention of *It's Always Sunny*. In another interview, he again stressed this point, saying that "Even the nerds on "Big Bang Theory" are getting better looking. Their clothes are getting nicer. They're better groomed. It works for them. But this show – it's not like that." ("Fat Mac," *The Wrap*). *It's Always Sunny* is often noted for its depiction of fundamentally selfish and unlikeable people, thus rejecting the patent moralism of the family sitcom. In this context, McElhenney argues, weight gain gave him a "perfect way to mock other shows and capsize the relentless vanity of his character, Mac" (*The Wrap*). By putting himself, and thus his character, through an anti-makeover, McElhenney draws attention to the subtle changes of sitcom characters over time and distinguishes his own sitcom from that pattern.

McElhenney's bodily transformation and statements about it are interesting in a number of ways. First of all, in drawing attention to the subtle teleologies at work over episodes and seasons in the sitcom, McElhenney contradicts the popular view of the sitcom as fundamentally episodic and devoid of long-term development. The substantial weight gain of his character Mac

shakes up the truism that sitcom characters never change, remaining as they began, whether thin or fat. Moreover, unlike typical weight loss plots in the sitcom, which, as we will see, may emerge in individual episodes but ultimately do not produce change in the characters, Mac's weight change is a longer process with very real bodily changes that last a whole season.

Because the weight gain took place in the season break, though, the process of weight gain itself remains off-camera. When Mac appears in the first episode of the season, then, both the viewers and the other characters are surprised at his new fatness. True to McElhenney's stated intentions of subverting the makeover, the episode functions as an anti-makeover. While friend Dennis tries to reform Mac to his own "healthy as shit" ways, arguing on should respond to aging by becoming more "vigilant," doctor's tests reveal that he actually has health problems himself due to his fasting and exercise regimen—"extreme dehydration, multiple vitamin deficiencies, anemia, low blood pressure." Mac is also diagnosed with diabetes, but nonetheless ends up converting Dennis to his ways, including the consumption of heavy chimichangas and wearing Hawaiian shirts. Meanwhile, the other plot of the episode, in which the gang, led by Dee, tries to reform a crack-smoking prostitute *Pretty Woman*-style, also ends in failure—Roxie fails to change, and even ends up overdosing and dying.

Given this clear manifesto against the makeover's tropes, it is ironic that, after this season, McElhenney returned to the normative trajectory of makeover, losing the weight again in the next season break. This decision is made additionally perplexing by McElhenney's insistence in interviews that he had felt "great," funnier and even "full of energy" at the higher weight (*The Wrap*). Likewise, when one examines McElhenney's statements about this bodily change, he reproduces many of the typical ideas of weight loss, saying, for example, "Losing it is easy. You just stop eating so f—ing much. [I'm also] working out three times a week. Regardless of your metabolism, if you stop consuming so many calories, you will lose weight." It is Nick Kroll, fellow comedian and interview partner, who steps in and contradicts this generalization, reminding him that "not everybody" loses so easily. McElhenney concedes the point that that some people have it more difficult because of their "genetic makeup," but then again emphasizes the thermodynamic model: "But it's just true that if you decrease the amount of calories you are eating you're [sic] body doesn't have the fuel to create fat." So while McElhenney's decision to

gain weight may subvert the conventions of the sitcom, his statements do little to critique popular assumptions about weight. In fact, appeals to logic he uses to support his ideas of weight gain and loss stand in stark contrast to the series, which portrays the motivations and mechanics of weight change as fundamentally illogical and absurd, disjointed in time. Moreover, the interviews and articles that note his weight loss fail to offer an explanation for why he decided to lose the weight he had gained, assuming, perhaps, that weight loss is naturally desirable. While the actor's weight gain must thus be given a noble reason, linked to his dedication to craft, weight loss is accepted as the inevitable progress of the actor's journey.

This is all to say that the stories of weight change of McElhenney and Mac, even though produced on the same body, are fundamentally contradictory in important ways. While Jerry Mosher argues that the seriality of television leads to a potential “fusion of actor and role,” this case exposes the tension in this relationship and in the sitcom’s attitude to change. While McElhenney expresses the desire to subvert the conventions of the sitcom and the pattern of makeover in *It’s Always Sunny*, then, he espouses its logics in interviews and produces the teleology of weight loss on his own body. In this way, *It’s Always Sunny* still stands apart, however, because the majority of sitcoms depicting weight change plots produce the opposite paradox—while apparently buying into the teleologies of makeover and weight loss, they ultimately fail to produce that weight loss in their characters. Thus weight loss may be used for the plot of an individual episode, but the fat bodies of television actors do not change, at least not drastically. Even *Mike & Molly*, a sitcom in which weight loss is a perpetual theme, does not actually want its characters to become thin. Given its staging of the limits of the sitcom’s ability to produce change in its characters, however, the weight loss plot becomes attractive to those series, like *South Park* and *Family Guy*, which satirize the sitcom and its episodic didacticism. Flaunting the narrative freedom afforded by animation, these series often recall the narrative patterns of the makeover, only to subvert them at the very end, often by means of a deus ex machina that thwarts the makeover. These plots reveal themselves to be boomerangs, returning characters to their previous size. In this subversion, they affirm the cyclical plot of the sitcom, but also draw attention to its artificiality, mocking its tendency to offer concluding moral lessons along the way.

In the rest of this section, I will discuss this relationship between generic convention and fat discourse in a number of comedies, first those “traditional” sitcoms *Mike & Molly* (CBS) and *Miranda* (BBC), and then their satirical reflection in the animated comedies of *South Park* (Comedy Central) and *Family Guy* (Fox). After examining the sitcom as a genre and the history of fatness in the sitcom, I will thus offer close reading of those episodes that explicitly feature weight loss plots. Drawing on these examples, I will argue that the sitcom, in its affirmation of static character, offers resistance to dominant makeover culture and its teleologies of change. This view stands in contrast with the typical view of the sitcom as reactionary and conservative due to its formal features. In addition, I contend, the sitcom satire provided by *Family Guy* and *South Park* offers another level of self-reflexivity that explicitly juxtaposes the generic conventions of makeover and the sitcom, drawing attention to the inherent contradictions of both.

The Sitcom as Genre

Throughout its history, the sitcom has been known as one of the most episodic genres, relying on cyclical plots, repeated gags, and catchphrases for its success. In its most extreme manifestations, the sitcom appears to have no “memory”—the characters act as if they do not know what has happened the week before. Rather than evolve in response to changing events, characters find themselves in the same situations over and over again and react in the same predictable ways, even speaking the same catchphrases in each episode. This perception of the traditional sitcom as a form in which “nothing ever really changes” has made it vulnerable to a variety of critiques. As Jane Feuer notes in her discussion of television genre, critics like Horace Newcomb and David Grote take different approaches to the sitcom, but come to similar conclusions about its supposedly regressive and conservative nature. As Feuer paraphrases, Newcomb criticizes the sitcom’s problem/solution plot as one that ultimately functions to reinforce existing structures: “As the audience we are reassured, not challenged by choice or ambiguity; nor are we forced to reexamine our values.” (Feuer 148). Grote, taking an aesthetic approach, argues that the sitcom is ultimately conservative in the way that it differs from the

traditional comedic plot of theater, in which the rebellious lovers are united in the final act despite the objections of their parents. In drawing out the resolution of the romantic plot over multiple episodes, seasons, or an entire series, Grote contends, the sitcom resists the unsettling of social authority that this union of lovers represents.

Typically, discussions of “quality” in television have also bracketed the sitcom on these, or similar, grounds. Of the characteristics that Robert Thompson lists as markers of quality in his seminal 1997 book *Television's Second Golden Age: From Hill Street Blues to ER*, many do not apply to the traditional sitcom. It does not, for example, generally have the complex serial memory of the primetime serial. Borrowing from Newcomb, Thompson praises the narrative “density” that certain television series can provide in contrast to other media, even film. As he writes, “The complexities of these shows that are so praised by critics, scholars, and serious viewers come from the slow layering of events, character traits, and other visual and dramatic details over the entire run of the series.” (Thompson 35). Because television series offer much more time and space to their characters than other media, like film, character arcs and plot developments can be built up in a slower, more deliberate manner. Such development, however, relies on serialization, the connection between the events of one episode to those of the next, and it is this sort of long-term plotting that appears to be absent from the sitcom. Character may be important, but the development of characters over time in relation to plot is lacking. As Michael Z. Newman writes, “[i]t is true that in episodic forms such as the traditional sit-com there may also be a strong investment in character, but it is of a different nature, based more on the familiarity bred by repetition than on engagement with unfolding events” (Newman 23). Here “familiarity” and “repetition” are the key words. Characters in traditional sitcoms are familiar, and thus expected to act in predictable and consistent ways.

Of course, the writings of Thompson and Newcomb are older, and they fail to address the changes that the sitcom genre itself has undergone in the past twenty years. Speaking from the same era, however, Feuer reminds us that genre theory should not forget that genres themselves are not stable categories, but also have their own dynamism. Recent developments in the sitcom include, most notably, the advent of single-camera sitcoms challenging the aesthetics of the traditional multi-camera set-up, and an increased push toward serialization. Jeremy Butler, in his

book *Television Style*, provides a very comprehensive comparison between “traditional” multi-camera sitcoms and the innovative single-camera sitcoms heralded by programs like *Scrubs*. According to Butler, single-cam sitcoms have revolutionized the genre by making the sitcom “televisual” in Caldwell’s sense; this means, among other things, an embrace of “stylistic excess” and a clear self-awareness. While older sitcoms were filmed and cut with an aesthetic of “liveness,” the new sitcoms are carefully constructed and self-reflexive about generic conventions. This self-reflexivity allows these sitcoms to satirize those very conventions of the genre that are often criticized by scholars. *Arrested Development*, for example, reflects on the lack of “memory” in sitcoms by producing erroneous “next time on...” montages showing events that would actually not take place in the next episode. Likewise, *Community*, in its episode entitled “Paradigms of Human Memory,” produces a parody of a flashback episode by showing flashbacks of events that have, in fact, not been shown in the season. In both cases, the shows demonstrated their self-referentiality and intelligence by referring to the temporal conventions of the sitcom and then thwarting them.

In some ways, Butler’s argument here reflects a teleological view of genre that assumes a development of self-consciousness over time. As Feuer writes,

According to the most teleological version of the theory of generic evolution, a genre begins with a naive version of its particular cultural mythology, then develops toward an increasingly self-conscious awareness of its own myths and conventions. It is implied that the genre is also progressing toward a higher version of its type. (Feuer 156).

In placing the “innovative” televisual single-camera sitcom after the “traditional” multi-camera sitcom, Butler creates a temporality that is inherently progressive. At the same time, he takes pains to stress that he does not distinguish single-camera and multi-camera sitcoms in terms of quality, but rather of style—between “a schema organized to capture live performance and one organized to allow the medium itself to perform” (197). He does not, for example, dismiss the “imprecision” of visual framing in multi-camera sitcoms as merely shoddy craftsmanship, but rather shows how it is a necessary part of producing a live aesthetic. At the same time, his obvious enthusiasm for the innovations of the single-camera set-up is evident. Feuer herself

critiques the teleological view, arguing that “one could equally argue that the sitcom has gone through repeated cycles of regression to earlier incarnations” (156). Citing the parallelism of the highly self-referential *Mary Tyler Moore Show* (1970s) and *Murphy Brown* (1980s/1990s), for example, Feuer demonstrates that the sitcom has not necessarily become more self-conscious over time. Weinstock, in his discussion of *South Park*, makes a similar point, arguing that it is important to see it not only in relation to its self-referential and “postmodern” contemporaries (*Family Guy*, *The Simpsons*), but also in regard to earlier series such as *The Flintstones*, which also reflected on television culture and pioneered the use of a simplistic animation style with shallow perspective, eschewing the dominant aesthetics of the day.

Another change that has undoubtedly affected the sitcom is the general trend toward serialization in all television genres. As Newman notes, many formerly episodic genres, like police procedurals, now also increasingly offer serial pleasures. By resolving an episodic plot each episode but also developing longer narrative arcs for their characters, these series are able to satisfy both casual and habitual viewers (Newman 20). The sitcom has also developed this serial bent; one can hardly imagine a sitcom these days without some kind of series memory being developed. While previously sitcoms may have constructed a whole series around a “will-they-or-won’t-they” romantic plot (e.g. *Moonlighting*, *The Nanny*), it is now not uncommon for events such as marriages, births, etc. to be captured within the narrative arcs of the sitcom. It is even possible, as *How I Met Your Mother* demonstrates, to construct a sitcom teleologically; rather than open-ended seriality, this series started with the end, even writing and filming the final scenes at the beginning of its run, and spent the following seasons building up to this conclusion. The questionable success of this strategy, evident in the general disappointment with the finale, though, demonstrates the continued difficulty of reconciling teleology and seriality.

Given these changes, however, the continued exclusion of the sitcom from “quality” television becomes less tenable. While the term “quality” television is still most often associated with primetime serials (PTS), sitcoms often compete with the same level of production, writing, and development. Moreover, as Butler notes, even sitcoms that retain multi-camera set-ups challenge the usual categories in adopting technology previously associated not only with “quality” television, but also the more culturally established medium of film. Writing about *The*

New Adventures of Old Christine, for example, Butler argues that its “HD format causes a disjunction between the photo effect (from Barthes) associated with the cinema and the liveness cues provided by multiple-camera production [...] Its high-definition visual resolution and widescreen aspect ratio signal to the viewer the this-is-was of the cinema, but this photo effect is overwhelmed by the signifiers of liveness,” (Butler 192).

Nevertheless, writers on the currently speculated “third Golden Age” of TV still tend to neglect the sitcom. Brett Martin, in his book *Difficult Men*, for example, not only limits his discussion to television shows featuring the eponymous “difficult men” (thus eliminating any number of television shows that predominantly depict or are created by women) but also eliminates sitcoms from his analysis. While he acknowledges that many of these new comedies deserve praise, he nevertheless sets them apart from the PTS he prefers, arguing that “[t]hese shows—*Curb Your Enthusiasm*, *It's Always Sunny in Philadelphia*, and *Louie*, to name a few—share many of the themes of the dramas, including that of the deeply flawed, usually male protagonist; but on the whole, they did not partake of the formal innovations of the dramas on which I focus.” (12). What distinguishes these dramas, he argues, is again the type of narration: “More subtly, all employ an open-ended, ongoing mode of storytelling that distinguishes them from either of their closest precedents: the largely episodic ‘quality’ network dramas of the 1980s and early 1990s (*Hill Street Blues*, *thirtysomething*, *St. Elsewhere*, and so on) and the closed-ended high-production-value miniseries of the BBC” (Martin 12). If he is interested in “open-ended, ongoing” storytelling, though, it remains unclear why sitcoms should be excluded from his analysis.

As Thompson’s original discussion of “quality” demonstrates, though, quality more often than not depends on factors external to the intrinsic qualities of the show—high-class demographics of viewers, for example, or positive critical attention. More importantly, as Feuer’s analysis of genre theory in the sitcom shows, it is possible to read the static nature of the sitcom as something that is not necessarily conservative or regressive: “it is equally possible to view the static nature of the sitcom form as having the potential to challenge our perceived norms and values” (ibid.). This is precisely what David Marc does, arguing that the static nature of the sitcom allows it to function as effective satire by preventing identification. As Feuer paraphrases,

“the static sitcom structure *can* explore ideas and challenge dominant cultural values, and it is able to do so precisely because it does not allow our individualistic identification with well-developed characters to get in the way” (Feuer 150). Indeed, the animated series to be discussed later in this chapter, *South Park* and *Family Guy*, are often praised for their satirical power, despite their continued adherence to a static sitcom structure.

Building on Feuer’s argument here, I would add that the sitcom as a static genre takes on particular meaning in a contemporary world that is characterized by makeover culture. In societies obsessed with change and self-improvement, the sitcom may paradoxically offer some resistance to dominant culture by allowing its characters to stay the same. Quality primetime serials, for all their development, do not necessarily proceed in an “open-ended” manner as Martin suggests; in fact, it is more likely that they proceed teleologically, either in the positive sense of self-improvement or the negative sense of self-destruction (in the case of Martin’s “difficult men,” it is usually the latter—*Breaking Bad* is paradigmatic). In this respect, seeing sitcom characters who do not change significantly, and most likely never will, can be quite refreshing. This tendency of the sitcom takes on an even greater meaning when it comes to the depiction of fatness, as will be discussed in the next section.

Fat and the History of the Sitcom

There is a long history of fat characters on TV, especially iconic fat men in programs from *The Honeymooners* to *Cheers*. Jerry Mosher is one of the few scholars to excavate this history and address the fat body in television narratives. In his article “Setting Free the Bears: Refiguring Fat Men in Television,” Mosher contrasts the depiction of fat in film and television, arguing that television is “friendlier to fat” because of its seriality. The narrative structure of television “allows for a slower development of physical nuance and encourages viewers to regard its characters as ‘real people’” (166). Running over months and often years, television series collapse the distinction between the body of the actor and character: “The authenticity inherent in this conflation renders fat television actors as iconic, deviant, and yet ordinary, positioning them as highly visible models of the often contradictory forces that figure fat men in

America." (166-167). This fusion paradoxically makes fat actors more likely to find a television role that allows for their embodiment over a series of years, but also makes them subject to outside critique. Whereas the extreme bodily transformations of film are rarely criticized for being "unhealthy," as they are temporary, the enduring fatness of a television character may provoke people to question whether that actor or actress can or should be considered a "role model."

The relationship of weight change to television is also fundamentally different from its relationship to film. While it is common to gain or lose extreme amounts of weight for a single film role, and often lauded, this is less common in television. It is not thus not surprising that Rob McElhenney's decision to gain weight for his role in *It's Always Sunny in Philadelphia* drew comparison to filmic precedents; Tim Molloy of *The Wrap* called McElhenney's weight gain a "Raging Bull-sized committment [sic]" ("Fat Mac No More") while interviewer and fellow comedian Nick Kroll deemed him the "f—king Daniel Day-Lewis of basic cable" in another article on *The Wrap* ("Fat Mac"). This declaration is both a compliment as well as jokingly back-handed (as basic cable still does not have the cultural weight of the cinema). McElhenney responds, somewhat ironically as well no doubt, "I want to be part of that conversation. I want to be part of the DeNiros, the Bales, the Day-Lewises."

One should be aware, though, that the praise of McElhenney and other male stars who subject their bodies to extreme change is inherently gendered. It is hard to imagine the tolerance and even celebration of McElhenney's weight gain if he had been a woman. Indeed, his wife and co-star Kaitlin Olson was reported to be "especially uninterested" in joining his weight gain quest ("Fat Mac," *The Wrap*). Men may be praised for their dedication to craft when they lose weight, but women are rarely praised in the same way.⁵³ Tina Fey illustrated this gender disparity aptly in one of her jokes at the Golden Globes in 2012: "Matthew McConaughey did amazing work this year. For his role in *Dallas Buyers Club*, he lost 45 pounds. Or what actresses call

⁵³ In this vein, it is telling that Molloy would praise McElhenney for this decision to become fat as somehow ground-breaking while also criticizing Lena Dunham for using the nudity of her own not-thin body in her series, *Girls* (a comment that was criticized, in turn, by feminists). That he can imagine how Mac's weight gain might subvert generic conventions, but not how Dunham's showcasing of a non-normative body may be subversive, points to a gender disparity in how male and female bodies on TV are talked about.

being in a movie” (qtd. Vincent). As Fey points out, the bodily transformation of male actors for particular roles is often celebrated as an impressive sign of dedication to craft, while for women weight loss is seen as a simple prerequisite. In 2015, she followed up this joke with another one on the same theme, saying “Steve Carell’s *Foxcatcher* look took two hours to put on, including his hair styling and makeup. Just for comparison, it took me three hours today to prepare for my role as human woman” (qtd. Bacle). In both of these jokes, Fey draws attention to the ways that simply being an actress, or even just being a woman, requires body work that often goes unacknowledged. In Meredith Jones’ terms, the “labor revealed” of male actors is contrasted by a hidden labor that women must do to even be considered for casting. This contrasting acceptance of fat male bodies and female bodies carries over into television as well.

Of the television forms open to fat characters, though—both women and men—the sitcom appears to be one of the most common. As Mosher notes, the sitcom “provides the narrative space for plenty of fat jokes but also positions the home as a refuge from an increasingly fragmented culture, flattening social contradictions into everyday personal experience.” (168). While the humor is likely to be produced at the expense of the fat characters, the sitcom nevertheless offers room for fat characters to exist as ordinary “everymen.” Not coincidentally, Mosher notes that most fat men in television have been working class. Even in later incarnations that include “middle class” fat men in office jobs, these men exist “on the margins of corporate culture” (168). These men are not the go-getters and professionals, the rising stars or entrepreneurs, but rather corporate drones, harried low-level accountants, etc. Mosher cites particular precedents in *The Honeymooners* (1955-1956) and *All in the Family* (1971-1979).⁵⁴ Both series feature patriarchs who are “self-proclaimed kings of their castles whose layers of fat buffered them from the world and assimilated social turmoil into the visual and understandable realm of individual corporeal deviance” (168). In the face of changing social relations, Ralph Kramden and Archie Bunker, respectively, retreat to the home, railing against the changes that are happening but ultimately powerless to stop them. In fact, Mosher argues, Kramden had “by 1952 established the fat white male body as a televisual symbol of downward

⁵⁴ Incidentally, these two series produce a similar parallelism to the one that Feuer notes in *Mary Tyler Moore* and *Murphy Brown*.

mobility” (168). At the very beginning of television’s history, then, we find the fat man’s body linked to particular discourses of race and class. This association becomes even more cemented with Archie Bunker, whose belly takes on the onus of “embodying the growing alienation of white men in general” (168). Taken together with other frequently cited icons of similar girth (e.g. Homer Simpson), it becomes clear that fat operates as a clear sign of “white heterosexual masculinity losing its definition, rendered soft and impotent” (169).

All in the Family is particularly relevant to this discussion, not only because it created one of the most iconic fat characters in US television history, but because it is especially tied up in the internationalization of television formats. *All in the Family* was based on a British series *Till Death Do Us Part* that inspired multiple other versions, including the German *Ein Herz und eine Seele*. All three of these series featured reactionary working class patriarchs who openly expressed their distrust of leftist politics, racial minorities, and feminism. The universality of this set-up shows how a similar social response to the student protests of 1968 was formulated across borders. Of course, each of these shows was adapted to the local context. Sharp-tongued patriarch “Ekel Alfred” (Creep Alfred) of *Ein Herz und eine Seele*, for example, has a slightly Hitler-like appearance with similar mustache and parted hair, clearly locating him as a relic of a bygone German generation. Of these three, it is only in the US version that the patriarch has a prominent belly, suggesting perhaps that the fat male body was particularly legible as a symbol of downward mobility in the US in contrast to others. Today, certainly, it appears that fatness is clearly associated with men’s downward mobility in all three countries.

According to Mosher’s argument, fatness works paradoxically to mark men in the sitcom as ordinary men and yet somehow less masculine—in fact, ordinary in their weakened masculinity. As he writes, “[t]he fat and flaccid male body proved to be a handy visual metaphor for the impotence of patriarchal power and masculinity under siege: large and vulnerable, the fat male body became a recognizable symbol of insecure male performativity, its phallic potential buried under folds of flesh,” (170-171). Indeed, the suggestion that fatness compromises masculinity by literally hiding phallic potential is often used by sitcoms and their parodies for the sake of humor. In an episode of *Family Guy*, “He’s Too Sexy for His Fat,” for example, there is a scene in which Peter, having lost a lot of weight, speaks to his penis in the shower, saying, “I see

you” and giggling. The implication is that the reclaimed ability to surveil one’s own genitalia restores masculinity, although of course *Family Guy* undercuts this assertion of symbolic virility with Peter’s childish laugh, which again distances him from mature masculinity. Similar questions may be raised for sitcom actors who gain weight. One of the first things Nick Kroll asks Rob McElhenney about his weight gain for *It’s Always Sunny* is “Now, did you get fat man’s dick?” (*The Wrap*). McElhenney claims not to know what he means, but agrees that “[his] legs and [his] gut got so big that [his] penis looked even smaller,” and then adds, “It’s insane. It really is a very, very crushing psychological gain.” Kroll presses the point for the sake of humor, asking “Did it look like a penny with a button on the end?” Instead of answering directly, McElhenney offers a funnier phrase from a friend of his who described his penis as a “button on a fur coat.” In this joking exchange, Kroll and McElhenney speak as if they are two bros ribbing each other in the locker room. This simultaneously permits a discussion of masculinity and the body in such a way that cloaks it in irony and thus evades earnest confession of any actual insecurity.

While the majority of male characters in sitcoms seem to reproduce stereotypes of fat masculinity, Mosher suggests that there are portrayals that go beyond them. In the generally dismissed *What’s Happening!!*, for example, Mosher notes that fat man Rerun is allowed multiple opportunities to dance and thus show temporary escape from sizist narratives that would assume he is clumsy or uncoordinated. Likewise, Mosher compliments *Roseanne* for John Goodman’s “sensitive and complex portrayal of a working-class father who is neither know-it-all nor buffoon” (181). In the character of Dan, Mosher argues, the viewer can appreciate the “nuances of fat performativity.” More importantly, sexuality is a key part of the show; in its unapologetic depiction of fat desire, the show allows Roseanne and Dan “a tactile sensitivity rarely seen in televisual couples” (182). As Mosher notes, while Dan and Roseanne occasionally give in to societal pressure and attempt diets (in the episode “I’m Hungry,” for example), they largely evade weight loss and “engage in pleasures both subversive and sensuous. Their sexuality is not unthinkable; rather, they are unthinkable without it” (182-183).

Focused on the fat men of television, Mosher inevitably leaves out the various fat women in television history. Fat women also have had important roles in the history of the sitcom. While these women have appeared in such comedic series since the beginning, however, they have

rarely featured as leads, more often than not relegated to commenting sardonically on the action rather than participating in it (e.g. Conchata Ferrell's role in *Two and a Half Men*). *Roseanne*, of course, is a key exception, and one that is often cited by feminist and fat studies scholars as a milestone in the depiction of working class women. Yet Roseanne's role as an advocate for fat is complicated by the actress herself, who pursued weight loss by way of bariatric surgery at the same time she insisted she loved "fat chicks." This contradiction leads Beth Bernstein and Matilda St. John in *The Fat Studies Reader*, for example, to call her a "Roseanne Benedict Arnold," that is, a traitor to the cause of fat acceptance. In her tripartite division of fat stars in relation to their own fatness (from "Out and About," to "Silent Types" and "Traitors") LeBesco also leaves Roseanne in the traitor group, acknowledging Bernstein and St. John's point that while "fat celebrities are not mandated to be fat advocates [...] because they use their body talk to build a fan base, their betrayals sting significantly" (LeBesco 94).

In any case, the sitcom appears to be more friendly to fat than other television genres. Whether or not they embody "positive" stereotypes or rather represent qualities with negative connotations, such as downward mobility, fat characters find space in the sitcom that they do not find in other genres. Moreover, the sitcom is unlikely to produce weight loss in its characters, even if they attempt it. I argue that the persistence of fat in the sitcom is not only because of the assumption that fat is inherently funny and therefore can be easily exploited for laughs, but also due to the formal structure of the sitcom itself, which nevertheless reverts to the mean even as it progresses. We will see this pattern in the following analyses of two examples, *Mike & Molly* and *Miranda*.

Mike & Molly & Makeover Culture

Mike & Molly is a situation comedy that began in 2011 and is still currently running on CBS. On the most obvious level, it is a sitcom about two people who fall in love—Mike, played by Billy Gardell, and Molly, played by Melissa McCarthy. As the CBS website describes it, *Mike & Molly* is "a comedy about a working-class Chicago couple who had almost given up on love... and then found each other." This love story is mostly told in conventional ways; *Mike & Molly*



Mike & Molly bills itself as a simple love story between two ordinary working class people—Molly, a teacher, and Mike, a police officer. (Source: iTunes).

easily fits the traditional mold of a multi-camera sitcom. Created by Mark Roberts and produced by Chuck Lorre, *Mike & Molly* is similar in style to other well-known sitcoms in the Lorre canon such as *Two and a Half Men* and *The Big Bang Theory*. Like these sitcoms, *Mike & Molly* also reflects the increasing serialization of television genres by producing episodic plots within longer narrative arcs. While the plots of individual episodes are largely cyclical, they are framed by greater developments that often build to important events at structurally important moments. The first season, for example, charts the development of Mike and Molly's relationship from their first meeting to their engagement in the season finale, while the second season builds to their wedding in the finale. In this way, the seasons produce their own sort of teleology. On the level of individual episodes, however, the plots reflect typical sitcom structure, in which a conflict is introduced and then resolved in less than thirty minutes. These individual plots, in turn, fit in the context of the larger narrative arcs.

What sets *Mike & Molly* apart from other traditional sitcoms on television now is the embodiment of the eponymous characters—Mike and Molly are both fat. This embodiment is not incidental; instead, the entire series hinges on this fact. Not only do Mike and Molly meet in the context of weight loss, at an Overeaters Anonymous meeting, but their embodiment is also

important to paratextual descriptions. The iTunes description of the first season, for example, introduces them in relation to their bodies: Mike is “a good-hearted cop who sincerely wants to lose weight” and Molly is “an instantly likeable fourth-grade teacher with a good sense of humor about her curves.” These phrases indicate their fatness, yet rely on euphemisms, demonstrating a reluctance to assert their embodiment outright. As the description continues, it posits Mike and Molly as valiant defenders of weight loss against food temptations and the people who do not understand their desire to lose weight: “For Molly, focusing on smart choices isn’t easy while living with her sexy older sister, Victoria, and their mother (Swoosie Kurtz), both of whom flaunt their effortless figures while indulging their healthy appetites right in front of her.” In Mike’s case, he “faces temptation at the diner he and Carl frequent, where they’ve become friends with a Senegalese waiter, Samuel, to whom dieting is a foreign concept.” In this way, the description introduces the main conflicts in the show, presenting Mike and Molly as likable and admirable precisely because they eschew the hedonistic pleasures of the supporting characters in favor of the valiant quest for weight loss.

In this description, the inherent paradox in *Mike & Molly*’s premise also becomes evident; in emphasizing both fatness *and* weight loss, the series is predicated on both the characters *being* fat and *becoming* thin. This contradiction reflects *Mike & Molly*’s position at the crossroads of two opposing trends. On one hand, as the previous chapter has demonstrated, fatness is denigrated as ugly and unhealthy in the weight loss makeover, an embodiment that must be changed through weight loss if subjects are to achieve true subjecthood. On the other hand, *Mike & Molly* reflects a push to include characters of more diverse embodiments on television, made visible in a wave of shows with fat actors and characters. Melissa McCarthy is an important figure in this regard, as her success in film and television is particularly heralded as a sign that entertainment is becoming more accepting of women who are not incredibly thin. As argued earlier, however, most narratives with fat characters do not argue for fatness on its own terms, but instead put their characters in the context of weight loss, and *Mike & Molly* is no different. It seems fat characters are only considered commercially viable on TV as long as they want to lose weight and effectively escape their fat identity. As a result, shows like *Mike & Molly* exhibit an

ambivalent attitude toward fatness, allowing fat actors to occupy lead roles, but still portraying fat as negative and weight loss as desirable.

The weight loss process, however, presents a conundrum for the sitcom format, which generally relies on recognizable characters and cyclical plots. At the end of each episode, it is expected that we return, more or less, to where we began. In narrative terms, then, characters losing weight is not actually desirable; while characters may profess to be invested in self-improvement and makeover culture, they cannot change drastically. Mike and Molly actually becoming thin would not be true to the original premise, and would change much of the humor of the show, eliminating the frequent fat jokes at Mike's expense. Yet, as Sender and Sullivan note, "there can be neither an unapologetic nor an unexplained self-presentation as fat" on television (139). Mike and Molly cannot just "happen" to be fat; their fatness must be rendered visible in the narrative. As Sasha Pasulka argues, any visible imperfection in a TV character must be addressed, or even treated "like a third character" ([CNN.com](#)). In the case of *Mike & Molly*, that third character is their fatness; because it must be apologetic, however, the series puts this energy into makeover culture and thus weight loss. As long as they profess to desire losing weight and open themselves to change, audiences are assuaged, whether or not they actually reach the final "after" of thinness. Consequently, Mike and Molly spend their time in the series attempting to lose weight, but are not very successful. This failure to lose weight makes them even more representative of the everyday experience of people in the audience, though, who most likely have also tried and failed to become thin. In this way, Gardell and McCarthy are emblematic of the status Mosher ascribes to fat television actors as "iconic, deviant, and yet ordinary," embodying the "contradictory forces" that figure fat people in the US. By invoking weight loss but not producing it, *Mike & Molly* manages to capitalize on both the widespread attractiveness of weight loss in makeover culture as well as the increased visibility of the fat body in recent years. And this strategy is evidently successful—now in its sixth season, *Mike & Molly* is, according to CBS, one of the network's highest-rated shows.

The portrayal of two fat people as romantic leads is significant in that it breaks a widespread taboo in television on the depiction of fat people in romantic relationships. Even reality television shows that are dedicated to issues of fat and weight loss, such as *The Biggest*

Loser, often refrain from depicting romantic relationships between their protagonists, or at least until the end when they can be made part of the successful “after” stage. As former contestant Kai Hibbard claims in the [Cracked.com](#) article on her season, producers chose not to show real relationships onscreen if the contestants involved were deemed “too fat.” As the article notes, this decision reflects a larger taboo in television: “TV just can't seem to bring itself to show fat people falling in love unless it's the two comic relief characters having their arcs wrapped up in such a way that we don't have to see them bone.” In other words, fat love may be depicted in minor subplots, but not put center stage. Instead, fat characters must be portrayed, more often than not, as either sexless and pathetic or comically overconfident and hypersexual. Fat sex may be referred to for laughs, but weight loss is assumed to be a prerequisite for “true” love. Within this trend, there is also a clear gender disparity; fat women are much less likely to be seen as romantic leads. *Cracked* illustrates this with an interjected photo of the sitcom *King of Queens*, captioned thus: “Over in sitcom-land they'll do fat guy/hot wife, but don't you *dare* think about reversing those roles.” In this respect, the inclusion of Melissa McCarthy as a fat romantic lead in *Mike & Molly* is particularly path-breaking; although it does not reverse the roles, it allows a fat woman to be depicted having her sexual desires satisfied.

Read in this way, *Mike & Molly* is revolutionary in its very banality; the depiction of two fat characters in everyday jobs having a rather normal intimate relationship is hard to come by in television. While their fatness may be the target of jokes, the majority of plots in *Mike & Molly* revolve around conflicts that could occur in any relationship and thus do not depend on their size. In this way, the series recalls the revolutionary politics of fat, class, and sexuality as found in *Roseanne*, although with not nearly as much biting wit. Like *Roseanne* and Dan, Mike and Molly have a successful sexual relationship that “is not the irritant or source of neurosis it is for most sitcom couples” (182). Mike and Molly frequently refer to their sexual attraction to each other, and express physical affection through hugging and kissing fairly often. As normal as this is in the real world, it is a sight one rarely sees on television. Indeed, according to CNN, *Mike & Molly* has drawn complaints from people who are not “comfortable watching intimacy between two plus-sized actors” (France). At the same time, the show does not go further than this; Mike and Molly are not shown in explicit sexual contexts (i.e. in the midst of sexual acts), and neither

are they depicted with exposed skin. While they make verbal references to sex, they remain fully clothed. In this respect, the sitcom displays some of the “containment” strategies Mosher identifies in television representations of fat. *Mike & Molly* is happy to tell us that they have a fulfilling sex life, but is ultimately reluctant to show it, enforcing the taboo on the exposed fat body and its “pornographic signification” (Mosher 171).

Unlike other romantic sitcoms, *Mike & Molly* does not indulge in a “will-they-or-won’t-they” romantic premise in which the long-lasting sexual tension between two characters structures the entire series without being consummated. As the title suggests, Mike and Molly are together, for better or worse. There is no question that they will remain a couple, and they quickly hit the typical romantic milestones of heteronormative monogamy—engagement and marriage. In this regard, *Mike & Molly* escapes the classic critique lodged against the sitcom by David Grote that the genre implicitly delays the union of the lovers that upsets the social order. Instead, the romantic “will-they-or-won’t-they” is displaced to the weight loss plot. In this way, the animating question becomes not “Will they or won’t they get together?” but rather “Will they or won’t they lose weight as their relationship progresses?” Until the series ends, though, this question is unlikely to be fully answered. In the meantime, both Mike and Molly remain fat.

In this disavowal of weight loss as a prerequisite for romance and its willingness to let its characters remain fat, *Mike & Molly* substantively resists makeover teleology. Nevertheless, the relationship between the advancement of the romantic plot and the progress of weight loss is complicated one. While effective weight loss is not necessary for Mike and Molly’s relationship to begin, dedication to self-improvement is nonetheless linked to its progression. When crises arise, they are often linked to weight loss and eating, either as a cause or effect. At the same time, the series reflects a number of mainstream views of fatness as fundamentally undesirable, an “imperfection” that can be overlooked or overcome, but is nevertheless negatively assessed. Likewise, the show rarely critiques the social conditions that stigmatize fat people, instead

suggesting that a transformation of the body is preferable to a transformation of social reality.⁵⁵ In its centering of Mike and Molly, the show also inherently positions them as the most “normal,” likeable and capable characters in the show. The supporting cast, in contrast, provides the most colorful lines and wild antics, building the crazy fringe around their relationship. In contrast to his mother’s mean and frequently racist comments or his partner Carl’s sexist remarks, Mike appears moderate; in this way Mike contrasts the reactionary image of fat TV men like Ralph Kramden or Archie Bunker. Likewise, in the context of her mother’s heavy wine drinking and her sister’s marijuana habit, Molly seems completely responsible. Most importantly, unlike their friends and family, Mike and Molly appear to be self-aware and willing to change. While no one else appears to identify their habits as problematic, Mike and Molly are presented from the beginning as in a constant process of self-improvement, that is, in the thralls of makeover culture. In their dedication to the weight loss process, the series presents Mike and Molly as subjects who are, in the words of Deborah Lupton, “autonomous, directed at self-improvement, self-regulated, desirous of self-knowledge, [...] seeking happiness and healthiness” (Lupton 12). Although the OA setting features less prominently over time, weight loss remains part of the series. In this way, Mike and Molly as characters are embedded in makeover culture, even as their bodies resist the actual change propagated by this rhetoric.

The introduction of both Mike and Molly in the pilot episode shows how their characters are constructed to be admired because of their dedication to self-improvement through weight loss. In line with the title, the series introduces Mike first and then Molly. The episode opens with Mike in the diner with his partner on the police force, Carl, being served by Samuel, the Senegalese waiter. While Carl has a normal meal, Mike is served a simple hot dog. Samuel highlights the lacks of this meal by rattling off a list of things that the wiener does not have: “no bun, no sauerkraut, no chili, no mustard, no pickle, no cheese, no relish.” Samuel is also curious why Mike is not eating a large meal, noting his “tremendous girth.” Mike says that he is on a

⁵⁵ A rare moment of critique comes in the episode when Mike and his groomsmen are being fitted for Mike and Molly’s wedding at Andre’s Big and Tall; here it is the thin characters Carl and Samuel who are comically ill-fitted in their clothes, while Mike and Harry are pleased with their dapper appearance. Harry emphasizes the reversal of the situation, saying to Carl and Samuel “Kind of a bummer not being able to find clothes that fit, huh. Who’s the freak now?” (2.22, 6.45). This scene shows how the idea of what is “normal” is constructed by society, not naturally given as one might assume. The Big and Tall shop, as a space separate from mainstream retail stores, offers the fat men a rare moment of pride in their appearance.

diet, going to the gym three times a week and riding his bike. Carl is initially supportive, but when Mike says he is going to his Overeaters' Anonymous that night instead of going out on the town, Carl calls it "pathetic." Our first shot of Molly, in contrast, is a pan up to reveal her working out on the elliptical machine in her living room. Soon her mother, Joyce, enters from the kitchen with a slice of cake. When Molly becomes annoyed and asks "Do you have to eat that in front of me?" clueless Joyce offers her a bite, to which Molly replies "What do you think I'm doing on this machine here, making butter?" Joyce insists that Molly should stop "punishing" herself, that she is a "big-boned girl" and "will always be a big-boned girl." Molly retorts, "Bones don't jiggle, ma." Joyce continues, attributing Molly's weight to genetics and suggesting she has to accept it. In putting this explanation in the mouth of Joyce, the series suggests it is a lazy, self-serving way of reading fatness that not even Molly believes. To make matters worse, Molly's sexy sister Victoria enters the scene and savors a bite of the cake as well. When Molly says she is going to her OA meeting, Victoria criticizes the decision, saying "you're never going to meet a cute guy at the chub club." In both of these introductions, we see Mike and Molly valiantly trying to control themselves and resisting temptations. Both are faced with friends and family who dismiss their decision to go to OA, assume that their energies are misplaced, and seem to offer little support for their attempts at self-transformation. In these scenes, the show presents both Mike and Molly as strong-willed and likeable characters in contrast to those around them, who easily indulge their appetites without a second thought, whether they are for food, alcohol (Joyce), marijuana (Victoria), or sex (Carl).

In the next scene, Mike and Molly converge on the Overeaters Anonymous meeting in which they meet for the first time. The OA setting here, in addition to stressing *Mike & Molly*'s commitment to weight loss, offers some clear benefits for the narrative. First of all, it allows both Mike and Molly to give monologues. In the pilot, this is essential for providing expository information on both characters—their family situations, motivations for weight loss and attitudes toward their bodies. The monologues also allow the actors to showcase their comedic skills; as a performance in front of a crowd, they look a lot like stand-up—especially for Gardell, who is a stand-up comic, this is important. In addition, the OA audience acts as a stand-in for the position of the viewer. Watching this audience gives us clues about how to react to their speeches, and

also present OA as a supportive community that listens to and helps its members. One could argue that this audience also serves a similar function as the laugh track—as Jeremy Butler argues, the audience track is “another marker of immediate presence as it encourages viewers to experience the program as if they were members of that audience that witnessed the program live. Further, the audience track interpellates viewers—hailing them to join the experience that the live audience is having,” (Butler 194). In a similar fashion, shots of the OA audience “hail” the viewers at home, potentially creating a community between fat characters and fat viewers, who most likely have also attempted weight loss and can relate to the struggles of the characters. The OA setting recurs throughout the series, often appearing when Mike and Molly have crises in their relationship.

Mike and Molly’s initial “shares” in the pilot demonstrate both important similarities and differences between their stories. Both of them share moments of overeating, Mike in the previous week and Molly a story from her childhood. Their performances are both charming and joking, a stark contrast to the teary and shame-filled confessions of reality television’s weight loss makeovers. Mike’s share, though, expresses more self-doubt. Mike admits that he struggles with self-loathing and “the voices in my head start telling me what a loser I am, how no one’s ever going to love me, you know, how I’m going to spend the last few years of my life alone in a dark apartment, my only companions six or seven cats that made the mistake of wandering into my gravitational field.” Molly, on the other hand, stresses her gratitude to her father for never making her feel bad about her weight, and affirms her self-esteem, saying, “I know I’m never going to be a size two, I mean, and that’s fine. I happen to like who I am, you know. There’s nothing wrong with me as a person. I’m smart, I’m funny, I recycle! I just wanna learn to control my eating, you know, and not keel over in a White Castle drive-through like my dad.” While both Mike and Molly are evidently concerned with mortality and the possibility of a death that is either too early (Molly) or lonely (Mike), Molly seems to be more confident about herself and in control of her life. She suggests that the only thing “wrong” with her is her weight, and even this is not so bad. Her problem with overeating and weight seems to be an aberration rather than a symbol of her character in general. Mike, on the other hand, expresses a greater lack of confidence in himself, which continues throughout the episode as he repeatedly fails to ask

Molly out despite her evident interest. In Mike's case, his fatness and failure to control his eating are read as part of his general failure to fulfill his potential or, in typical corporate jargon, "self-actualize."

This initial difference continues throughout the series, allowing the comedy to build on larger gender conventions in its plots and conflicts. Much of the domestic comedy of the show, in fact, centers around difficulties in communication and values in the relationship between Mike and Molly. As their relationship develops, it becomes clear that it is Mike who is most in need of makeover for the sake of romantic success. This is not only tied to his weight, but also the habits that mark him as a stereotypical bachelor, such as lax standards of hygiene and the tendency to buy shampoo by the gallon. Mike reveals himself to be a classic working-class sitcom man—good-natured but frequently irresponsible or clueless, uninvested in acquiring the knowledge or habits of upward mobility. Molly, on the other hand, has ambitions for herself and for Mike. She not only upgrades his living standards, but also reforms his communication strategies and gives him a dose of culture, taking him to the opera and museums, and later encourages him to become a detective. In classic sitcom style, Mike has a best friend, Carl, who continually warns him about submitting himself to Molly's interventions, read as typical feminine ploys to encroach on his masculine space and "domesticate" him. In the opening of "Carl is Jealous" (1.5), Carl even explicitly labels Mike's transformation a "makeover" when he learns that Mike has been to the symphony and started drinking tea, saying "Wow, this woman is giving you a complete makeover, isn't she?" (1.22). When Mike asks for further explanation, Carl says, "Going to the symphony, drinking tea—next thing you know you'll be carrying her purse and asking to visit your balls on the weekend." In this scene, Carl equates Molly's influence and the makeover itself with emasculation; the adoption of tastes associated with upward class mobility is read as a threat to working class masculinity. Mike, of course, is offended, insisting he is not "whipped." This scene rehashes typical sitcom/romcom tropes. Carl's advice, of course, should be taken with a grain of salt, as the series frequently reminds us that his own romantic life is often lacking. In the context of the episode, for example, Carl's initial depiction as the voice of machismo is undermined when his resentment of Molly is later couched in the feminizing language of jealousy. Likewise, in this episode as in others, Carl's sexism is countered by other people, most

notably his grandmother, who easily deflates his masculine posturing, usually with references to embarrassing incidents involving masturbation or sexual desperation. In the end, even Carl himself admits that he is jealous and actually wants a steady relationship of the kind that Mike and Molly have. This conclusion affirms Mike's masculinity in contrast to Carl.

While the show implicitly critiques Carl's sexist reading of Mike and Molly's relationship as over-the-top, the series does often significantly rely on "battle of the sexes" plots that indicate Mike and Molly's contrasting priorities. Mike, for example, makes spontaneous decisions that do not jive with Molly's values, which include maintaining domestic harmony and planning for their shared future. This is particularly clear in the second season, as Mike and Molly look forward to their wedding. While Molly has her eyes on the prize, so to speak, Mike gets easily distracted, buying a classic car when they should be saving money, for example, or going fishing when he should be helping with the planning. Likewise, while Molly is responsible and dedicated to weight loss, Mike is not. He repeatedly suffers setbacks, often going off his diet when Molly is not controlling it. Molly, on the other hand, is rarely shown deviating from her diet—or eating at all, for that matter. The gendered expectations of the characters ensure that Mike can neglect his diet and still be lovable, while a fat woman indulging in food onscreen is still apparently taboo. In this way, *Mike & Molly* recycles the familiar gender plots of sitcoms, simply recasting them in the relationship between two fat characters.

The humor of *Mike & Molly* derives largely from different treatments of the main characters' bodies. Mike is a constant target of jokes about his weight and his relationship to food; friends and family alike emphasize both his huge appetite and his large body. Molly, on the other hand, is rarely mocked for her weight; she may bring it up herself in moments of self-deprecation, but she does not face the same comments about it. This is not to say that Melissa McCarthy's performance is somehow less embodied than Billy Gardell's; it is actually the opposite. Melissa McCarthy's performance as Molly includes more physical humor and slapstick, while Billy Gardell's performance is more verbal. The moments of physical comedy performed by Melissa McCarthy do not occur in every episode, but they are memorable when they do, as when she spends their first date ill and inadvertently high on codeine cough syrup, eventually plucking one of Mike's nose hairs at the restaurant table and falling asleep on the

toilet (1.2). While McCarthy's embodied performance is more active, Gardell's is more passive, often making him the object of one-liners and other jokes rather than the subject. At times, stereotypical moments of embodied fat humor are mentioned, but remain off-camera; while the show tells us about Mike running after his hat when it is blown off his head, for example, it does not show it to us—the humor is in Carl's retelling of the incident (ep 1.4).

The differing humorous treatment of Mike and Molly may, in part, derive from the actors' divergent comedic styles. McCarthy is well-known for her physical comedy in her film roles, so it makes sense the series would want to capitalize on that, while Gardell's comedic career reflects his history of stand-up. Yet the reluctance here to make Molly's weight the butt of jokes also reflects a gendered difference. Even when she performs scenes of physical and thus embodied comedy, they do not have to do with her size. She does not get stuck in small chairs or find herself bursting out of small clothing, as other fat women in comedy do. She does not, as Mike does, embody a sloppy fat stereotype by spilling things on her clothes. Instead, her look is always feminine and put-together, often featuring wrap dresses or embellished tops that defy ideas of fat women's frumpiness. Molly embodies an ideal of middle-class respectability that incidentally takes a fat form. This depiction may fall out of the standard depiction of a fat woman as low-class, out of control, emotionally needy or alternately aggressive (Conchata Ferrell's depiction of housekeeper Berta on *Two and a Half Men* springs to mind). But it also enforces a different kind of silence, perhaps because a lead fat woman's failings are considered too dark for comedy. As Vanessa notes in her "epic fat girl monologue" on the sitcom *Louie* (3.4), a fat man like stand-up comic Louie (or his alter ego, real-life Louis C.K.) can leverage his weight as a comic tool, while a fat woman cannot; "I mean, you, you can talk into the microphone and say you can't get a date, you're overweight. It's adorable. But if I say it, they call the suicide hotline on me."

In other ways, though, *Mike & Molly* subverts gendered conventions. In fact, throughout the series Mike is the one who seems more insecure, while Molly is intelligent, confident, and successful in her job as a fourth grade teacher. As the more confident partner, Molly takes the initiative in their relationship, while Mike hesitates because he does not feel secure in his body and life situation. This comes out when he is intimidated by Molly in the early episode "First

Kiss" (1.3); after bearing witness to Molly's knowledge and bowling prowess, Mike briefly considers abandoning the whole relationship. Likewise, in the following episode, "Mike's Not Ready" (1.4), they face another crisis in their relationship because Molly is ready to enter into a sexual relationship, while Mike hesitates. Carl diagnoses the situation as evidence of Mike's insecurity in his body, but he rejects the suggestion adamantly, presumably because it is not masculine to admit such a thing. Molly, faced with Mike's apparent lack of interest and attributing it to a lack of attraction, breaks off the relationship. At the end of the episode, the conflict is resolved when Mike, in a comedic rendering of the balcony scene in *Romeo and Juliet*, drunkenly climbs a ladder to explain himself and win her back. Mike confesses that he "panicked" because he was afraid of her reaction to his nudity. As he goes on to say, "I was hoping to lose a little weight first so you'd be turned on by me," (18.58). Molly asks, "How much were you talking about?" and Mike responds "I don't know, 160 pounds?" at which point the audience laughs. Molly reassures him, though, saying "You idiot. I don't know if you've noticed this, but I'm not exactly perfect." In an "aww" moment, Mike says, "You are to me." After initial difficulties, in which Mike falls asleep halfway in, halfway out of the window, Molly pulls him in and reunion is complete. In this way, *Mike & Molly* ostensibly shows that while weight loss is part of their story, their love is not contingent on its success.

At the same time, *Mike & Molly* produces a number of episodes within which food acts symbolically as an index of not only the progress of weight loss, but also an indication of romantic plot stalling or regression. In every moment of romantic stress or crisis for one of the fat characters, he or she resorts to food. In response, another typically comments critically or even halts the meal, "saving" the person from his or her overeating. This happens in the pilot when Mike, depressed that he has failed to ask out Molly after visiting his class, returns to the diner and orders two meatball subs, a large curly fries, and chocolate malt (beginning of the third act). When Carl appears and sees Mike begin to eat the sub, though, he quickly stops him, saying it is "suicide with meatball bullets." Earlier dismissive of Mike's plan to go to OA, Carl now affirms his support of Mike's diet, saying "I'm not going to let you blow your diet. You just lost three and a half pounds." Carl takes the meal and gives it to Samuel, ordering Mike a chicken breast on wheat toast. Mike is initially resistant, but ultimately thankful. As Carl concludes,

“There, you may never have sex without paying for it, but you’re still on your diet.” This statement is ironic given that Mike is ostensibly losing weight to become attractive to the opposite sex, as he had suggested in his OA monologue; being on his diet loses its value if he can have love only from prostitutes. Of course, this loneliness is not in Mike’s future; after one more failed attempt to ask out Molly, Mike does succeed in initiating a romantic relationship, presumably escaping both his pattern of overeating and his loneliness, but this connection happens without him losing any significant weight.

While Molly is generally more in control of her diet, the show does occasionally present her eating for emotional reasons linked to stalling of the romantic plot. In the first episode of season two (“Goin Fishin”), Molly is upset that Mike is not helping plan their wedding, instead going off fishing with his friends. In her stress, Molly indulges in some pancakes at breakfast with her sister and mother. When Joyce says, “Sweetie, I don’t think those pancakes are part of your diet,” Molly responds aggressively, saying “Do you want to reach over here and try to take them away from me?” (13.00). Joyce backs off. In the next moment, Molly says “Besides, this is my new diet. This is the I’m-mad-at-my-boyfriend-and-I’m-punishing-myself diet.” Victoria, unaware as usual, says, “Oh, that sounds a lot like your I-just-found-out-my-boyfriend’s-gay-so-I’m-eating-cake-and-hot-dogs diet.” Molly responds, “Same principle.” Joyce, however, offers her advice to Molly to ease up on the wedding planning and takes her plate away, saying “No, no hot dogs and no pancakes. You’re not eating this stress away.” Then she suggests going to her yoga class together; Molly declines, saying “Me in a leotard surrounded by skinny bendy women, I’d rather kill us all.” Finally Joyce offers an ultimatum: “You can either come with me and your sister or stay here and eat pancakes until you’re left with no self-esteem and no elbows.” In the end, Molly chooses to go the yoga class and the conflict of the episode is finally resolved when Mike comes back and demonstrates his dedication to their wedding planning.

At the beginning of “Mike Loves Lasagna,” Harry announces that he wants to start dating again. Molly is enthusiastic, but Mike warns him about romantic entanglements: “You’ve been doing really good on your diet, and you don’t want to end up broken-hearted and only leaving the house to chase down an ice cream truck.” (2.17) As predicted, when Harry is rejected by Victoria after asking her to a concert, he heads to the diner to go on a binge. Again the crisis

comes in the third act. Mike arrives quickly, canceling his orders and encouraging Harry. As he says, “Look, I know how you’re feeling, because I’ve been right where you are.” He continues, “You can’t give up or give in. And stuffing your emotions with food is not going to make them go away.” Using typical OA rhetoric, he says, “It will get better. It did for me. And if you keep working this program, it will for you.” When Samuel brings a piece of pie, Mike hugs Harry so he cannot eat it. Finally, the conflict is resolved when Victoria and Harry agree to go to the concert as friends.

In its representation of food as both the barrier and result of romantic stalling, *Mike & Molly* reproduces many of the ideas of Overeaters’ Anonymous which psychologizes the consumption of food by fat people, reading it as fundamentally linked to emotional problems rather than physiological needs. Moreover, this set-up suggests that, even though Mike and Molly both affirm their dedication to each other beyond weight loss, the shared battle against overeating is necessary to their emotional health and thus the success of their relationship. In fact, the series suggests, Mike must learn to displace his love of food on to Molly; when stuck in the process of writing their wedding vows, for example, Carl encourages him to think about the way he describes lasagna, which is quite poetic and affectionate. This works, allowing Mike to unlock a reserve of inspired language. As if he is resisting a tempting ex-girlfriend, though, Mike must take care to keep his love for food in bounds, and put Molly above it when necessary. Ultimately, both must exercise their self-control to keep food from getting between them.

In episodes that center around weight loss plots, however, *Mike & Molly* takes pains to suggest that their love trumps any weight struggles they have. A comparison between two episodes in the second season, “Mike Cheats” (2.9) and “The Dress” (2.20), suffices to show how the difficulties of weight loss pose an obstacle to their relationship, while eventually being overcome and even discarded as a prerequisite for love. In these episodes, Mike and then Molly, respectively, face challenges in their weight loss progress. In “Mike Cheats,” for example, Mike starts cheating on his diet, while also attempting to hide it from Molly. In “The Dress,” Molly is shocked to find that her wedding dress does not fit even though she is supposedly a mere six pounds from her wedding weight loss goal; to shed the final weight, Molly subsequently

embarks on a juice fast and extreme fitness regime. Both episodes end with a heart-to-heart between Mike and Molly that affirms their love independent of weight.

As the title of “Mike Cheats” suggests, the episode presents Mike’s failure to keep his diet and subsequent attempts to hide the fact as a betrayal of Molly. The episode plays with the analogy of food and sex, suggesting that eating and sleeping around are similar in their form and effects. While Molly is steadfast in her quest for weight loss, even dreaming up new healthy Thanksgiving recipes, Mike wavers in his dedication and is again intimidated by her success. This becomes clear in the beginning of the episode, which opens with an OA meeting. Both Molly and Harry, a friend of theirs who becomes important in the episode, share that they have lost weight. Mike, however, is resentful, remarking to Molly while Harry speaks, “One lousy pound, he’s acting like he won an Oscar.” Molly responds, “Well, buckle up, buddy; I’ve lost three and I’m going full-on Sally Field.” Harry continues to talk, listing all the delicious food temptations of Thanksgiving, while Mike coughs for him to finish. Thereafter Molly does her own proud share, saying, “Don’t you hate it when people come up here and tell you they lost a bunch of weight and had an amazing week? Well, let the hating begin, because this girl has lost not one, not two, but three pounds! If you want to throw something at me, fruit and vegetables only.” Molly’s triumphant story is illustrated in her body, which appears to have been extra-slimmed with shapewear that emphasizes her waist.

As the meeting continues, Mike slips out to sneak a small candy bar. Harry discovers him and the action of the episode’s narrative is set in motion—Mike continues to cheat on his diet while attempting to hide it from Molly with the help of Harry. Harry appoints himself as Mike’s sponsor and moral guide, offering to let him “hitch [his] wagon of weakness to [Harry’s] tow truck of willpower.” Throughout the episode, Harry tries to keep Mike from overindulging using the typical rhetoric of overeating as addiction, saying, for example, “one candy bar is too much, and a thousand is not enough” (2.07). While Harry presents himself as a triumphant loser of weight, he is also a comic figure. It is clear that despite presenting his seven-pound weight loss of the year as “hard-fought and well-earned,” Harry has not achieved everything in life. The joyful and triumphant nature of his share is mitigated, for example, by the confession of his lonely Thanksgiving plans, which include only a “holiday Lean Cuisine flavored by [his] salty

tears.” Harry thus offers his services as moral counselor in exchange for a spot at Mike and Molly’s holiday dinner.

Ultimately, what reveals Mike’s deception to the others is not being caught in the act of eating, but actually the opposite—insisting he is not hungry. It seems that for Mike, as a large man known to eat a lot, saying he is not hungry is the most suspicious thing he could do. This becomes clear in the second beat, when Mike and Carl are having breakfast in the diner the day after the OA meeting. Mike says he is not hungry, opting only for herbal tea, while Carl and waiter Samuel express their skepticism. Mike insists that he is cutting down on food now so that he can enjoy more on Thanksgiving. In the next moment, however, Carl gets hit in the head with a button that has popped off Mike’s shirt, betraying his actual weight gain and contradicting his story of restraint. This moment highlights the way the fat body often acts as a “virtual confessor,” as Samantha Murray describes, telling the tale of its own production independent of the person’s own story of him- or herself.

A similar scene happens when Mike returns to Molly’s house after eating macaroni and cheese at his mother’s house. He again insists he is not hungry because he had a “late, light, sensible lunch.” Joyce is immediately surprised, saying “Not hungry? I’ve heard him say ‘not,’ and I’ve heard him say ‘hungry,’ but never the two together.” Victoria comes up with a theory that Mike may be getting fed somewhere else, like their old cat Buster, who was being fed by their neighbors. As Victoria says, “he’d come home late and walk right past his food dish.” Eventually they had to tie a bell around his neck to track him. Molly rejects the comparison, but when confronted with more suspicious behavior, eventually concludes the beat by saying, “I may actually have to put a bell around his neck.”

The truth is, of course, that Mike is being fed somewhere else—his mother’s house. Faced with the weight gain that makes his clothing no longer fit, Mike returns to his mother’s house to get the bigger clothing she has kept. His mother is unsurprised that he has regained the weight, saying, “Well, it didn’t take a Magic 8 ball to know that you were gonna put those pounds back on and come a-knocking for your chubby duds” (5.25). In fact, Peggy seems to relish the fact that Mike has regained the weight he has lost, as it gives her a chance to take a shot at Molly. When Mike insists that he will lose the weight again before Molly finds out, Peggy takes the

opportunity to contrast their ways of loving him, saying “I for one love you for who you are, unlike your fiancée, who seems hell-bent on turning you into a Chippendale dancer.” This is a ridiculous exaggeration, of course, and Mike takes exception to Peggy’s bad-mouthing of Molly. At the same time, he is happy to have her cure his case of the “hungry-grumblies” with some macaroni and cheese. This scene shows how *Mike & Molly* reproduces the common idea of mother blame in discussions of fatness that ascribe children’s size to their mother’s expression of love through food that is tasty, if ultimately unhealthy. Peggy, who has been resistant to Mike’s relationship with Molly all along, takes the opportunity to denounce the “wheat toast and lemon slices” Molly is feeding Mike and cook for him again.

After Mike panics about his consumption of his mother’s macaroni and cheese, Harry takes Mike to an emergency OA meeting, one for gay men where they will not be recognized. This homosexual setting emphasizes the dangerous position Mike is in, both in relation to his masculinity and his ability to salvage the heterosexual relationship with Molly. Instead of opening up about his problem, though, Mike refuses to share at the meeting, and instead takes them to the drive-through of a fast food restaurant, saying he will be “back on his diet” the next day. Harry is anxious about the temptation the drive-through poses, saying “the siren smell of fries is like a salty whorehouse,” a comment that again illustrates the episode’s equation of diet deviation with sexual deviance. When Mike continues, Harry tries to prevent him from ordering, even throwing himself on the hood of the car, but to no avail.

The reason for Mike’s diet “infidelity” remains mysterious. When Mike confesses to Carl on Thanksgiving Day that he has fallen back into old habits, such as eating in the shower, Carl says, “But I thought things were going so good.” Mike responds that they are, and that he’s “never been happier.” Paradoxically, Mike believes he has gained weight because his happiness has caused him to “let [his] guard down.” Paradoxically, weight gain here is connected to both the loneliness of being single before Molly and the comfort of being in a relationship with Molly. These different explanations reflect common threads in the public perception of fatness; *Mike & Molly*, it seems, chooses whichever one is convenient for the narrative at a particular point.

More than comfort in his new relationship, however, the episode subtly suggests that Mike is returning to overeating precisely because his insecurity is laid bare in their common quest for

weight loss and he is intimidated by Molly's success. As he says, "She lost three pounds last week, and all I lost was a NutterButter I dropped in the shower." The resulting guilt from not living up to her standards and concealing it fuels yet more overeating. When Mike finally confesses to Molly, however, she admits that she already knows. Like the confessions that Murray describes, it is not about actually revealing information but rather about taking ownership of his own "transgressions"; Molly already knows what the content of the confession will be. Like Carl, who is literally hit in the head by the evidence of Mike's weight gain, Molly says she realized Mike has gained weight because she spends every day with him, sleeps with him, and puts her arms around him. The intimate relationship to his body tells her more about its changes than he assumes. Mike is contrite, saying "I'm sorry to disappoint you." (16.09) Molly, who already knows that he has been eating in secret, says she was only disappointed by the fact that he did not feel comfortable telling her about it. Mike responds, "I didn't want you to think that I was weak, especially since you're doing so good..." Molly responds that while she is doing well "for now," she does not necessarily expect her success to be long-lasting. Moreover, she argues that part of being in a relationship is supporting each other through good and bad times: "You know, one of the perks to this whole relationship thing is that you get to tell the other person everything. You wanna know the best part? I never stop loving you." Mike and Molly then leave their Thanksgiving celebration to go to an OA meeting, breezing past his mother as she offers them food in vain; the episode ends with Mike standing up to speak and thus affirming his rededication to the weight loss process. In this way, the episode's plot returns to the mean, as expected; Mike chooses Molly and OA over his mother and overeating, and both return to their weight loss path. Succeeding at weight loss is apparently not essential to their romantic life, but attempting weight loss is.

"The Dress" takes place three weeks and three episodes before Mike and Molly's wedding in the finale of season two. It begins, aptly, with Molly at the bridal shop for her final fitting. Molly is already visibly stressed and irritable. As she puts on her dress, Joyce and Victoria chat about the upcoming wedding, reminding us that they previously believed the event to be unlikely. Joyce says, "Until about two years ago, I'd have bet cash money that she was going to be one of those cranky old spinsters in sensible shoes and a boy's haircut." Riffing on the

suggestion, Victoria adds, “Living in a mobile home with stacks of old *Redbook* magazines and twenty-five uncaged parakeets...” and Joyce follows up, “We’d go visit her on the weekends and walk through her gauntlet of wind chimes and dreamcatchers, ignoring the health department citations and her prominent chin whiskers.” In this very feminine setting, Joyce and Victoria remind the viewer that Molly could have had a different future, one marked by a lonely, masculine existence with a “boy’s haircut” and “chin whiskers,” as a lesbian or spinster. This serves to align the viewer with the narrative arc ending in heteronormative romantic resolution i.e. marriage. Right after these comments, Molly reappears, resplendent in her wedding gown. Everything appears to be going perfectly, until the shop assistant finds herself unable to pull up the zipper. When she suggests that they might have to let out the dress “just a smidge,” Molly rejects the suggestions, saying “No you don’t. I am just a few pounds from my target weight and when I set a goal for myself, I, I reach it!” When Joyce expresses her concern with this state of affairs three weeks before the wedding, Molly holds fast, saying she will drop the last six pounds “easy peasy lemon squeezy.” Joyce and Victoria encourage her, rather than face her wrath.

From this point, Molly embarks on an extreme weight loss regime to reach her goal, waking early and forcing a reluctant Mike along to exercise with her. To help her along, Joyce and Victoria remove tempting foods from the kitchen, while Joyce recalls an earlier time Molly “starved herself” in a similar fashion, even eating avocado face scrub in desperation. Joyce’s uncouth boyfriend Vince, for his part, suggests the “weight loss miracle known as horse laxatives.” Mike is unhappy with the new fitness regime, griping to Carl that she is driving him crazy all for the sake of one day. Carl tries to put it in perspective with a typically sexist analogy, saying a wedding day for a woman is like the first day seeing “a real live naked boob” for a man. Confirming Carl’s theory, Mike remembers the exact day of his first breast sighting, nostalgically recounting the event in detail.

Molly continues to develop into a “bridezilla” as she desperately tries to slim down. After about a third of the episode, Molly weighs herself in the bathroom, removing all her jewelry for the best result and exhorting the scale to “stop” in an ever more panicked tone until she cries out “son of a bitch” and kicks the scale away. Then the camera switches to downstairs, where Joyce and Vince are on the couch. From off, we hear Molly yelling “Liar!” and Joyce says, “Uh oh,

she's arguing with the scale again." Soon thereafter, Molly runs down the stairs to ask her mother if she put a banana in the smoothie she made for her, which she had expressly forbidden. Joyce affirms her innocence, trying to suggest Vince ate the bananas. When he fails to back her up, she tries to minimize the damage, saying that one banana will not hurt. Molly flips out, saying "You might as well fill the blender with fudge. You're all trying to sabotage me." While Molly storms off to prepare for a spinning class, Joyce exhorts Mike to go with her, exclaiming "If she looks in the trash and sees two banana peels, we're all dead!"

At the spinning class, though, another surprise is waiting when Molly runs into a woman from OA who has successfully lost a large amount of weight, fifty-two pounds, in three years. Molly is visibly impressed, congratulating her "Wow, you set a goal and you hit it, bully for you." This wording recalls her earlier statement in the bridal shop. The situation worsens for Molly when Allison offers her advice saying, "The key is not to try to lose it too quick" and "Those crash diets never work. You try starving yourself, you just end up gaining more weight." Upset but trying to hide it, Molly excuses herself to go back to the car, where she searches for a hidden snack and finds candy bars in Mike's flashlight, but ultimately rejects the impulse to indulge. In this moment, it seems like Molly may be conquering her emotional turmoil, but all that changes when a thin, beautiful woman steps out of the fancy car next to hers, hitting the door of Mike's car. When the woman reacts carelessly, Molly becomes upset, but she becomes especially enraged when the woman condescendingly tells her that the parking lot is "for gym members only" and offers her five dollars to "buy a slice of pizza" and call it even. This woman represents the exclusion of fat people from fitness culture even as they are encouraged to lose weight. Molly, in response to the condescending offer, appears to take the deal for a second before turning and kicking off the side mirror on the woman's car. In this moment, the two cars act metonymically for the contrast between their two bodies. Molly's car is older and beat-up, while the woman's car is shiny and new. Molly, clearly upset that the ideal of thin perfection is so far out of reach, takes it out on the car as a representation of the woman's body. She is eventually arrested and taken away as the act closes.

As the final act opens, Molly is in jail talking to two women in her holding cell. While one of the women recounts her extremely violent behavior (biting off a woman's ear, for example,

because she gave her a bad manicure) and drug use (angel dust), Molly's transgressions pale in comparison, a contrast that produces comedy. When the woman asks her what her "poison" of choice is, she says "Well, I've been on kind of a crazy juice fast and I'm not going to lie to you, I'm tweaking pretty bad." This comparison is humorous, but it is also notable in its linking of "health" food with drugs and addiction. Usually, after all, it is "bad" food that is equated with a harmfully addictive drug, as the OA paradigm and previous episodes like "Mike Cheats" suggest. While the viewer laughs because this comparison is ridiculous, the other woman responds with understanding, saying, "I am never so mean as when I'm hungry. I did four days of Jenny Craig —lit my boyfriend's legs on fire!" Despite the horror of this confession, Molly asks her whether she had success on Jenny Craig, showing just how desperate she is for solutions. Molly continues to confess about her situation, emphasizing again her dogged determination to reach her goal: "I just don't want to give up. I set a goal for myself and, my God, I want to meet it." After a moment of reflection, she adds, "...I mean, without killing somebody."

When Mike finally bails Molly out and takes her home, she goes upstairs while he expresses his shock at her change of character—"I thought I was marrying a sweet little schoolteacher, not some car-kicking lunatic!" In response, Joyce takes him in the kitchen and gives him a serious pep talk. She tells him that Molly does this with every major goal she sets for herself. Now that he is marrying her, it is his turn to talk to Molly. In the meantime, Molly is dismayed to weigh herself and find that she has actually gained weight. When Mike comes in to bring her tea and check in, though, she apologizes for her erratic and aggressive behavior, saying "I'm sorry to put you through all this. I just...I want to look perfect for you on our wedding day," (17.50). Mike reassures her that she always looks perfect to him, concluding "Listen, you don't have to squeeze into some wedding dress to look perfect to me. You're already the most beautiful woman in the world." Like the final heart-to-heart "Mike Cheats," this conversation affirms their love beyond the scale, mending the damage done to their relationship by the challenge of losing weight. Molly is reassured, yet still tells him she plans to go jogging in the morning, exclaiming "I am getting married in three weeks and I'm going to fit in that freaking wedding dress if it kills us all!" Her dedication to her goal is unwavering, even if she has become more reflective about it.

In this episode, *Mike & Molly* shows the destructive path that can be taken when driven by an external motivation, such as an abstract weight loss goal. The pressure to lose the weight and compete with others who are or have become thin almost drives Molly back into a cycle of compulsive eating, as the scene in the car with the candy bar attests. Molly's push to attain rapid weight loss is ultimately self-destructive. Yet the episode, of course, does not question weight loss in its ends, but rather its means. The "slow and steady" approach of Allison is endorsed over Molly's extreme fitness regime, but Molly is not encouraged to give up weight loss as a goal in itself. Instead, this plot again returns to the mean; Molly's foray into extreme crash dieting is ended, but their quest for self-improvement goes on. In true sitcom fashion, the end of the episode resolves the conflict between the two so that the issue may be quickly forgotten. When Mike and Molly marry in the season finale, Molly has no trouble fitting in the dress; presumably she has either reached her weight loss goal or had the dress let out to fit her body, but the episode does not tell us which. Her previous struggle is not referred to at all. In this way, the series quietly delivers Molly to her goal of being a beautiful bride at the wedding without indicating how it was done. In this case, the weight loss plot reveals itself to be more important as a narrative arc on the level of the individual episode, rather than a teleological drive over the whole season, even as weight loss simmers under the surface throughout the series.

In its plots and resolutions, *Mike & Molly* demonstrates its contradictory attitudes toward fatness. Yet the case of *Mike & Molly* also demonstrates the fraught relationship between actors' and characters' bodies, particularly in the way that Melissa McCarthy and Billy Gardell are discussed in popular media. The same sitcom format that allows them to remain fat also opens them up to critique from "concern trolls" who worry that their existence on television "promotes" fatness or provides viewers with negative role models. For Melissa McCarthy, there were even rumors published by the *National Enquirer* that the producers "forbid" her from losing weight. While McCarthy discredited these rumors, she has also gone on record as being relaxed about her weight. In a 2014 interview with *Rolling Stone*, McCarthy is reported as saying "I could eat healthier, I could drink less. I should be learning another language and working out more, but I'm just always saying, 'Ah, I could get hit by a bus tomorrow.'" This is a marked contrast to her character Molly's attitude toward mortality. While Molly buys into the idea that

death is primarily a matter of individual will—preventable with the right healthy habits—McCarthy stresses the contingency of death and the necessity of asserting one's own desires in response. Billy Gardell, for his part, reports that the network has been flexible in responding to the fluctuating weight of their actors, neither suggesting weight loss nor “requiring” continued fatness. In an interview with the *Detroit Metro Times*, for example, he says that the producers told him: ‘As far as your health goes, we’ll hire you a trainer if you want, but we just want you to be healthy. If you lose a little weight we’ll write it into the show, and if you gain a little weight we’ll write it into the show. We want it to be a very organic experience.’” (qtd. McFarlin). If Gardell is to be believed, then, *Mike & Molly*, despite ostensibly promoting weight loss in the show, actually resists the one-way teleology of weight loss by giving narrative room for movements both up and down the weight scale and taking its cues from the actors rather than forcing their bodies to conform to outside narrative demands.

This is not to say that Gardell and McCarthy are freed from the pressures of losing weight, but rather that these pressures are more likely linked to larger societal forces rather than narrative demands. In fact, both actors are reported to have lost weight recently. In press reports, Gardell also speaks in the language of the weight loss makeover, saying that he had “75 pounds to go” last year despite having already reportedly lost nearly 25% of his body weight (Daly). McCarthy has also lost a significant amount of weight (speculated to be 75 pounds) over the past two years, and is praised in the online celebrity press using typical makeover rhetoric; *In Touch Weekly* reports she was “flaunting” her weight loss at the recent Golden Globes (Sitzer), and others, like *Hollywood Life*, speak of her “unveiling” her weight loss and compare her current body to past versions with “before” and “after” pictures (Travis). When questioned about it herself, though, McCarthy reports that her weight loss was the paradoxical result of no longer worrying about her size: “I stopped over-analyzing, over-thinking, over-doing anything. I kinda went back to when I was pregnant and I just stopped constantly being worried about it and I think there’s something to kinda loosening up and not being so nervous and rigid about it that, bizarrely, has worked.” (CBS *This Morning*, qtd. Heller). McCarthy’s position here may make her problematic as a role model for fat acceptance, putting her on par with the other “Roseanne Benedict Arnolds” of the celebrity world who preach body love but nevertheless treat weight loss as desirable, but her

advocacy for less obsessive reactions to weight is nevertheless in marked contrast to those other stars who either endorse weight loss products or develop their own wellness brands (such as Gwyneth Paltrow's Goop) in which thinness is often an explicit goal and to be achieved through a specific regimen.

In the end, *Mike & Molly*, like its stars, takes an ambivalent stance on makeover culture. On the surface, weight loss is promoted; Mike and Molly's attempt to lose weight make them likeable and relatable to audiences—who are, after all, likely to be fat and possibly trying to lose weight themselves—and also allow them to appear as autonomous and virtuous despite their stigmatized embodiment. At the same time, the resistance of McCarthy's and Gardell's material bodies to the pressure of becoming thin, and the willingness of the producers to allow them to stay fat, contradicts the ostensibly pro-makeover stance of the show. Ultimately, this contradiction is necessary to sustain the demands of the market—to produce the fat body as a marketable commodity while also highlighting the popular theme of weight loss.

Miranda

Like *Mike & Molly*, the BBC sitcom *Miranda* (2009-2013) adopts a traditional sitcom style. *Miranda*, created by and starring Miranda Hart as an exaggerated version of herself, features some less traditional elements, such as frequently breaking the fourth wall to address the audience, but these elements do not mark *Miranda* as particularly innovative in terms of aesthetics. Unlike more well-known British sitcoms of the 21st century like *The Office* (2001-2003) and *Peep Show* (2003-), *Miranda* does not utilize cringe humor or single-camera, mockumentary style, but rather recalls the more campy fun, slapstick, and wordplay of older multi-camera series such as *Are You Being Served?* (1972-1985) or, as Hart herself claims, the comedy of 1960s/1970s duo Morecambe & Wise. While *Miranda* consistently gets into embarrassing situations, the sitcom remains relatively light-hearted.

Praise or critique of the show often hinges on the assessment of its style. As Mark Lawson notes in *The Guardian*, complaints about *Miranda* “mainly involve the alleged retro nature of her comedy.” The use of comedic techniques like catchphrases and slapstick are

particularly cited to present *Miranda* as crude and silly comedy. Her fans, however, argue that “each of the old-fashioned elements – prat-falls, signature sayings and love story – is handled with panache” and that Hart “is echoing TV comedy’s past not from conservatism or laziness but a scholastic fascination with the conventions” (Lawson). Others, like Sally Newall in *The Independent*, also defend *Miranda* for its difference from its contemporaries. As Newall argues, “[t]he comedy my generation grew up with was usually subtler, but often with a darker, complex edge. In contrast, *Miranda* is the television equivalent of going home for Christmas and binning off a night out on the town in favour of staying in with your family and playing charades in front of the fire. It's safe, warm, laughs are guaranteed, and the most shocking thing likely to happen is your great aunt Ann having to act out *Free Willy*.⁷”

In the same article, however, Fiona Sturges offers a countering view. Citing the fact that *Miranda*’s viewership is (or is assumed to be) mostly female, Sturges takes issue with the implicit suggestion that *Miranda* is an “everywoman”—“a woman with whom the rest of us with ovaries can identify” (Sturges). Sturges’ critique rests on the worry that in painting *Miranda* as the quintessential woman, the show presents a problematic image of femininity. As she writes, “Playing the fool is one thing but, much as Bridget Jones inadvertently told a generation of men that women were the calorie-counting, marriage-obsessed numbskulls they’d always suspected, so Hart’s character conveys the message that, deep down, we women are all neurotic, incapable of behaving like sentient grown-ups and deserving of pity.” As a result, Sturges concludes, “the idea that *Miranda* might be viewed as speaking for all women makes me want to weep.” While Sturges’ concern that one story of womanhood would overwhelm others might be pertinent, it is unlikely that *Miranda* Hart herself should be faulted for this, rather than the general dearth of woman-centered narratives on television.

One thing none of these articles seem to mention is Hart’s embodiment as a tall and fat woman, although this is certainly relevant to the sitcom’s humor and its plots. It is *Miranda*’s embodiment, in fact, that marks her apart from other women in the series. Perhaps, then, this explains part of Sturges’ hesitation to embrace *Miranda* as an “everywoman.” Much of the humor on *Miranda* derives from the bodily performance of Hart herself. Hart plays an exaggerated version of herself in the semi-autobiographical series, highlighting her physical and social

awkwardness. In addition to being socially inept, the character Miranda is physically clumsy, often falling over things for laughs at the precise moments when she attempts to look elegant. Her lack of sophistication becomes evident in other bodily ways, too—when, for example, she accidentally burps or farts in conversation, or giggles uncontrollably when potentially sexual topics are mentioned. In addition, her body often becomes exposed in embarrassing ways when she is in public—her pants fall down, her clothes rip off, etc. All of these attributes, of course, could belong to any comedic character. Yet Hart’s particular brand of physical comedy relies heavily on her embodiment as a tall and fat woman—when, for example, she is forced to sit on a very small chair and gets stuck. Likewise, throughout the series Miranda is contrasted with women who are much shorter and thinner than she is, including her mother, her best friend Stevie and her boarding school friends, of whom Tilly is the most prominent. These women are not only smaller and more conventionally feminine, contrasted visually with Miranda’s stature, but also more ambitious and invested in social status. Unlike these women, Miranda is goofy, unambitious, and relishes eating with an appetite that outpaces women and men alike.

More importantly, Miranda’s embodiment is presented as a barrier to her successful performance of femininity and a visual representation of her failure to “fit” the role that her society and family demand of her. It is a recurring gag in the series, in fact, that Miranda is often not recognized as a woman at all. In the very first episode, she is addressed as “sir” by a man who delivers a package. Miranda’s height and fatness combine to masculinize her, creating an apparent conflict between her gender and her size. This paradox is evident in her boarding school nickname, “Queen Kong,” which combines a reference to the monstrous male gorilla King Kong with the royal female moniker. Her boarding school friends, led by Tilly, continue to use this nickname although Miranda dislikes it. While Miranda sees herself as a woman, she can never be truly seen as a full woman by the people around her, including the other women she counts as friends.

Like other traditional sitcoms, Miranda relies on cyclical plots that reformulate ongoing conflicts. One recurring pattern, for example, is the conflict between Miranda and her mother, whose expectations are often at odds. Miranda’s mother, Penny, wishes Miranda to be a respectable middle-class woman with posh pretensions and a successful husband, but she fails on

all of these counts; instead, she is content to pursue a low-stakes career as the owner of a joke shop and bumble her way through romantic encounters, never quite able to establish a relationship with her handsome love interest, Gary, despite his attraction to her. Penny, unsatisfied with this state of affairs, pressures Miranda to improve herself, that is, to lose weight, pursue a high-status job, and find a man to marry, preferably one with noble title. Instead of wanting these things for Miranda's sake, however, it is clear that Penny only desires Miranda to achieve these goals in order to maintain an image of respectability and upward mobility in the eyes of the public and her equally pretentious friends. In this way, Penny's character skewers the pretensions and obsessions of the posh upper middle class, who adopt posh practices and superficial friendships just to compete with each other. Miranda generally resists her mother's attempts to reform her, but finds herself unable to escape entirely, roped into attending events such as absurd literary-themed fancy dress matchmaking parties (e.g. *Last of the Mohicans*) or going on dates with boorish yet aristocratic men. Predictably, these efforts are unsuccessful; in the end, Miranda inevitably embarrasses herself or rejects her unsuitable suitors.

While Hart plays with her embodiment for laughs, the series is also reflexive about how television portrays and attempts to make over women who fall outside the mold of middle-class respectability in body or behavior. This is clear from the beginning of the series. In the very first episode, Miranda finds herself with the prospect of a date and addresses the audience directly while she thinks about performing a makeover on herself. Referring to the hosts of the British fashion makeover show *What Not to Wear* (2001-2007), Miranda says, "I will Trinny and Susannah myself." In the next moment, though, she rejects their methods, saying "I couldn't do it with them because I'd have to punch them in the face." She confesses that she hates those programs, and describes their fundamental premise as "I'm OK, You're Obese." In this parody of a makeover title, Hart exposes the implicit hierarchy of the makeover show that places experts above participants and creates a pretext for particular women to be shamed by others. In this monologue, Miranda then goes on to imagine what she would do if she had her own makeover program. The show cuts to a clip from this imagined show. In the style of *What Not to Wear*, Miranda, camera crew in tow, ambushes a woman on the street to judge her fashion. The woman

is wearing a hooded top and hoop earrings, typical class markers of the working class “chav.”

Miranda engages the anonymous woman in the following dialogue:

Miranda: Right, let’s have a look at you. Well, I wouldn’t wear that top, but you look comfortable. Are you?

Woman: Yeah.

Miranda: Do you like it?

Woman: Yeah.

Miranda: Do you care that others might not like it?

Woman: No.

Miranda: Brilliant, then wear that then. Bye!

At this point, Miranda and the camera crew retreat to leave the woman to her business. This clip is funny because it subverts the paradigms of makeover shows which necessarily claim to be able to identify bodily problems that must be fixed. While Miranda’s show begins with the same typical gestures—finding a person on the street and passing judgment on their style—“I wouldn’t wear that top”—it quickly shifts to a different mode, asking the woman herself how she feels about it rather than using the host’s opinion to justify an intervention. The message is simple: If you feel comfortable and you like what you are wearing, then that is what you should wear. The experience of the body for itself trumps its appearance for others. The makeover is abandoned before it even begins.

While Miranda implicitly abandons the quest to make over others, she does not give up the makeover for herself. After imagining her own (anti-)makeover show, Miranda goes out to look for a new outfit for her date. Speaking to the camera, Miranda updates the viewer on her unsuccessful quest for a new outfit at Big & Long, criticizing the lack of options in shops in the meantime when she asks rhetorically, “Just because people are bigger or taller than average, why do we have to shop in patronizingly named places? What’s next? Lanky & Sweaty? Swallowers & Amazonians? Huge & Gross?” To find clothes in one’s own size, she suggests, one must submit to names that either mark the body as disgusting or freakish. Shortly after this comment, Miranda stumbles upon a shop that appears to cater to people of her size, advertising chest size to 48 inches and shoes to size 14. Of course, what the viewer quickly realizes and Miranda does not

is that the shop, called “Transformers,” is for male transvestites. The dramatic irony continues as Miranda is flattered by the shopkeeper, who compliments her “natural” femininity and “ladylike curves.” Not realizing she is now being read as a feminine man rather than a masculine woman, Miranda relishes his attention and quickly submits herself to his advice so that she can get the “really feminine” look that she desires.

In the next beat, when she emerges in the next scene in her “after” look, though, her appearance is predictably over-the-top and ridiculous—a sparkly purple dress with dramatic earrings and make-up, even false eyelashes. Still, Miranda does not realize what has happened when a customer in the shop tells her she is “gorgeous” and “feminine,” that she could even “pass.” Again, Miranda is flattered, but Stevie bursts her bubble outright the moment she sees her, calling loudly across the shop, “Miranda, why are you dressed as a transvestite?” The customer, embarrassed at his mistake, rushes away, while Miranda expresses her frustration that she has again failed to signal her femininity. As she points out, she cannot seem to win: “I wear normal, everyday clothes, I get called ‘sir’—I actually make an effort and I’m a transvestite!” (21.10). In this moment, Hart hits upon a paradox of femininity—putting both too little effort and too much effort into one’s feminine appearance is taboo. Body enhancement is implicitly encouraged, but also condemned if it is too apparent. The trick is to produce a version of the self that, while enhanced, appears “natural.” Unfortunately for Miranda, because her embodiment falls out of the “natural” bounds, she has trouble being read as feminine no matter what she is wearing. In the play back and forth between “masculine woman” and “feminine man,” the episode demonstrates how ambivalent her embodiment can be. While Miranda the character is frustrated with this blurring of categories, Hart the comedian appears to enjoy playing with them.

While Miranda’s appearance is a constant topic of the series and target of her mother’s critique, there is only one episode in the entire series in which Miranda pursues weight loss, “It Was Panning” (3.1). At this point, Miranda appears to be in a more desperate state than usual. In her updates, delivered as always at the beginning of the episode directly to the viewer, she announces that she has put her romantic aspirations with Gary on hold and has been forced to close her shop. Frustrated with Miranda’s lack of commitment to the business and her ill-

conceived idea to order a large number of maracas, Stevie has quit working in the shop and their friendship is suffering. In this context, Miranda discusses her mother's desire to see her lose weight: "Now Mum is on a mission to get me trim and fit. It's not working." (0.50). To demonstrate its lack of effect, Miranda offers the viewer a mini-mince pie and immediately retracts it, crying "mine!" As usual, Penny's attempt to get Miranda to lose weight is motivated by social envy, which becomes evident in the following scene. In a typical gesture, Penny appears at her daughter's celebration to read from a "ghastly Christmas letter" she has received from the aristocratic Lumley-Kendalls, who report, among other things, that their daughter has "lost three stone doing charity fun runs and marries a duke in the spring." Penny caps it off with a declaration that the letter is "So smug!" (4.15). Here weight loss is clearly linked to successful heterosexual union and upward class mobility, with a dash of charity thrown in. Penny laments that in the face of such good news all she can report of Miranda is that she is a "fat temp."

Thus far, the plot of the episode is hardly extraordinary; Miranda is used to criticism from her mother. Yet this episode, like the first episode of the series, goes beyond the satire of Miranda's family to also reflect on the policing of fat bodies on a larger societal level through television. The main premise of the episode is reflected in the title, "It was Panning." As Miranda and her friends sit down in front of the TV, they catch the tail end of a journalistic report on obesity. As the journalist walks through a park, he reports the alarmist factoid that "up to 65% of us could now be considered obese." A second later, he signs off, walking away as the camera pans across the park, revealing Miranda sitting on a bench and eating. Shocked, all of those watching lean in to the TV. Tilly quickly takes it as an opportunity to mock Miranda, calling her "Obese Wen-Kenobese" while Miranda insists it was "just panning"—that her appearance in the report is incidental.

In its staging of this moment, the episode recalls Charlotte Cooper's discussion of the "headless fatties" that proliferate in news reports about obesity. Miranda's image here is the photographer's "money shot: a cheaply-dressed, underclass fat woman tucking into some fast food on the street" (Cooper). These images, as Cooper argues, cannot be read objectively; instead, they "reek of a surveillance culture with which fat people—whose bodies are policed by glares, and disapproving looks – are all too familiar." What is particularly disturbing about it is

the pervasiveness of this surveillance: “It really is true that you could be anywhere, walking down the street, on your way back from the shops, waiting for a bus, down at the gym, at the canteen, looking gorgeous or looking crappy, and an image of your disgustingness could be produced and reproduced outside of your control, perhaps without you ever knowing it.” Cooper, herself British and fat, wonders how a person would react to seeing themselves in such a report:

I wonder what it must feel like to open the paper one morning, or click onto a news site, and see a headless version of yourself there, against a headline decrying people who look like you. I imagine that it would be hard for a person with high self-esteem to take, let alone some random fatty, who’s grown up with the depressingly familiar round of self-hatred, body-disgust and shame. (Cooper)

This episode of *Miranda* dares to explore the answer to the same question.

Of course, Miranda’s image here is not actually “headless.” This fact is significant, although it does not make it any less an example of the “headless fatty” phenomenon, but rather confirms the contentions Cooper makes about these images and their dehumanization. As Cooper writes, the lack of a head in the image of a fat person ensures that their thoughts and feelings are cropped out; instead, there is only the body, which becomes entirely symbolic of cultural anxiety. But Miranda cannot remain a nameless, faceless person to the viewer; she is inherently humanized by her narrating position at the heart of the show. Therefore the program invokes the headless fatty while keeping Miranda’s head visible; this allows us as viewers not only to recognize her more easily, but to recognize her as a human. In a way, this inclusion reminds us also that all the other “headless fatties” out there are also people, people who were not consulted about their experience in their bodies, but rather diagnosed from a distance and publicized for the world to see without their permission.

While Miranda acts as if she is not bothered by the report, insisting it was “panning,” the other people in her environment do not agree that her eating and weight are in order. Her mother, of course, is outraged that her daughter would be part of a “televisual obesity campaign,” declaring that “Christmas is confiscated” until Miranda has “detoxed and lost weight” for the Lumley-Kendalls’ ridiculously-titled holiday event, the “cashmere sweater-themed Christingle Pringle Mingle.” It is easy to see why Penny would be horrified; Miranda’s inclusion in such a

report makes her the “cheaply-dressed underclass fat woman” Cooper identifies, and broadcasts her downward mobility to the world, including the rival Lumley-Kendalls. After seeing the report and learning that Miranda is losing her shop, Penny even downgrades her description of her daughter from “fat temp” to “obese destitute.”

Yet Penny is not the only one suggesting that Miranda has a problem with her weight and food. After Miranda waxes poetic on the joys of Christmas food, Stevie ends up taking Penny’s point of view as well, saying “You should detox; you’re obsessed with food!” Gary even offers to make her healthy food, like a “sugar-free beetroot cake.” When Miranda adamantly rejects such efforts, though, he does not push the issue, instead bringing over a pizza and horror movie to Miranda’s place. When the lights go out, however, Penny arrives, just in time to yell “Put the pizza down!” and, in a twist on the famous line from *The Sixth Sense*, say “I smell fat people.” In this way, Penny becomes part of the surveillance apparatus that tells Miranda to reform her body. Penny also propels the plot by forcing Miranda to attend Eaters’ Anonymous in exchange for her help to recover her shop.

Like its parody of the media representation of fatness, “It Was Panning” also easily satirizes the rhetoric of weight loss programs. The Eaters’ Anonymous program as it is presented in the episode appears to be nothing more than a few platitudes strung together with bits of rather obvious nutritional advice. This advice relies on discrete moralistic categories of “good” and “bad” food, which become apparent when the EA leader starts the meeting (post-weighing) with a scenario to help the participants through the holiday season. She reveals a table with food—the obviously “bad” foods on the left (pastries, pies, etc.) and clearly “good” green foods on the right—and asks the participants to identify which side looks “more delicious.” Predictably, everyone says “to the left,” pointing to the pastries. The teacher asks them to try again, but they repeat their answer. Miranda quotes Beyoncé, singing “to the left” and the subsequent line “you must not know ‘bout me” from her song “Irreplaceable.” She then explains to the leader “I think we’re always going to say to the left, and I’ll tell you why: it’s got pies on it.” Ignoring this feedback, the leader continues to give one of her “mantras”: “If you ever feel like a cake, stop yourself, have a carrot.” This mantra combines obvious nutritional advice with a patronizing tone to suggest that if only fat people knew which foods were good and which were bad, they would

make the “right” decision. Miranda speaks for all the skeptics when she again employs her singsongy voice to ask the leader “Are you out of your tiny mind?” Miranda’s interjections continually undermine the authority of the leader. Exasperated, she says “Look, I’m just trying to help you help yourself.” Asked to repeat, she simply says “help yourself,” in response to which everyone immediately gets up and moves toward the buffet table. At this point, the mutiny is complete. The fatties converge on the sweets, and the meeting erupts into chaos. Miranda takes the opportunity to run away, pursued by both her mother and the EA leader, who screams “Catch the fatty!” after her. Like the “Fat Fighters” sketches in *Little Britain* discussed previously, this scene satirizes the patronizing “concern trolling” of organized weight loss programs. Unlike *Little Britain*, however, in which the hypocrisies of the group leader generate its comedic effect and the participants rarely rebel, *Miranda* clearly revels here in Miranda’s ability to reveal the hollowness of the weight loss program and instigate her fellow “fatties” to revolt.

While this episode easily skewers news reporting on obesity and weight loss programs, though, its fat politics remain ambivalent, primarily because Miranda consistently denies that she is fat. Instead, she insists that “it was panning” and she therefore does not need to lose weight. Miranda’s reluctance to own her weight is evident in the weigh-in at the beginning of the Eaters’ Anonymous meeting (20.36). Before she steps on the scale, Miranda asks the leader of the group to factor in a number of things: “Just a couple of notices pre the weighing. Firstly, I’ve got a very heavy jean on. Secondly, my breasts are quite heavy. I know that because I once weighed them to see how much they’d cost to post. Also, could we factor in that at least 10% will be wind?” Giving this list of ridiculous disclaimers, Miranda appears to be looking for any reason to explain her weight—anything that lessens her chance of being seen as truly fat.

In a similar way, the episode quickly deflates the revolutionary moment of Miranda upsetting and escaping the Eaters Anonymous meeting. Running down the stairs, she meets Stevie, who is also running away. Stevie has been working with Tilly, only to also become frustrated. As the two best friends are reunited on the stairs, Miranda’s main plot and Stevie’s subplot meet and run together. Allied in their desire to escape their pursuers, Miranda and Stevie join a choir giving a holiday performance of “Lean on Me,” jumping on stage and blending in. At this point, it appears as if the episode’s plot may simply dissolve in the pure pleasure of the

singing spectacle. Instead, however, Miranda spots the journalist from the report in the audience and takes the chance to run and ask if she was actually meant to be depicted in the report or whether it was, as she has been insisting, merely panning. He responds, slightly embarrassed, that they were in fact panning and that she is actually “lovely.” Miranda, excited, calls to Stevie, “Stevie, it was panning! I’m not obese.” The choir picks up the phrase, singing “she’s not obese —it was paaanning” in the tune of the song. In this way, Miranda is ultimately vindicated in her desire not to be identified as “obese” or fat. Instead of accepting a fat embodiment and criticizing the construction of “obesity,” Miranda simply maintains that the category does not apply to her.

In the end of the episode, everything returns more or less to how it was, with some decided improvements. Stevie returns to manage the shop, allowing Miranda to reopen; the two of them then utilize the overstocked maracas to start a fitness maraca class in the style of the trendy dance fitness course Zumba, shaking them to the song “Proud” by Heather Small.⁵⁶ In a scene parallel to episode’s opening, Penny reads from her own Christmas letter, “And finally, to Miranda, who has resurrected a boutique in difficult economic times. She is the creator of the latest fitness craze, and a dashing news reporter said she was lovely, not obese.” (27.50). In addition to the revision of Miranda’s description, the reversal of fortunes becomes clear when Penny herself becomes the object of the surveillance culture that had targeted Miranda. In the final scene, all of them are again watching television when another news report with Michael Jackford comes on, this time on the “geriatric frail unfortunates.” Again, as he signs off, the camera pans away, this time to reveal Penny sitting on a bench. Penny is momentarily mortified before she dismisses it with the episode’s catchphrase, “It was panning!” This final moment may seem a fitting comeuppance for Penny, who is known to be sensitive about her age and has been particularly cruel to Miranda in this episode. At the same time, it is an indication that the threat of surveillance does not apply only to fat people; anyone may become a target if their body does not fit a particular young and fit ideal. Whether or not it is “panning,” the threat of surveillance, and subsequent social judgment of disgust or pity, never fully disappears. Just as Marjorie in *Little Britain’s Fat Fighters* can be forced onto the scale, so can any shamer become the shamed.

⁵⁶ Incidentally, “Proud” was once the theme song of *The Biggest Loser* in the U.S., stressing the line “What have you done today to make yourself feel proud?” In *Miranda*, Stevie frequently sings this line to motivate herself and Miranda, bringing out a paper cutout of Heather Small’s head on a stick for comedic effect.

III. GROTESQUE WEIGHT CHANGE, NARRATIVE ELASTICITY, AND SITCOM SATIRE IN ANIMATED SERIES

In the *Futurama* episode “Anthology of Interest II” (4.3), elderly mad scientist Professor Farnsworth creates a “what if machine” to imagine alternative realities. Robot Bender volunteers first to ask a question, wishing to know what it would be like if he were human, because, as he expresses paradoxically, “being a robot’s great, but we don’t have emotions, and sometimes that makes me very sad” (0.56). The machine obliges to Bender’s request, showing what would happen if Professor Farnsworth were to give Bender human form through “reverse fossilization”—a process that resembles *Frankenstein*-like electrocution. Within minutes, Bender is taking joy in his new human body, reveling particularly in its orifices as he spits and vomits profusely, laughing and declaring “Being human is great!” (2.45). While his other co-workers attempt to teach him modesty and moderation, Bender goes off on a long adventure of smoking, drinking, eating, and carousing with women. When Amy tells him, “Bender, part of being human is having self-control,” he does not listen, instead overjoyed by the idea of crossing the body’s boundaries multiple ways simultaneously: “Oh my God, I bet I could eat nachos and go to the bathroom at the same time!”

One week later, Prof. Farnsworth is set to present Bender’s transformation as a great achievement to the Nobel Prize Committee. When the curtain is lifted on Bender, however, it is revealed that he has become a huge, torpid ball of flesh. Initially shocked and disgusted at the sight of the “bloated man-ball,” the other scientists in the room are soon won over by Bender, who gives an impassioned speech that they should not judge him before trying out his lifestyle (i.e. partying). After the resulting drunken orgy, Farnsworth’s chief critic comes forward to congratulate Bender, saying “Truly you have lived more in your one week of being human than the rest of us have in our entire lives.” He thereby awards Bender a Nobel prize, only to have them realize that he has died in the course of the revelry. The spectacle of the fat body continues, however; Bender continues to make noises that sound like he is saying “whoo,” but are actually,

as Professor Farnsworth demonstrates, “air escaping from the folds of his fat.” Eventually, after a short eulogy, Bender’s now-dead body is rolled by his co-workers out of the room because “he’s beginning to stink up the place.” In this way, Bender is born as a human, lives, and dies.

The lessons of this story are many. First, it keenly illustrates how bodily behaviors we take for granted in society are in fact learned. Bender must be taught to wear clothes, chastised not to touch his new “antenna,” and held back from distasteful behavioral combinations such as eating and defecating at the same time. Secondly, in his desire to cross as many bodily boundaries as possible in the most extreme manner, Bender is clearly linked to the grotesque body in a Bakhtinian sense. Another character, Dr. Zoidberg, even makes an explicit reference to Carneval, declaring after Bender’s initial vomiting “Hooray! It’s just like Mardi Gras!” The spectacular end of all these grotesque bodily acts is fatness, and the spectacularity of Bender’s fat body is highlighted by its nudity and unveiling on stage. His extreme fatness is also linked to a stereotypical lethargy; he can barely breathe and speak. The story could have easily ended here, as a cautionary tale like *Frankenstein*. Instead the show decides to celebrate the grotesque. Rather than merely denigrating Bender’s behavior and body, the scientists come to the conclusion that Bender has in fact learned how to be more human than they have. In doing so, they imply that being human *is* being grotesque—having a body that eats, drinks, shits, vomits, and ultimately dies, reduced to abject matter. This revaluation of the grotesque body implies a different temporality—instead of the best life being the longest one, the condensed bodily experience of Bender makes his short life more valuable than the long years of the scientists. The grotesque fat body continues to signify this triumphant celebration past death, “speaking” the same triumphant “whoo!” even after Bender has succumbed to his excesses.

In its celebration of the grotesque, *Futurama* is not alone. Indeed, in both of the other animated shows to be discussed in this section—*Family Guy* and especially *South Park*—the celebration of bodily excess is evident. This bodily excess is enabled by a particular narrative excess that characterizes this animated genre and imbues it with freedom and flexibility. As they do not use live action actors, these series can imagine extreme transformations without producing them on real bodies. This freedom is somewhat paradoxical, however, given that both of these shows are satires of the sitcom and thus also reflect the formulaic rigidity of the sitcom plot.

Their narrative conventions thus often conform to the sitcom in returning to the status quo at the end of an episode. In fact, these animated series demonstrate even less seriality than the traditional sitcom, with even less series memory. They are characterized by a fundamental flatness, and their characters are more iconic and thus fixed in their appearance, depicted according to the same template with the same clothing in episode after episode. *South Park*, in particular, draws attention to this flatness in its visual style, making visual the stereotyped nature of its characters in its simplicity and two-dimensionality that eschews traditional perspective drawing, as Halsall notes (26). Likewise, Weinstock argues that “[p]art of the fun of South Park is the tension established between its relatively sophisticated dialogue and involved narratives and its extremely limited animation—an ironic disjunction between the program’s visual style and its content” (81-82). In other words, there is an apparent disparity between narrative complexity and flatness. Similarly, there is a marked difference between the narrative flexibility that allows character transformations and the extreme iconicity of animated characters that requires them to be recognizable over time. As a result, the plots of these series can be even more experimental, going further before they boomerang back to the status quo, often via a deus ex machina. The freedom of the animated form not only allows Bender to be imagined as a human in this example, but also shows him undergoing an extreme change in his physical shape within this transformation. Ultimately, of course, it is a thought experiment with no narrative consequences; it is even self-reflexively labeled as such by the frame narrative created by the “what if machine” within the episode. In the meantime, however, there is an extreme narrative freedom.

This narrative freedom or elasticity is linked to the “televisuality” of the series, in both the earlier sense of Caldwell as well as the more recent work on the sitcom by Butler. Like the sitcoms Butler discusses, these animated series demonstrate the “stylistic excess” of televisuality. As he writes, televisual style is often self-reflexive: “It carries meaning. It makes jokes. It might call attention to itself.” (197). These series call attention to themselves, and to television as a medium, by cannibalizing and parodying a multiplicity of other TV styles and formats within individual episodes. *Family Guy* is the paradigmatic example, often indulging in wild plots and repeated non sequiturs (flashbacks, daydreams, asides, etc.) that overpower the ostensible “main”

plot, which more clearly recalls the sitcom. In one *Family Guy* episode such as “Don’t Make Me Over,” for example, they parody a variety of formats—local news, makeovers, pop music, the family band show (like *The Partridge Family*), *Saturday Night Live*, etc. These often do not just appear *in* the story, but become the story, so that the narrative mode is constantly morphing, taking on the conventions and visual style of different genres before coming back to the core characters and the conventions of sitcom.

Satirizing the Sitcom

Both *South Park* and *Family Guy* are often discussed in terms of their satire, particularly in reference to their playful parody of the sitcom. *Family Guy*, especially, refers explicitly to sitcom conventions. Like the family sitcom and its more immediate precedent *The Simpsons*, *Family Guy* features a nuclear family—father, mother, three children, and dog—with a twist. Most obviously, both the dog Brian and the baby of the family, Stewie, speak, and in much more educated and erudite terms than those ostensibly higher in the family hierarchy. Meanwhile, the patriarch of the family, Peter Griffin, much like his corollary Homer Simpson, is good-natured, but generally stupid and also, not coincidentally, fat. Like the sitcom fathers discussed earlier, Peter Griffin and Homer Simpson both represent downward mobility and the general incompetence of the patriarch to maintain family authority in the wake of the social upheavals of the twentieth century. Unlike their sitcom forbears, however, these shows take a parodic approach, recognizing that the fat, stupid father figure has already become a trope. So, while the theme song of *Family Guy* bemoans the loss of “good old-fashioned family values” in the wake of “violence in movies and sex on TV” and posits a “family guy” (and thus, Peter, as the patriarch) as an answer, its actual content rejects the narrow confines of “family humor,” instead using the sitcom format simply as a parodic background for its own boundary-pushing content and reflexivity about television as a medium.

South Park does not conform as easily to these conventions, focusing on four boys rather than one particular family, but it also reflects on the narrative patterns of sitcom. While *South Park* is nearly universally read as a satirical program, its actual ideological stance and

relationship to ideology are contested. As Daniel J. Frim notes in his survey of literature on *South Park*, the ideological position of the series and its creators is not easy to pin down. While some assume a liberal critique of conservative racism (Coleman, for example), others posit *South Park* as fundamentally “anti-liberal” (Anderson). Matt Becker, on the other hand, argues that it is “equal opportunity satire,” skewering both conservative and liberal ideologies and thus remaining “deeply politically ambivalent” (Becker 160). Stefan Groening, in still another version, argues that *South Park*’s ideological “commitment is to be uncommitted”; in this sense, it is “postideological” and “cynical” in its passivity, which itself works as an ideology in its programmatic refusal to identify itself with particular institutions or “isms.” Frim, for his part, attempts to offer a more nuanced point of view, pointing out that while many episodes of the show use satire meaningfully to critique real-world referents, other episodes deconstruct satire itself by depicting referents “in inverted, incongruous, or ‘random’ ways.” (151). Thus, Frim argues, while certain episodes force both “liberalism and conservatism to ‘undo’ or invert themselves, [...] this strategy of inversion is not ideologically meaningful or coherent” (166). This leads him to the conclusion that *South Park* functions more as “pseudo-satire” as its narrative strategies “lack the necessary coherence and underlying realism to deliver sincere social criticism.” (151).

While Frim’s argument here is valid in pointing to moments in which *South Park* appears to refuse clear satirical reading, he rather overstates his point. His struggle to demonstrate the lack of meaning in *South Park* through the act of interpretation (itself a paradoxical enterprise) is evident, leading him to argue, for example, that *South Park*’s “techniques of subversion and ambiguity are not means of rejecting or critiquing socio-political meaning but, rather, of escaping it altogether.” (166). This statement fails to account for the ways that evading meaning may, in fact, be a way of critiquing it; by failing to assign it value, one resists the ways that meaning is produced in clear narrative patterns. The very inversion of the “isms” is important, even if the text remains fundamentally ambiguous or polysemous. Indeed, in a series of now 250 episodes, it would be stranger to find no contradictions. The final leap—suggesting that the series is “best understood as a remarkably complex, abstract, and playful exercise in imaginative signification

freely removed from the pragmatic world of socio-political reality” (167)—is thus all the more questionable.

Moreover, while Frim seems to suggest that *South Park* is unique in respect to his argument, one could probably make the counter-assertion that a show like *Family Guy* is even less satirically sound, offering a presumably liberal perspective without any real critique. *Family Guy*'s satire is arguably flatter, less richly imagined, citational and (self-)referential rather than integrated into the very fabric of the narrative. While it is always gesturing outside its own frame, building a new frame and then gesturing outside that one too, *South Park* brings everything from outside inside—percolating issues up from the schoolyard to the mayor's office and beyond, as Coleman notes (136). This makes *South Park* more ambiguous perhaps, but it does not necessarily dull its satirical edge.

Both series, in fact, share their satire of the sitcom in their depiction of episode endings, parodying the frequent pedagogical “lessons” presented as the episodic plot of the sitcom concludes. It is common in *South Park* for Stan or Kyle to say “You know, I learned something today...” while sentimental music plays. Likewise, *Family Guy* episodes also frequently partake of this pattern. In each case, however, the lesson is ultimately undermined. In the *Family Guy* episode “To Love and Die in Dixie,” for example, the Griffin family moves to the southern United States, where they have conflict with the locals. As they resolve their differences at the end of the episode, Peter declares “I think the lesson here is it doesn’t matter where you’re from, as long as we’re all the same religion” (3.12). The apparent message of tolerance is limited by another qualifier, simply redrawing the boundaries of what can be tolerated and pointing to another brand of intolerance, thus exposing the emptiness of the tolerant gesture. Likewise, as Halsall argues, these statements in *South Park* are used to demonstrate how language and narrative “impose a false sense of closure on a particular subject” (Halsall 32). Moreover, Halsall suggests, “*South Park* arguably resists all forms of didacticism and dogmatism. If it does use moralistic statements, it is to highlight the inanity of the candy-coated endings of family-oriented sitcoms on American television.” (32). The apparent message is revealed to be a “corny moral that is devoid of any true meaning” (32). In this way, these series point to a teleological endpoint, a higher state of knowledge, only to reject or undermine it. This rejection, repeated over and over

in various episodes, is programmatic and, as Halsall suggests, tied to the desire to evade moralism and implicit ideologies. Rejection of teleology becomes the rejection of ideology. This rejection may not be complete (and it often is not), but rather points to a greater desire for destabilization of moral categories.

The generic conventions of makeover offer these series a prime opportunity to display this narrative flexibility and rejection of teleology. The weight plots to be discussed, especially, allow these animated series to parodize ideas of weight and the genres of makeover, pitting its teleology against the cyclical genre of the sitcom and thereby flaunting their narrative elasticity and the ultimate rejection of teleology. These episodes thus conjure up the narrative tropes of the makeover, mimicking its teleological patterns, only to reverse them in the end before the “after” is complete. Characters undergo makeovers, sometimes quite extreme ones, but always return to their original shapes. Often this return is quite sudden and effected by a *deus ex machina*—a sudden event that appears in the final scenes. This return again aligns these programs with the sitcom, while the absurdity of the event producing this return often draws attention to the formulaic nature of the sitcom. In imagining extreme bodily plots that then return, just as suddenly and extremely, to their origins, these shows can thus both show their alignment with the conventions of the sitcom as they distinguish themselves from the sitcom by drawing attention to the artificiality of those conventions. In the meantime, as we shall see, these shows capitalize on the opportunity to make fat jokes, which abound in popular culture, while subtly critiquing and undermining many of the assumptions in weight discourse.

Family Guy

As mentioned above, Peter is the quintessentially fat patriarch, the bumbling oaf who fails to be a successful father just as he fails to be a productive and responsible citizen. He is not the only character whose plot lines reflect makeover culture and weight loss, though. In fact, each of the family characters goes through phases within individual episodes of weight gain and loss. The first episode to tackle these issues, “He’s Too Sexy for His Fat,” in fact revolves around the struggles of son Chris with his weight and the effect of their shared fat embodiment on the

father-son relationship. The episode begins with moments of embarrassment for Chris in the first act. In the supermarket he is accused of shoplifting hams under his shirt by a guard, recalling the phrase “smuggling hams” to refer to a fat person’s upper arms. When the guard realizes he’s “just a fat kid,” he apologizes but continues to emphasize his fatness, saying “Sorry about that, fatty fat fatty.” In a subsequent scene at the pool, Chris is self-conscious about going in the water, although his mother Lois attempts to reassure him that he is not fat. Of course, at this very moment a hotel employee approaches them and says, “I’m sorry, sir, you can’t park your van on the diving board,” referring to Chris. This hyperbolic joke takes the same form as the earlier moment when the employee then calls to his offscreen co-worker, “he’s not a van, he’s just a fat kid!” These moments of misreading the fat body are telling not only in that they literalize popular fat jokes, but that they link the fat body to transgressions—shoplifting and illegal parking, respectively. In the case of the second, Chris is not only mistaken for the transgressor, but in fact a transgressing object—like Mary Douglas’s dirt, he is literally “matter out of place.”

In the second act, Peter again tries to reassure Chris, this time on the basis of their shared heredity: “You’re not fat, Chris. You just come from a long line of husky Griffins, like your great-great-great-uncle Jabba the Griffin.” Again recalling a typical epithet used for fat people, Jabba, the show cuts away to a brief shot of *Star Wars’* Jabba the Hut with Peter’s face.

Returning to the main story, Lois offers to help Chris lose weight, putting him on a diet and making Peter his exercise trainer. These attempts, however, are not very successful. Presented with steamed vegetables for dinner, Chris declares that the meal “tastes like a monkey, a monkey that’s past its prime.” Meanwhile, baby Stewie taunts him by exaggerating the deliciousness of the meatloaf everyone else is eating, even imitating the famed orgasm scene in *When Harry Met Sally*. The depiction of a baby imitating a performance of sexual pleasure not only breaks a taboo on children’s sexuality, but further emphasizes the transgressive nature of a fat person’s enjoyment of food. In the subsequent exercise scene, the episode skewers a variety of work-out tropes. Peter’s most effective method of motivating Chris to run is dangling a twinkie in front of him. When Peter tells Chris to “feel the burn” while doing pull-ups, it is revealed that he has lit a literal fire under Chris. Despite everything, Chris does not lose weight. Talking to his friend Cleveland, Peter expresses his frustration and concern that Chris “has been working out all week

and hasn't lost a pound." Cleveland recommends getting liposuction from his brother Broderick, where Chris and Peter then go for a consultation. Back at the house, Chris tells Lois that he has decided to stick to his diet and exercise rather than get liposuction. Lois is proud, reflecting the usual moral hierarchy of weight loss methods when she says, "Good for you. That was a very grown-up decision. I mean, what kind of lazy, narcissistic, irresponsible moron would even consider doing something as unbelievably foolish as getting liposuction? Who, I ask you, who?" In the drawing out of this long rhetorical question, the answer becomes clear. When Peter enters, much thinner, there is no more doubt. Peter is exactly the "lazy, narcissistic, irresponsible moron" that Lois imagines. The show then cuts to commercial before we can see Lois's reaction, heightening the suspense of the coming conflict between Peter and Lois.

When the episode returns for act three, Lois is clearly dumbfounded. Stewie makes a crack at Peter's previous size, saying, "My God, it's finally happened. He's become so massive he's collapsed into himself like a neutron star." Lois criticizes the decision, saying "Peter, you can't just suck two hundred pounds of fat out of yourself—it's not natural!" while Peter responds "Come on, Lois, I feel great dropping that ton of weight all at once. You remember how good you felt after you had Chris?" The camera cuts to a newspaper clipping on the fridge with the headline "Elephant Child Born to Local Woman" and picture of Lois looking bedraggled with baby Chris, whose size is apparently freakish. Lois does not accept this argument, but Peter clearly enjoys his newfound thinness, although his aspirations for his new body are as ridiculous as his giggling appraisal of his newly-visible penis is childish. When he confesses to Brian that there is something he always wanted to do but could not because of his size, a number of things spring to mind; there are any number of activities people feel more enabled or comfortable doing when they have lost weight. Peter's desire, though, is frivolous; he wants to ride Brian like a horse.

Lois, meanwhile, holds fast in her position that plastic surgery is unnecessary, telling Peter, "It doesn't matter if your nose is a little bulbous, or your eyes are too close together, or your chest is flabby. You are who are." Unwittingly, however, these observations just prompt Peter to go for even more procedures to "correct" the flaws she has mentioned. When Peter returns to the house even more enhanced and muscular, Lois tries to maintain her critique, saying

“I liked you the way you were,” but is clearly impressed and aroused by his new chiseled face, arms, buttocks, and chest. Touching his body and making involuntary noises of pleasure, Lois eventually pushes all the kids out of the house and jumps on him. Later, when she confronts Peter about pasting his own “after” photo over her face in their wedding photos, making literal the metaphor of self-love, she is again nonetheless hypnotized by the sight of Peter’s new butt moving as he leaves. In defense of her actions to Brian, she says, “I can’t help it. I know, I know, he’s become a superficial, egomaniacal jerk, but I’ve never been more attracted to him! Oh, does that make me a bad person?” Brian replies, straightforwardly, “Yes, yes that does make you a bad person.” In her split attitude toward Peter’s transformation, Lois embodies the ambivalence of society as a whole, which promotes authenticity rhetoric (especially elevating loving someone “just the way they are”) at the same time it reveres physical perfection and encourages the makeover.

Meanwhile, Peter has been approached by the “Quahog Beautiful People’s Club” to become a member. Perks involve the privilege of cutting the supermarket line and receiving a welcome basket with “some scented lotion, Ferrari sunglasses, and of course some pills to make your bowel movements smell like bakery-fresh cinnamon rolls.” (16.52). Beautiful people, according to *Family Guy*’s parodic exaggeration, are so special that even their bodily waste is pleasant. Fat people, of course, are not welcome at the club; this policy is clear in the “Fat people will be towed” sign hanging outside that again recalls the earlier confusion of Chris with a van. When Peter tries to bring Chris with him after being reminded by Lois that he had agreed to help him lose weight, the man at the door easily rejects him, saying “He can’t come in. Pfft. He’s fat.” Peter begins to answer, “Well, let me tell you something, buddy, if my son can’t come in...” For a split second, it appears as if Peter is going to defend his son and be woken from his narcissistic haze, but instead he finishes the sentence “then I’ll just come in.” He leaves Chris outside as he walks in. This end subverts the expectations of the viewer and continues the build in dramatic tension.

Another subplot, that of Stewie’s weight gain, also approaches a climax. After eating more to taunt Chris in the second act, Stewie has continually gained weight, drawn fatter each time he appears. At the playground he is too heavy for the equipment; the horse on a spring he is

placed on just sags over rather than bounces. Finally, his high chair collapses. Brian is quick to tell him he deserves it for trying to make Chris jealous, and plays with Stewie's new roundness by spinning him around. In this subplot, Stewie's comeuppance for fat-shaming Chris is bodily; he becomes fat himself. This plot illustrates not only that moral equilibrium will be restored by the universe's punishment of Stewie, but also that no one is safe from becoming fat. Even if it seems that thin people are "allowed" to eat things that fat people should not, the tables can easily turn. In a way, this points to the way that not only becoming thin but staying thin requires constant vigilance. As Marilyn Wann writes, "In a fat-hating society, everyone is fat" (15).

Finally, of course, these plots are resolved and all characters return to their previous shapes. Peter becomes fat again, but he does not realize his mistakes on his own. Instead, the episode concludes with a deus ex machina of ridiculous events: distracted by his own reflection in the rearview mirror, Peter drives off a cliff and falls into a tub of lard in a factory, which he is forced to drink to survive. Later, in the hospital, Peter is back to his previous size, and apologizes for being a jerk. When Lois suggests, in true sitcom fashion, "Well, Peter, I guess you learned a pretty valuable lesson," he responds point-blank "Nope." The credits roll. In this way, the episode recalls the sitcom's conclusion with a lesson, but then jettisons it just as easily. Just as the bodily change in the characters has been undone (or in Chris's case, never takes place), so will the events have no effect on Peter or his behavior. He will continue to be selfish and irresponsible. In this way, *Family Guy* points to the contradiction in the traditional sitcom, which insists on lessons learned in the conclusions of its episodic plots but rarely assigns long-term narrative consequences to events.

Similar issues of authenticity versus bodily change through makeover appear in the episode "Don't Make Me Over." In this episode, daughter Meg is the focus. After Meg is rejected by a boy, Lois attempts to lift her spirits by revamping her style. At the mall, local TV reporter Trisha Takanawa is recruiting women for makeovers, saying to the camera "That's right, Tom. Some lucky hideous woman will be transformed by our makeover magicians into someone of value to society." After Meg is transformed from a frumpy brunette with glasses to a trendy blonde, Peter, like Lois in the previously discussed episode, attempts to hold fast to the rhetoric of unconditional love, saying, "Oh Meg, honey, I always thought you were beautiful just the

way...” Before he finishes the sentence, however, he breaks into laughter and admits he cannot say it with a straight face. Finally, he concludes, “Welcome to the family, sweetheart,” and tells Chris to “go burn all Meg’s old pictures.” As Meg transforms into an attractive and sought-after date, and then sexy front woman of their family band, however, she begins to become arrogant and dismissive of her family. Lois, again as the moral center of the family, attempts to pull her back while Peter is still eager to capitalize on her obvious sex appeal for their financial success. As their producer Dr. Diddy (combination of Dr. Dre and P. Diddy) says, Meg is essential to their success because “America loves hot white jailbait ass” (15.07). Finally, when Meg is sexually exploited by Jimmy Fallon for the sake of *Saturday Night Live* ratings, Peter finally does his “fatherly duty” and punches Fallon. At this point, the episode returns to their house and Meg returns to her usual appearance, saying “I’m so glad to be the real me again. It’s too much work being beautiful.” Rather than having this as the final refamiliarizing moment, however, the show goes to a meta level, unsettling the diegesis as the characters step off the sitcom set and into another genre, doing the farewell and credits in the style of *SNL*. Finally the TV even rolls over to the next show in the NBC line-up and the show again steps out of the TV, to another level. Brian is on their couch. In the folding and refolding of these multiple levels, constantly stepping outside the diegesis to point to another frame, it is ultimately unclear (and perhaps meaningless) at which level the events were “real” or staged. In this way, the episode refuses to return to true stasis even as it recalls the plot resolution of the sitcom and its familiar settings and characters. Moreover, in disrupting the ideas of the “real” and constantly transforming itself, it rejects its own discourse of authenticity.

In another episode, “Sibling Rivalry,” it is Lois who gains and subsequently loses weight. This process is both caused by a crisis in her marriage to Peter and subsequently accelerates it, before eventually being resolved. This episode displays the sitcom pattern identified by Jerry Mosher whereby sex becomes “the irritant or source of neurosis” for the couple (182). The problem begins when Lois and Peter decide that Peter should get a vasectomy, which in turn threatens his masculinity and makes him unwilling to have sex. In her sexual frustration, Lois turns to food. In the second act, Lois appears to have already gained weight, walking to the fridge, past Peter and Brian, for a midnight snack and passive-aggressively highlighting her

unhappiness, saying “I’m just going to grab something too and go back to bed...alone...again. Night!” After she leaves, Brian makes the causal link between their lack of sex and her weight gain explicit, encouraging Peter to resume their sexual activity. Peter, in turn, suggests his reasons for avoiding sex have changed: “You know at first I didn’t want to do it because of the vasectomy but now it’s just...I mean, look at her. She’s got elbow cleavage.” By way of explanation of “elbow cleavage,” he goes on, “You know that little wrinkle that fat people get on their elbows that looks like a schwa?” At this point, it becomes clear that Peter, despite being fat himself, is rejecting Lois on the basis of sexist ideas of female attractiveness which do not allow women to be fat and sexually fulfilled.

The hypocrisy of Peter’s stance becomes clear in the subsequent restaurant scene, when Peter continues to embarrass Lois by guiding her through tables and announcing “fat wife coming through.” Lois protests that he is embarrassing her, but Peter says it is not as embarrassed as he was when he had a job “entertaining prison inmates.” In a typical non sequitur, the narrative then cuts away to a scene in the prison. Peter is topless in the prison yard, singing “Milkshake” by Kelis (“My milkshake brings all the boys to the yard...”) and pressing his “man boobs” together before breaking into tears. This moment, aside from an absurd moment of comic relief that cannot be located in time or space (When would this have happened? Where?), reminds us that fat masculinity also involves abjection. Peter, however, refuses to make the connection, instead insisting on stigmatizing Lois. While she says that it is only “five pounds,” he echoes the rhetoric of obesity and dieting when he emphasizes the “slippery slope” of weight gain and thus social decline: “You start with five pounds and then boom, you wake up and you’re on *The Practice* with sixteen rings in your ear.” This projected endpoint is Camryn Manheim, who famously claimed her Emmy “for all the fat girls.” The description draws a laugh, however, because there is nothing inherently negative about having “sixteen rings” in your ear and, on the contrary, being on a popular television series is a mark of success. Nevertheless, *Family Guy* also refers here to the criticism and controversy afforded by Manheim, who continued to be berated for her size despite her success, and even later recanted her position as a fat activist.

Peter here operates as the voice of the sexism inherent in sizeism, to borrow a phrase from Cecilia Hartley. When Lois calls out Peter for his hypocritical denigration of her in the face of his own fatness, he easily says “Lois, men aren’t fat. Only fat women are fat.” As Peter walks away to “warn the chef” of Lois’s arrival, Lois angrily responds by scarfing down a number of dinner rolls—“He wants fat? I’ll show him fat! The only reason I’m eating anyway is because of him!” Lois eats because she is fat-shamed, thus furthering the cycle that so many writers on weight, those in the medical establishment and fat activists alike, have noted.

Things take another twist when Peter recants his earlier position, swinging to the other extreme in his attitude toward Lois’s fatness. When Lois accidentally falls over Peter while turning off the light one night, they end up having sex. Thrilled with the results, Peter declares the next morning that “Fat sex is the hottest sex [they’ve] ever had.” While just the night before he had derogatorily called her “Hogzilla,” now Peter begins to encourage Lois’s weight gain. He feeds her cake, even though she’s not hungry, calling her “my fat concubine” and saying “I want you bigger, I want you fatter, it will please me.” In this way, Peter makes a complete transformation from fat shamer to “feeder,” or someone who encourages weight gain in their spouse for the purpose of sexual pleasure. The initially positive potential of valuing fat sex is again linked to the pathological and selfish behavior of Peter. In his statements, it becomes clear that it is again his pleasure which is at stake, not Lois’s. In this way, *Family Guy* posits fat-shaming and feeding behavior as simply two sides of the same coin. Both are sexist in that they shape the female body for the purpose of male pleasure, without regard to what women themselves want. This theme is extended when Lois begins to have a heart attack during a subsequent sexual act; Peter wants to “finish” before taking her to the hospital, putting her life in jeopardy for his own pleasure.

Here in the hospital the conflict of the episode is resolved and the foray into fat sex meets a sudden end as Lois is returned to her previous size. This resolution takes a form very similar to the one observed earlier in “He’s Too Sexy for His Fat.” Again the denouement is effected very suddenly by the contingency of traumatic events, a deus ex machina that prompts a “reveal” moment in the hospital. Unlike the makeover, this “after” is the same as “before,” returning the character experiencing weight change to their previous form. When Lois wakes up, she is back to

her normal appearance; this sudden transformation is explained by the doctor, who says it was “a tough job removing all that fat to get to your heart.” The absurdity of this explanation is beside the point. The important thing, it appears, is that Peter and Lois have potentially learned lessons. As in both episodes discussed above, characters make statements affirming their unconditional love for the other and stressing the value of authenticity to the self. As Peter says, “Honey, I’m sorry I tried to make you into something you’re not. I love you no matter what size you are,” adding only the comment that he will “miss eating cereal out of the dimples on [her] ass.” Likewise, Lois repents of her overeating, saying “I realize now eating is not the way to solve my problems.” This comment she aims directly at Meg, who retorts, “For your information, Mom, I don’t eat to solve my problems—I cut myself. Is that better?” Instead of responding with concern, however, Lois simply moves on to compliment Chris. In this way, Lois is shown to perpetuate the sexism of sizeism of which she herself had been the victim. Meg’s critical, rhetorical question goes unanswered.

In the meantime, Chris asks the doctor what he had done with Lois’s fat. The doc opens the door to the storage closet to reveal Peter, caught with his pants down, fondling the large bag of Lois’s fat. He does not deny the obvious sexual reading, saying “It’s exactly what it looks like” as the episode ends. This final moment makes clear that Peter has not learned any significant lesson, or at the very least that he has not given up his erotic relationship with fatness. In fact, the loyalties of his attraction are made clear. Rather than being attracted to Lois as a fat woman, he is attracted to the fat itself. This makes literal the objectification of fat, divorcing it from the human subject.

In all three of these episodes, characters experience change but ultimately return to their previous sizes and shapes, often through very sudden and implausible means that draw attention to the fanciful possibilities of the animated comedy. While these episodes end up reciting platitudes about unconditional love and appreciating one’s own authentic self and given body, they undermine their own lessons, both in the ultimate ineffectiveness of these last-minute realizations, and in the willingness with which they indulge in making fat jokes. In other words, while the ends of the plots undermine makeover culture, these episodes maintain the status of fatness as something to be ridiculed. Moreover, the gendered weight disparity between Peter and

Lois, replicated also in their children Chris and Meg, is kept. Just as Peter cannot permanently lose weight, neither can Lois gain. Television has yet to see a show, animated or otherwise, that depicts a romantic relationship between a fat woman and a thin man—beyond the pathologizing programs on feederism one may find on networks like TLC, that is. Even with the narrative and artistic freedom afforded by animation, it seems, this type of relationship appears to be beyond the limits of imagination.

South Park

South Park is as famous for its profanity and toilet humor as it is for its incisive political and cultural satire. While each of these sides may seem incidental to each other, they in fact work together. In its willingness to upend hierarchies by bringing well-regarded figures down to the body and its scatological dimensions—depicting, say, popular musical celebrity and humanitarian Bono as literally the “world’s largest piece of shit”—*South Park* proves itself to be inextricably linked to carnival and the grotesque. As Gulnara Karimova notes, “*South Park* can be considered the epitome of carnival culture because it exhibits many carnivalesque features such as festive laughter, grotesque realism, images in tremendously exaggerated forms, abusive language, and celebration of the lower bodily stratum” (Karimova 41). In this celebration of the body’s “lower stratum,” as Karimova emphasizes, one finds numerous spectacles of the body in *South Park* that highlight the body’s orifices. Whether it is eating, drinking, farting or its vaginal cousin “queefing,” shitting, bleeding, vomiting, performing sexual acts (including, but not limited to, bestiality, incest, etc.) or getting plastic surgery, *South Park* loves staging the body and the transgression of its boundaries as spectacle. Gaining weight and losing weight belong to these spectacular acts, and a number of episodes deal with plots of weight gain and loss. Alison Halsall, in her exploration of the Bakhtinian grotesque in *South Park*, argues that the series’ use of this mode allows it to expose the mythologies of US American society:

“Popular culture, and the scatology of *South Park*, reminds us that the body is inherently dirty and this dirtiness, this impurity, this untidiness is resistant to the metaphorical cleanliness of the American social order. Through the carnivalesque

principles of *South Park*, its interrogation of language, and its use of grotesque realism, Parker and Stone construct a transformative vision of the world that ‘excrementalizes’ the U.S. sociopolitical landscape.” (Halsall 24)

In other words, *South Park* turns the inside out, revealing the dirty interior hiding in the high ideals of U.S. culture and politics. This is not only literal dirt or abject body fluids, for example, but dirt as “matter out of place” that represents larger contradictions within and between ideologies—ideology out of place, perhaps.

Most of the weight plots in *South Park* revolve around Eric Cartman, certainly one of the most notorious fat characters on television in the past twenty years. Of the four main boys on *South Park*, Eric is also perhaps the most iconic, known for his selfish, manipulative, and racist antics, as well as his bodily difference. While Kyle and Stan look nearly interchangeable but for the color of their clothes, Cartman is fat, although he insists that he is rather just “big-boned” in response to being called “fatass.” As Halsall writes, each of the boys represents a different stereotype: Cartman is the “fat kid” (26). Moreover, he often acts as the “ugly American”—classist, racist, and sexist, not to mention greedy and selfish. Instead of being disciplined by his mother, however, Cartman is usually rewarded for his narcissistic abuse of others, often in the form of food. This reflects a cultural stereotype that “the mothers of children are too permissive and overindulge their children with ‘bad’ food” (Boero 139). Mrs. Cartman thus represents the “bad mothers” who allow bad behavior as well as the consumption of junk food. His fat body metonymically refers, therefore, to larger anxieties about the US and its willingness to exploit others for the sake of its own consumption, while only listening to those who confirm its own worldview and self-importance. Cartman’s body is essential to his portrayal, in contrast to the others: “[b]ecause all of the characters are recognized by their enlarged heads rather than by their bodies (except for Eric Cartman!), the characters become important not for how they look, but rather for what they say and how they act.” (27).

The second of all *South Park* episodes, “Weight Gain 4000,” stages the ongoing issues of Cartman’s weight and bodily transformation. Instead of losing weight, however, Cartman gains in this episode. Rather than a decline, however, Cartman understands his transformation as a makeover; Cartman starts consuming bulking supplements after seeing an advertisement that

extols their masculine effects and promises to make him a “beefcake.” It is only when he becomes a complete spectacle, immobile in his bed and appearing on sensationalist talk show *Geraldo*, that Cartman eventually begins to reverse the process. Seen in the contemporary context, almost twenty years after this episode aired, this episode’s projection of masculinity through weight gain seems a bit quaint. With the recent rise of “spornosexual,” bulking up has lost ground to slimming down and getting ripped with lean muscle. Yet it is prescient that Cartman’s transformation relies on a misreading of what constitutes masculinity. This is the same mistake that Mac in *It’s Always Sunny* makes, insisting that he is more masculine after gaining weight although he has a large belly and his fat is depicted as slovenly and disgusting. Both Cartman and Mac have failed to make the transition to a new ideal of the masculine body, and misread their own fatness according to their own narcissism, rather than from society’s perspective.

It is perhaps predictable, then, that Cartman’s weight plots soon shift to weight loss, rather than gain. In two episodes, “Fat Camp” from season four and “Tsst” from season ten, *South Park* plays with the possibility of Cartman being reformed. In both episodes, changing his body is linked to changing his behavior, although they reverse the causality; in “Fat Camp,” Cartman’s weight loss is presumed to improve his behavior, while in “Tsst,” Cartman’s reformation through behavioral training has the additional effect of weight loss. Predictably, of course, neither of these processes result in lasting change. Like the sitcom, *South Park* returns its characters to their recognizable forms before long. This is especially true for Cartman, as his villainy is too essential for the production of conflict to be reformed away.

In “Fat Camp,” Cartman becomes the target of an intervention and is sent to Hopeful Hills weight loss camp by his mother and family friends. Hopeful Hills’ logo is a thin white stick figure superimposed over a round turtle-like shape, suggesting the popular idea of the “thin person inside” just waiting to be let out. The episode easily mocks the cheesy upbeat attitude of the counselors, who try to convince their child charges that “losing weight is fun” while forcing them to run up hills and eat unappetizing food. The program of the camp also includes an initial skit in which one counselor is dressed as “glutinous fat” and must be beaten by paddles of “exercise” and “proper diet.” As it does in other episodes, *South Park* lays bare the patronizing

rhetoric so often found in material aimed at children. Here the added element of weight loss makes the context doubly patronizing—both children and fat people are assumed to be in need of education to make the “right” decisions, and their compliance is often packaged in faux cheerful terms to mask its compulsory nature.

Cartman, of course, resists both the rhetoric and practices of the camp, hatching a scheme to smuggle in food and sell it to his campmates while another kid pretends to be him in town. Cartman soon becomes a sort of Mephistopheles, enticing his campmates to indulge in candy and snacks. A key scene takes place when one child, Chad, expresses his sadness as he lines up to buy food from Cartman (15.15). As Chad approaches, he is crying, and Cartman, with a seemingly sympathetic tone, asks why. Chad replies “Cause I’m always going to be fat. I don’t want to eat those sweets but I can’t control myself when they’re right in front of me like this. All my life I’ve been fat [...] I swore to my momma that I’d lose the weight. I want to, but I can’t help myself.” In his sniveling sadness, Chad mirrors the legions of weight loss participants on makeover TV who tearfully confess both their desire to lose weight and their failures to do so. Cartman, in apparent empathy, suggests that Chad needs “a friend.” But instead of meaning himself, as the viewer might assume, Cartman suggests “...a chocolate friend” as he pulls out a candy bar. Continuing, he says, “Mr. Candy Bar doesn’t judge you, Chad. Mr. Candy Bar likes you just the way you are. Look at how yummy and sweet he is.” Chad takes the candy bar and eats it, still crying, while Cartman collects the cash. In his silver-tongued seduction, Cartman echoes all the marketing of food that promises pleasure and unconditional love for one’s “authentic” self. Implicitly, the episode judges this behavior, showing how Cartman uses his pseudo-concern as a way to further his own self-interest at Chad’s detriment.

Cartman’s subterfuge of the camp’s practice has effects. Frustrated with the lack of progress, one child’s parents arrive to take him away. Horace’s father, also fat, is depicted with flesh poking out between the buttons of his shirt, emphasizing his size and implicitly linking him with a fat stereotype of slovenliness. Angry, Horace’s father rails against the camp leaders, saying “Look at what you’ve done to my boy. You told Horace *he* was responsible for his weight. You made him believe that with exercise and proper diet he could be thin when we told you it was his genetics.” Emphasizing this point, he continues to say, “Look at these kids; they’re not

getting any thinner! Your camp is a fraud. You need to accept the fact that most fat people are just genetically fat.” Horace’s father here echoes arguments from fat activists and others about the genetic origins of fatness as a way to counteract prescriptive weight loss. The show gives space to this argument, but puts it in the mouth of a man who is obviously fat and angry. According to the show’s plot, he is also wrong in this case—the kids *have* been cheating, which he does not know—suggesting that this argument is ultimately more self-serving than accurate. None of the children speak up, however, so Cartman’s plot remains hidden.

Finally, however, things come to a head when more parents arrive to take their children away from the camp. Sad music plays as the children leave, saying goodbye to the counselors. Just when it appears Cartman will have succeeded in breaking up the camp, however, Chad decides to make a stand. He couches this confession in the language of self-control and neoliberal accountability, saying “Wait a second, this isn’t right. It’s time for me to be responsible for my own actions. Mom, Dad, we’ve been eating candy this whole time. Eric Cartman’s been sneaking in junk food.” Horace confirms this truth, saying, “No, he’s right. The counselors been doing a good job; we’ve just been cheating.” As contrite, inspirational music begins, he declares, “I believe I can lose the weight with exercise and proper diet. I don’t want to make excuses no more.” As all the other children chime in to agree, they promise to stop cheating and continue the program. Even Horace’s father, who had just minutes before insisted on the immutability of weight, says to his son “Maybe you can even teach me a thing or two when you’re done.” Cartman, realizing that he is now the minority, attempts to be part of the movement, too, saying, “You know, you guys are right. I’m sick of being the fat kid, too. I’ve been making excuses all my life, but I know deep down if I took responsibility and really tried hard, if we all try together, we really can lose the weight!” Susan, one of the counselors, though, tells him he’s not welcome anymore. As all the children return to the camp and the care of the counselors, Cartman is left outside. Initially defiant, Cartman shouts “screw you, fatasses!” before beginning to eat a donut and crying, just as Chad had in the scene with the chocolate bar. While Cartman has escaped the control of the camp and will certainly not lose weight, he becomes the very loser that he had preyed upon earlier, relying on food for comfort.

Six seasons later, another reformation of Eric's behavior is attempted. Frustrated with his behavior, Mrs. Cartman calls on the help of nanny makeover shows *Nanny 9-1-1* and *Supernanny*. Instead of being reformed, however, Cartman turns the tables on the nannies, driving them to mental breakdowns with his manipulative sympathy. In this way, South Park satirizes the makeover show, parodying its conventions while upending its hierarchy of "expert" and "client" and reversing its positive teleologies. Faced with these failures, Mrs. Cartman hires the last option suggested to her—Cesar Millan, the dog expert known for reforming canine behavior on his show *The Dog Whisperer*. Millan applies his dog rhetoric and techniques to Eric, emphasizing particularly the need for Mrs. Cartman to "assert her dominance" and be the "pack leader" using the syllable "tsst." Ironically, these techniques work. Eric becomes more obedient and performs better in school.

Part of this transformation, although it was not the initial goal, is weight loss. From their first consultation, Cesar suggests that Eric's weight should be dealt with: "I think the first thing we need to work on is getting the child some exercise. He's fat and he has all this pent-up energy that we need to let him burn off." (7.38). This is a theme that often appears on Cesar's show, and he often suggests going for more walks with dogs who are hyperactive. Of course, the comedic effect emerges when Mrs. Cartman and Cesar emerge with Eric on a leash. While he protests that it's "degrading," Cesar insists that he will "run out of energy soon" and stop protesting, and indeed he does. In a following exercise, Cesar practices eating Kentucky Fried Chicken in front of Cartman, insisting that the pack leader always eats first and Cartman will not be rewarded until he demonstrates "calm, submissive behavior." While Cartman protests again, yelling, "Goddamn it, I'm not a dog!" he proceeds to jump up and down and repeat "give me the chicken" like a dog begging. Finally Cesar subdues Cartman as he does with the dogs in his charge, calming putting him on his back, which he insists is "not being aggressive," but "dominant." After attempting to run away, Cartman is disappointed to find that none of his "friends" will take him in. Instead, he returns after a few hours to find his mother nonchalantly finishing a painting. Cesar comments, "Oh look, it came back," furthering Cartman's dehumanization. Thereafter, Cartman is subjected to a worse indignity (in his view)—being fed boiled vegetables, skinless chicken, and salad. The only nod to dessert is a bite-size Snickers.

That is the last straw for Cartman, who threatens to call Child Protective Services. Instead of following through, however, his mother manages to use Cesar's tactics to "tsst" him into submission.

In the final act, Mrs. Cartman reports on Eric's progress, which seems to indicate that Cartman has made a complete transformation—the makeover has been successful. As she says, "He got an A on his last spelling test and a B+ in history. He's losing weight and he's doing what I tell him." She worries, however, that he is "still the same angry, spoiled child" inside. Cesar reassures her that the personality change will come with time. In the meantime, Cartman arrives at the house where his friends are playing. He is dressed differently and, as Stan notices, has lost more weight—Cartman, clearly upset at the fact, announces that he has in fact lost ten pounds. Instead of being happy with this transformation, as one would expect, Cartman is desperate to make it end, announcing to the other boys that he is planning to kill his mother because "she's like Hitler with all the demands she makes." The boys are uninterested in being part of the scheme and half-heartedly try to persuade him to give it up. Later, however, he tries to go through with it by himself, standing over his mother's sleeping body with a knife only to be assailed by an unfamiliar "angel" voice in his head that prompts him to realize "Maybe I don't have the right to kill my mom." As the monstrous evil side attempts to win him back, he continues to come to apparently original thoughts such as "She's not an object. She's a human being." and "Maybe the world doesn't revolve around me." Finally, in a sort of exorcism, he vomits black liquid and collapses in the hallway. The next morning he is up before his mother, working on his schoolwork and eating a healthy breakfast of grapefruit and toast on his own.

If the episode were to end here, the makeover would be complete. But of course, that does not happen. Rather than coming from Cartman himself, though, the regression is prompted by Mrs. Cartman. When Cesar turns down her invitation to see *Madame Butterfly*, Mrs. Cartman returns to her previous behavior, bribing her son with KFC and toys to go with her. The episode ends with the camera zooming in on Cartman's happy face as ominous music plays, the sort one would find in a possession film. This gaze alone is enough to tell us that Cartman's near-makeover will not come to completion. Cartman will not change permanently; in the next episode he will inevitably be back to his old cruel, racist, and selfish antics. In this turn of events,

as well as more generally, the show attributes Cartman's weight to his mother's actions and their dysfunctional relationship. The hope of restoring a nuclear family and "healthy" family life to Cartman is again thwarted, and he returns to his usual state of small-town despotism.

One episode that skewers weight loss rhetoric more generally, however, is the episode "Jared Has Aides." Prompted by the arrival of Subway spokesman Jared Fogle in *South Park*, the boys decide to get their own marketing deal with local restaurant City Wok by transforming Butters—first fattening him up and then slimming him down. In the meantime, Jared faces opprobrium from the town for admitting that his weight loss was helped by "aides," which the public inevitably hears as AIDS. The episode satirizes general ideas of weight loss, but it reserves particular critique for Jared and his corporate presentation, which, in the writers' view, mislead the public with their suggestion that weight loss can be easily achieved. Of course, in the wake of the recent scandal with Jared, this episode has even more salience than when it aired in 2002, although the writers on *South Park* could scarcely have guessed at the time that Jared would lose his promotional deal on the basis of his sexual involvement with minors, nor that his defense team would claim that his problematic sexual appetites were linked to his Subway diet and subsequent weight loss, the result of trading a food addiction for sex addiction.⁵⁷ Had they known, they would have almost certainly capitalized on this fact.

As it is, the episode primarily criticizes Jared and his corporate backers for deceiving the public on the ease and means of weight loss. When he appears in *South Park*'s town hall, Jared declares to a cheering audience, "After a year of eating delicious sub sandwiches, I've proven weight loss is easy! I promise you I will always be your leader in easy weight loss!" (2.13). The "easiness" is emphasized twice, cuing the viewer in to what the episode will proceed to critique. For the moment, however, Cartman is sufficiently awed, saying "That guy ate all the sandwiches he wanted and lost weight. He is so cool." Of course, Jared did not eat "all the sandwiches he wanted," and the viewer is quickly disabused of this notion when the boys meet Jared backstage. Jared admits to the boys that he ate only "a half-size lean turkey sandwich with no mustard or

⁵⁷ Fogle was sentenced in 2015 to over 15 years for sexual encounters with minors and charges related to child pornography. It was reported by the Indianapolis Star and subsequently cited by sites like *Jezebel* and *Chicagoist* that during the trial a forensic psychiatrist testified that Fogle's weight loss had evoked his hypersexuality, thus making him trade a "horrible food addiction for a horrible sex addiction." (cited Emma Gallegos, "Jared Fogle's Bonkers Defense Blames 'Mild Pedophilia' On Weight Loss," *Chicagoist*)

mayo or anything like that,” but, as this information appears in the “fine print” of the commercials, Jared feels he is not being deceptive (3.17). Kyle, however, is not satisfied with this explanation, saying “But you’re lying to people! If they knew you didn’t just eat all the sandwiches you want, you might not be so popular!” and insisting “it matters” when Jared appears genuinely perplexed. As they digest the meeting, all the boys express their disappointment with Jared. In a telling exchange, Kyle again notes the deceptive aspect of Jared’s persona, saying, “That penis-butt didn’t lose weight eating sub sandwiches. He lost weight because he ate less of them and exercised.” Stan responds, in a clear cultural commentary, that “it’s only in America somebody can become famous just because they go from being a big fatass to not being a big fatass.” While this comment may seem derogatory to fat people, suggesting that compliance with a social norm is to be expected rather than lauded, it can also be read in more generous terms as it discredits the supposedly inherent value of weight loss and suggests it is not a genuine feat to be celebrated. For people who receive positive feedback for every pound lost, this is a potentially liberating stance. The American obsession with redemptive transformation is so strong, however, that such weight loss success stories become elevated in the public sphere, even if the person lacks any other talent. Jared is the perfect example of this phenomenon in his apparent averageness and lack of charisma.

Although the boys are disillusioned with Jared, that does not stop them from trying to replicate his success on their own scale. Initially, it seems that Cartman would be the perfect candidate for such a plan, but instead he volunteers Butters, arguing that he cannot do it himself: “I can’t lose weight, Butters, because I’m not fat. I’m big-boned. You can’t slim down bones, stupid.” Skeptical and fearful as ever that he will be grounded by his parents, Butters is eventually convinced when the boys sing an impromptu song for him in the style of Jared’s Subway advertisements: “His name is Butters, it’s Butters/Used to be fat, but not no more/City Wok brought him down to a size four/Now he’s got lots of money and girls/And a lifetime of free food at City Wok...” From this point, Butters becomes symbolic of the victimization of the American consumer, who is entreated to eat to excess, then berated for being fat, and finally punished if weight loss attempts go awry.

The boys' plan entails two abject phases—the gaining and the losing. To gain weight, the boys take Butters to the Chef, who makes them all kinds of food that they feed to Butters. When he vomits from being so stuffed, they entreat him to eat that too. By the second act, Butters has become fat and they bring him to the owner of City Wok, who seems receptive to the idea of having a spokesman. As a result, the second phase begins. In a clear parody of makeover shows like *The Biggest Loser*, Cartman berates Butters at the gym as he works the rowing machine, yelling "You are such a flabby hunk of crap!" and "Nobody loves you!" When Butters objects that his parents still love him despite his size, Cartman changes his tone, saying in an understanding voice that he is "just trying to offer some motivational help." When Butters acquiesces, Cartman again abruptly switches back to yelling, "Row, you fat bitch! Look at them jelly rolls! Nobody loves you! You're not even a person!" In this switch from berating to helping tones, Cartman presents the two sides of affective domination in the reality television makeover, as defined by Brenda Weber—the tough love composed of equal parts shame and "love-power." Unfortunately for Butters and the boys, this quick trip to the gym does not cause Butters to drop the weight. Butters asserts that he followed the program, but "losing weight is harder than putting it on." Cartman immediately contradicts, yelling "No it isn't, stupid blubberbutt!" Having these words in Cartman's mouth is ironic, of course, given his own fatness. While he himself may be an example of the difficulty of losing weight, he criticizes Butters for being fat. The only solution they find is to perform liposuction surgery on Butters in his own home, which goes predictably wrong. Again, despite Butters' objections that he is feeling bad, the boys continue, eventually losing control of the tube, which sprays blood and fat everywhere as Butters is quickly reduced to deflated shape. Unlike *Family Guy*, in which the grotesque transformations usually take place off-camera, *South Park* shows here its willingness to play with the disgust engendered by abject fluids and their excessive transgression of the body's boundaries.

When Butters' parents arrive home, the boys scramble away, leaving Butters alone to answer for it. Instead of being concerned for his health, though, his parents (as is typical of them) are angry at his disobedience, shouting hyperbolically, "This is unbelievable! How many times have we told you not to have self-performed liposuction surgery in our house?" as Butters responds weakly, "Four times, Mom." In their punishment of Butters, his parents are not only



In a characteristically disgusting display, the boys of *South Park* perform amateur liposuction on friend Butters. (Source: Reddit)

symptomatic of parents who misdiagnose serious problems as disciplinary issues, but also symbolic of a larger society that punishes people for becoming fat (he has already been grounded for getting fat) and then offers no sympathy when attempts to get rid of that fat go wrong. Butters is stigmatized as fat, and then stigmatized for the liposuction, or as he later says when the boys come to collect him and present him to City Wok “You guys have already gotten me in dutch for getting fat, and then I got in double dutch for having liposuction, and now you’re asking me to be in triple dutch? Uh uh! I’ll never be that dutch.” Nevertheless, he agrees to go, only to find that the owner of City Wok no longer wants a “Jared” because Jared has been discredited for his statements about “aides” being the key to weight loss. Even after the controversy is cleared up and the town erupts in a celebration of the supposed fact that AIDS can now be joked about (a self-referential nod to the whole premise of the episode as well), the owner of City Wok offers only fifteen dollars for Butters’ endorsement, disappointing the great ambitions of the boys. Kyle attempts to soften the blow of this disappointment with a moral lesson, as he often does:

“But you know I’ve learned something today. It would have been wrong for us to exploit Butters’ weight loss because then lots of fat people would have believed it

and gone and eaten a ton of Chinese food instead of dieting properly. They'd still be fat, and we'd be responsible for their shattered dreams." (20.13)

Butters agrees, saying "Yeah, I don't like shattering fat people's dreams." While Kyle posits this as a great moral lesson learned in the process of their adventure, this point was rather clear from the beginning—it is exactly what Kyle had already criticized in Jared's position. Moreover, it seems rather inadequate in the face of Butters' suffering which has been, after all this trouble, for nothing. While Kyle posits their exploitation as a future potential, he fails to reflect on the personal suffering they have already visited on Butters. The question remains what "dieting properly" entails, and whether the search for that kind of dieting produces more bodily harm than good. Butters, of course, will return to his original appearance, apparently unchanged, but the effects of such extreme processes of gorging and liposuction on a real body are unlikely to be negligible.

Like the transformations of *Family Guy*, these episodes of *South Park* present episodic plots of weight change that are used for greater commentary, but ultimately have no narrative consequences. The characters do not change for good. Instead, these short narrative adventures venture into imagined alternate realities, only to ultimately reject them. With their refusal to enact permanent change on their characters even as they recall the media narratives of weight loss that fit the popular mold, they subvert the teleologies of makeover. In the meantime, however, these episodes demonstrate the elasticity of their narrative structure in the elasticity of the bodies they depict.

CONCLUSION

The sitcom does not have the best reputation. It is dismissed as formulaic and static, featuring cyclical plots and stereotyped characters who never grow or develop. At the same time, its didacticism and often less-than-subtle moral messaging also make it subject to critique. For these reasons, the typical conventions of the sitcom are easily satirized and the genre is often left out of discussions of "quality television." This dismissal of the sitcom fails on two counts, however. Firstly, it denies the ways in which the genre has developed in recent decades, often

taking on the high production values, self-referential style of televisuality, and enhanced seriality often associated with “quality.” Secondly, and more importantly, this judgment fails to account for the ways that the generic conventions of the sitcom and its plots—cyclical plots in which nothing really changes for good—may paradoxically provide ideological counterbalance to the teleologies of makeover narratives, which have become ubiquitous in the forms of reality television. Whereas the makeover divides time into “before” and “after,” suggesting that transformation is absolute, the sitcom bears witness to more long-term and subtle changes, capturing the ongoingness of life that rarely lives up to the one-dimensional promise of the makeover, but rather is composed of multiple overlapping strands and temporalities.

In terms of fatness, the generic conventions of the sitcom are potentially liberating in that they allow characters to remain fat, as we have seen in this chapter. Once the sitcom casts a fat character, he or she tends to stay fat. It is notable, moreover, that the sitcoms taking on the themes of fatness are often not those highly praised examples of televisual single-camera sitcoms, but rather those that are more traditional and multi-camera in their style. Neither *Mike & Molly* nor *Miranda*, for example, are known for their stylistic innovations, and are in fact rather disregarded for their adherence to more traditional modes. But even the most self-referential and critically acclaimed series either avoid the topic of fatness altogether, preferring to depict thin, rich characters (e.g. *Arrested Development*), or employ fat characters as simple accessories to the main plots. *It's Always Sunny in Philadelphia*, generally well-regarded, makes a stylistic innovation in terms of weight by making Mac fat for one season, skewering the teleologies of makeover and the tendency for sitcom stars to become more attractive over time, but undoes this move when he returns to his former size and shape. *Mike & Molly* and *Miranda*, by contrast, allow their characters to stay fat, even as they reflect on makeover culture and weight loss. This is not to say that their fat politics are entirely revolutionary. *Miranda*, after all, refuses to identify herself as fat altogether. In *Mike & Molly*'s case, the relationship to weight is also particularly ambivalent—while the characters stay fat, they are also perpetually shown trying to lose weight and following the Overeaters' Anonymous program (as well as Weight Watchers, at times). The show clearly embodies the contradictory impulses of the television market to capitalize on fat issues while also imbibing the dictates of makeover culture. In this way, these sitcoms indicate a

tacit support of fatness *de facto*, although the fat politics as espoused by characters often obscures this support.

In the case of the animated programs *Family Guy* and *South Park*, their attitude toward weight loss is also tied to their satire of the sitcom as well as larger social critique. Both these programs display a tendency to bring the teleology of the makeover and the cyclicity of the sitcom in direct conflict. Therefore, while they produce plots that mimic the makeover, satirizing its tropes and elements all along the way, they ultimately subvert its logic by reversing the makeover right before or right after the “after” is achieved. In the case of *Family Guy*, the boomeranging back to the start is made explicit and absurd by the employment of deus ex machina to return characters to their previous bodies, whether they were fat or thin. Thus in the last moments Peter drinks a tub of lard to regain his fat, while Lois’s fat is removed in the course of heart surgery; their bodily contrast is ultimately preserved. In *South Park*, the reformation of Eric Cartman is attempted, but never brought to full completion. Likewise, while Butters is forced by the boys to gain weight in “Jared Has Aides,” he loses it in a grotesque self-performed liposuction, which is ultimately for naught, leading to no great fame and fortune as they had hoped. In carrying out extreme and grotesque weight plots, both of these series demonstrate the narrative elasticity of animation, as well as the self-reflexivity that allows them to satirize the makeover and sitcom simultaneously.

Ultimately, these sitcoms and their satirical animated cousins allow their characters to stay as they were, whether that is fat or thin. While more subtle changes certainly do take place as the series age, these changes do not drastically change the embodiments of the characters, who remain recognizable and familiar. A cynical reading of these shows might suggest that they keep their characters fat just so that they may continue to make fat jokes at their expense, and certainly this is partially true; the live action sitcoms certainly derive part of their comedic effect from the physical humor and verbal jabs at the characters’ weight. Likewise, the fat animated characters of Peter Griffin and Eric Cartman can hardly be said to be “positive” depictions of fatness; they are, respectively, a bumbling oaf and a selfish sadist. The fat men in this programs are inevitably linked to fat stereotypes of downward mobility. Yet even when fatness is linked to a character who is fundamentally unsympathetic, such as Eric Cartman, it breeds a certain comfort and

familiarity in its stability. The world may change, crazy things may happen (and in the world of animation, they often do), but the characters stay the same. Their fat bodies are allowed to exist. In their very existence they embody the resistance to the siren song of weight loss. There is a twitch of joy watching Cartman talk back to the adult world and resist its discipline with all the profanity he can muster. As long as such programs continue to write or draw parts for fat characters, they will provide an important deviation from the mainstream narratives of fatness and its reformative teleologies.

PART THREE

LINES AND CURVES: FEMINISM, WEIGHT LOSS, AND NARRATIVE IN THE PRIMETIME SERIAL

“A line and a curve—nothing goes better together.” Sal Romano

When Salvatore Romano utters this line in the course of an episode from the second season of AMC’s *Mad Men*, he is talking about the complementary nature of two “types” of women, exemplified by two female icons of the 1960s—the straight lines of Jackie Kennedy and the curves of Marilyn Monroe (2.6). If we read Sal’s statement on another level, though, we might consider how the curves of the body complement a different kind of line—a storyline. Sal’s dialogue here comes in the course of the episode “Maidenform,” which is all about different kinds of femininity and the images of women that propagate them. The premise of the episode is that the ad agency Sterling Cooper is asked to create an advertisement for lingerie manufacturer Playtex; in the process of developing the campaign, a great deal of sexism in the office is exposed. Not only do the men of the agency lock out Peggy Olson, the sole woman on the team, from the creative process; they also come up with a male fantasy of femininity for the ad because, as Paul Kinsey says unironically, “bras are for men” (02.06, 21:03). The resulting pitch for Playtex stems from Paul’s assertion that all women are either a “Jackie” or a “Marilyn.” Peggy, in response, criticizes the idea, also pointing to her own embodiment as evidence that not all women can be categorized in this manner. Instead of acknowledging her point, though, the men simply imply that her position outside of these two types is a failure on her part to adequately perform femininity. Embedded in Peggy’s story arc, this episode reflects both on Peggy’s female body and her position at Sterling Cooper, which are so intimately tied together.

By meditating on the body and images of women, this episode, like others in the series, indicates *Mad Men*’s commitment to addressing issues of gender. The incredible sexism displayed by characters in the show is clearly linked to the pre-women’s liberation setting of the series; the 1950s and 1960s have often figured in US public discourse as a time of conservative

values which have since been abandoned. The temporal setting of *Mad Men*, then, might give the viewer the sense that sexism is a relic of that time. However, as Anne Helen Petersen notes, *Mad Men* also shows us how little has changed:

Narratives that reproduce the past are always, at least in part, commentaries on the present, and one of the many devastating realizations prompted by the last six and a half seasons of *Mad Men* is that racism, sexism, and homophobia may no longer operate on the surface of most of our everyday interactions, but that doesn't mean they've disappeared. They've been sublimated, swallowed up by the rhetoric of a post-racial, post-feminist, post-gay America in which everyone is equal and free to choose what makes them happy. ("What Peggy Olson Taught Me")

In other words, all sorts of discrimination, including sexism, still persist, even if their expression has become more covert and systemic rather than overt and personal. The neoliberal rhetoric of choice and freedom simply masks these inequities.

One thing that has changed relatively little is the prescriptions for women regarding their appearance. If anything, this focus on the female body has only intensified in the wake of women's gains in other areas, like the workplace. Naomi Wolf, in *The Beauty Myth*, was one of the first to clearly discuss the apparent paradox between women's increased status in society and decreased agency in terms of appearance. Other feminists agree that the increased focus on female appearance after the feminist movement reflects a larger change; "cultural expectations have progressively shifted away from what a woman is allowed to *do* onto what a woman is allowed to *look like*" (Hartley, 62). A key part of "what a woman is allowed to look like" is being thin. Nevertheless, the history of feminism has often had an ambivalent relationship to fat acceptance; as Amy Erdman Farrell demonstrates in her book *Fat Shame*, this difficult relationship in the United States can be traced through the various feminist waves, from the suffrage movement—in which both advocates of women's suffrage and their opponents depicted each other as fat—to the present. The fat acceptance movement, for its part, has often been uncomfortable with radical feminist factions within its ranks, as the early split between the

radical lesbian feminist Fat Underground and NAAFA⁵⁸ demonstrates. However, if we take into account the volume of media discussing body image and gender, we can surmise that there is an increasing consensus that fat is, as Susie Orbach declared decades ago, a feminist issue.

Primetime serials (PTS) often reflect on the demands on women to look a certain way, and one key factor in these considerations is weight. Given fat's contested meanings, particularly within contemporary culture, however, it is difficult for series to celebrate fat women outright, even when fatness is made an explicit issue. *Mad Men*, for example, depicts two different storylines of weight gain and loss for its female characters—Peggy in the early part of the series (seasons 1-2), and Betty in later seasons (5-6). Ostensibly, *Mad Men* uses these storylines to critique the gender relations of the time period and explore how being fat is perceived to interfere with gendered roles and expectations. When Peggy gains weight, she becomes the subject of gossip in the workplace; because her value is tied to her sexual availability and attractiveness, she suffers a loss in status. Likewise, when Betty gains weight, she struggles to perform as the beautiful and dutiful wife to her second husband, Henry. Although these story arcs appear to reflect on femininity and critique sexist expectations, they are troubling from a fat studies perspective in that they use padding and prosthetics to make the actresses fat, and soon return them to their “normal” states. In fact, *Mad Men* scarcely employs fat actresses, and certainly not for important roles. While Christina Hendricks, the actress who plays Joan Holloway, is often celebrated for her “curves,” it seems her casting is only possible because her character is highly sexualized and her hourglass figure fits into a particular masculine fantasy of voluptuousness that includes a large bosom and a tiny waist. It is no accident that Paul Kinsey labels her a “Marilyn.” Looking at *Mad Men* from the contemporary preoccupation with weight, then, it becomes clear that it mostly confirms the prescriptions for women’s thinness, reinforcing in the present what it purports to critique in the past.

⁵⁸ NAAFA was founded as National Association to Aid Fat Americans, but is now called National Association for the Advancement of Fat Acceptance. The Fat Underground, led by radical feminists such as Judy Freespirit and Summer-Vivian Mayer (known as Aldebaran), split from NAAFA in the 1970s. Arguing that treatment of fat people was “mystified oppression” and needed to be fought with “radical therapy,” the Fat Underground (also known by their intentionally defiant acronym FU) advanced their agenda by directly confronting doctors and people selling weight loss products. See Farrell 142-145.

Other dramas, or comedy-dramas, however, do something different with the fat female body, critiquing the gendered expectations of thinness as part of a larger feminist project. These include the short-lived comedy-drama *Huge*, produced for ABC Family for only one season in 2010, and the critically-acclaimed British E4 series *My Mad Fat Diary*. These two series share remarkable characteristics, most notably their main protagonists, who are both outspoken fat teenage girls who struggle to assert their worth in a fat-hating society. Both are also placed in a context of transformation that goes beyond the usual changes of teenage—in *Huge*, Willamina “Will” Rader has been sent to a weight loss camp for teens, while Rachel “Rae” Earl of *My Mad Fat Diary* is trying to recover her mental health after a suicide attempt and stay in a residential clinic. As characters who question authority, however, both demonstrate an ambivalent relationship to weight loss and conventional femininity. While Will initially adamantly rejects the rhetoric and goals of the weight loss camp and eventually comes to a less antagonistic relationship with the camp setting, Rae undergoes an opposite development—initially she tries to lose weight, but soon gives up the process to focus on accepting her body as it is. Like the reality television makeover *I Used to Be Fat* and documentary *Jung und Dick!* discussed in Chapter Two, these two series exploit the temporal moment of teenage to produce narratives of growth and independence. Unlike their “reality” counterparts, however, *Huge* and *MMFD* ultimately suggest that the true transformation to be sought is not one of the body, but of perception, especially one’s perception of oneself. This different perception, in turn, allows one to assert one’s embodiment in a new way that goes beyond shame. In making this move, these series are more in line with fat studies and feminism than many other programs typically discussed as “quality” television.

The following chapter will discuss the role of weight loss with regard to gender and femininity in the narratives of the three aforementioned dramas—*Mad Men*, *Huge*, and *My Mad Fat Diary*. In all three, it is notable that the discussion of weight loss is primarily focused on the female characters. Although *Huge* provides a range of fat male characters as well, and *MMFD* also presents a fat man, Liam, the female characters take center stage in both of these programs. Weight is assumed to be more of a problem for women, and thus more interesting in regard to these characters. In the end, as I will argue in the chapter, weight allows each series to reflect on

gender and the body in a larger sense. To address the role of these weight loss plots in regard to gender, the chapter will first consider how the series respond to media images of femininity, particularly in advertising, and then look at the individual weight loss story arcs of individual characters in each series: in *Mad Men*, both Peggy and Betty; in *Huge*, Will; and in *My Mad Fat Diary*, Rae.

I. THE PRIMETIME SERIAL: QUALITY TELEVISION, GENDER, AND STORYTELLING

Before considering the role of the body and gender in particular dramas, it is worth considering the format of the genre itself. As a serial format, drama (or longer-format comedy-drama, as *Huge* and *MMFD* are generally labeled) offers distinct advantages for the portrayal of a weight loss plot. Serialization means that space is given to longer story arcs—the slow development of characters over multiple episodes or even seasons ensures that a certain realism can be achieved in terms of weight loss. As evident in the previous discussion of the sitcom, the relative open-endedness of serial television defies the teleology imposed on other formats, such as reality television makeovers. Instead of wrapping up a character's entire story in one episode, as is the case for many makeover shows, these primetime serials (PTS) must balance different kinds of narrative closure, ending story arcs at different times. As Michael Z. Newman argues, narrative and commercial demands ensure that “serials are under increasing pressure to offer episodic pleasures to casual viewers at the same time that they offer additional, serialized pleasures to their faithful regulars.” (20)

PTS are also the television programs most likely to be labeled as “quality television.” Newman argues that this is because the PTS is a “character-driven form, and this is one thing that makes it more easily figured as ‘quality TV’ in popular and critical discourse” (23). This type of character focus differs from sitcoms and other formats, however, in that it is more about characters’ reactions to unfolding events rather than a stable familiarity bred on repetition. That is, PTS demonstrate a focus on the story arc of each individual character, or what Newman calls “plot stated in terms of character” (23). Whereas sitcoms or other types of programs can often be viewed individually or in a random order without losing much narrative content, PTS are more

likely to require foreknowledge and encourage sequential viewing. Moreover, multiple character arcs exist simultaneously and are woven together; each episode’s plot has implications for each character in their narrative trajectories. As Sarah Kozloff also notes, the “strategy of proliferating storylines diffuses the viewer’s interest in any one line of action and spreads that interest over a larger field” (75). The simultaneity of different plot strands also requires viewers to be more attentive, especially when the series features a large ensemble cast, as many PTS do. In considering the following weight loss plots, then, it is important to consider them both in relation to the larger arcs of the characters as well as in relation to competing storylines that are presented simultaneously (e.g. in the same episode).

The PTS associated with quality television provide an ideal format for long-form stories of weight gain and loss, but at the same time, series identified as QTV often have a problematic relationship to gender. It is telling that the core canon of television series that have been designated as QTV in the current “golden age”—*The Sopranos* (1999-2007), *The Wire* (2002-2008), *Breaking Bad* (2008-2013), and *Mad Men* (2007-2015)—were all made by male showrunners and feature male protagonists whose character arcs are remarkably similar, characterized by midlife crisis, illness, double lives, and vice.⁵⁹ Certainly many of these series are also interested in their female characters, and have been influenced by feminism. But even those series that purport to critique the sexist conditions of the period and society they depict—like *Mad Men*—nonetheless place male characters at the center. TV criticism sometimes also falls into a similar trap, romanticizing male actors and showrunners. Brett Martin, in his aptly-titled book *Difficult Men*, for example, acknowledges there is a gender bias in QTV and also that the “autocratic power of the showrunner-auteur scratches a peculiarly masculine itch” (13), but still indulges in scratching this itch when he describes the men of QTV. Martin opens his book by painting a romantic picture of James Gandolfini as a turbulent and enigmatic genius in contrast to his costar Edie Falco, who appears more as a competent craftswoman: “Blessed with a near photographic memory, Falco could show up for work, memorize her lines, play the most

⁵⁹ These are the four series that Brett Martin, like others, identifies in his book *Difficult Men*. Martin argues that these three series, while not the only QTV series of note, are those most indicative of the “creative revolution” in television starting with *The Sopranos*.

emotionally devastating of scenes, and then return happily to her trailer to join her regular companion, Marley, a gentle yellow Lab mix,” (1). In addition to such slightly patronizing depictions, Martin’s book is telling in that it takes the men of QTV as its subject, yet does not discuss them in terms of their masculinity.

In many popular television series, women are mostly important as they relate to men, and their bodies are generally aestheticized as erotic objects or ignored. As Lili Loofbourou argued in a piece on *Salon* about *Game of Thrones* in June of 2014, the gender question is not only a question of feminist narrative content, but also a question of style. Loofbourou does not assume that the eroticization of female bodies is bad *per se*. She argues persuasively, however, that prestige TV fails the female gaze by refusing to eroticize male bodies in the same way it does female bodies through camera movement, lighting, etc. The problem “isn’t just that women onscreen are marginalized from the narrative (though they are [...]), it’s that the women in the audience are getting physically marginalized too.” As she says provocatively, “[o]nly male arousal wins awards.” Rejecting the traditional feminist dialectic of pleasure and danger, Loofbourou does not treat pleasure itself as suspect, but rather criticizes the unequal distribution of visual pleasure. The problem is not pleasure; the problem is that it is pleasure *for some and not for others*. Or, in a more political sense, “it’s about who has the right to be turned on.” In her nuanced feminist critique of the gender politics of the PTS while asserting the importance of its erotic powers, Loofbourou aligns herself with those feminist “visual pleasure libertarians” whom Merri Lisa Johnson identifies in her discussion of the rhetoric of pleasure and danger in third wave feminism (Johnson 15). While she appreciates the storylines given to female characters, she argues that their treatment by the camera should be equitable as well. Rather than give up the eroticization of bodies altogether, Loofbourou calls on the makers of quality television to allow the camera to gaze as lovingly and longingly at male bodies as female bodies.

While Loofbourou does not explicitly talk about fat issues, her observations about the eroticization of the body in television is important in that it foregrounds the ways in which gender in television is intimately tied up with the body, both in terms of character and viewer. From this perspective, it also becomes clear why the fat female body is particularly ignored in quality television; discounted as both undesirable and undesiring, the fat female body is left out

of the erotic relationships produced both between characters and between character and viewer. The fat viewer is also left out, seeing no reflection of him- or herself onscreen. Television neither admits desire for fat, nor caters to the desires of fat people, especially fat women. In this respect, the recovery of pleasure for both fat characters and viewers is a pertinent question for feminists and theorists of media and gender. It will not do to eroticize both male and female bodies if only thin ones are allowed in quality television.

It is important to remember, however, that “quality” was not always associated with this type of male-centered programming (it is not, as some might assume, How It Is and How It Has Always Been). In fact, as Robert J. Thompson lays out, when the term “quality TV” first became part of industry parlance, it referred primarily to those sitcoms produced by MTM in the 1970s, particularly the *Mary Tyler Moore Show*, which were very intimately tied to feminism. As Kirsten Lentz also notes in her article about 1970s feminist TV, these “quality” TV shows made by MTM were complemented and contrasted by what was called “relevance” programming. These shows, made by Norman Lear and epitomized by *All in the Family*, were racialized. It was here that the most controversial issues could be discussed and represented, but as Lentz argues, only within the confines of what she calls a “politics of the referent”— meaning that these programs were valued only in so far as they were believed to be realistic or “authentic.” The “quality” shows, on the other hand, could indulge in a highly self-referential “politics of the signifier,” by showing how television as a medium itself is constructed.

Of course, “quality” and “relevance” no longer operate as these distinct categories. While the “politics of the signifier” remains important to series like *Mad Men* which explicitly reflect on the creation of images, it is now the most highly-regarded QTV shows that tackle controversial issues of race, crime, sex, etc. In terms of gender and weight loss, though, there remains a tension between the “politics of signifier” and “politics of the referent,” and it may be worthwhile to resurrect these categories to describe a larger contradiction between ostensible feminist content and actual body politics. How weight gain and loss are handled in the narrative is important, but so are the extratextual means employed by the series to produce the fat body— whether it means hiring a fat actress or throwing a thin actress into a fat suit. Often the

apparently feminist message is lost on the level of the body, neglecting fat women onscreen and female viewers alike.

A simple solution would be to advocate for more roles for fat women on TV. As Jerry Mosher cautions, however, more screen time for fat characters does not necessarily mean better representations. Even more sympathetic portrayals may reinforce the “pornographic signification” of fat flesh (Mosher 171) or “unwittingly suture the viewer into a ‘sizist’ perspective” (Mosher 171-172). Moreover, in the push to consider such diversity, there may be a temptation to argue for “authenticity”—the need to show the “real” experience of “real” women who have “real” (imperfect) bodies. Making this argument runs the risk of devaluing certain bodies as fake/plastic/etc. in favor of other more “authentic” ones, and perhaps may limit series featuring fat women to the “politics of the referent” and its insistence on realism. In any case, there is something to be said for the simple acknowledgement that a) women, fat or not, have bodily desires that deserve to be addressed and b) the denial of the validity of those desires produces a different and difficult social reality for fat women. Ideally, both the “politics of the signifier” and “politics of the referent” would be used to make compelling storylines for women that contest received notions of gender and the fat body. Series like *Huge* and *My Mad Fat Diary*, while generally ignored by television scholars, are innovative precisely because they integrate these two levels, both “talking the talk” of the signifier (reflecting on the construction of images) and “walking the walk” of the referent (employing fat actresses, catering to female desire).

II. THE SELF-REFLEXIVE IMAGE, OR THE POLITICS OF THE SIGNIFIER

In the second episode of *Huge*, Will, the main protagonist, cuts up the glossy pictures of women from a teen magazine, rearranging their thin limbs to spell the words “screw body fascism” in body parts on her wall. When questioned, she responds with self-aware irony, “When I see propaganda that I know is destroying girls’ brains, it’s my duty as an angry feminist to destroy it.” (03.50). Will’s defense displays not only a critical appraisal of media, but also her self-awareness as an “angry feminist”; cleverly, the joke itself also disproves the very stereotype

she invokes—in joking about her humorlessness, Will shows she is not a feminist killjoy devoid of humor. In this scene, as in others, *Huge* demonstrates its self-reflexivity; like the other two series to be discussed in this chapter, it is aware of the power of the image, and of itself as a series of moving images. These series use this awareness to deconstruct images of femininity, not only in advertising, for example, but in the development of the characters, showing how they respond to images of the female body as well as understand their own bodies in relation to those images. Will’s act of cutting up the magazine is not only indicative of her opposition to such media, but also symbolic of a type of critical feminist praxis that takes the sexist products of mass media, cuts them up, and creatively refashions them to critique their assumptions, producing a message opposite to the original. Will’s creative rearrangement is also emblematic of the show’s approach, taking all the typical elements of a makeover show—weight loss setting, fat teens, gendered expectations—and doing something different with these components.

“Maidenform,” the episode of *Mad Men* cited at the beginning of this chapter, is also significant in its self-reflexive deconstruction of femininity. On the surface, the episode is about how women see themselves through men in a patriarchal society, or, rather, how men mistakenly assume that women see themselves only in relation to men. The premise of the episode, involving lingerie, is a perfect way to allow the series to meditate on the body, femininity, and the power of images in the lives of characters. The product to be sold, the brassiere, is significant not only as something marketed exclusively to women, but also as a product that clings to and shapes the body. We might consider lingerie as a sort of secondary shaping in that the body’s contours have already been conditioned to reflect gendered ideals, including thinness, but the bra adds a layer of “packaging.” The bra also serves a dual purpose—providing support and comfort for the breasts and heightening sexual attractiveness of the wearer. The conflict between these two functions—one that serves the needs of the woman wearing the bra, and the other, which intends to satisfy the desires of the sexual partner (presumably a man) viewing it—structures the entire episode. Similarly, this contrast is about the difference between experiencing the body in three dimensions and viewing it in two. As one model auditioning for the Playtex campaign remarks of the casting process, “Well they fall in love with a picture of you and then you come in and they’re disappointed. But it doesn’t make any sense because all they need is a picture.” This

play between 2D and 3D and back can be understood as a larger comment about gender relations; men fall in love with a 2D “picture” of women and are disappointed to find that the 3D version does not live up to their expectations, but this disappointment is irrelevant if all they want is a picture to begin with. In a way, this comment suggests that men are more comfortable with women remaining in two dimensions, flat and easy to read, rather than three-dimensional; to see women in three dimensions would be to consider their “roundness” rather than their visual surfaces, and thus to acknowledge them as existing for themselves, outside of men.⁶⁰

The visual language of the episode supports this theme of image versus reality, stressing mirrors and images as reflective surfaces to explore the ways in which both literal and figurative reflections of the body interact with questions of gender and representation. The episode opens with the three main female characters (Betty, Joan, and Peggy) getting dressed for the day. Each is shown in her lingerie, looking in the mirror, appraising her body as she dresses. The minute-long montage, accompanied by the first verse of The Decemberists song “The Infanta,” is abruptly ended with a cut to a close-up of a magazine being dropped on a table to reveal the Maidenform advertisement that gives the episode its title (see appendix). The ad, an actual vintage example of Maidenform’s long-running advertisement series, shows a woman, arms outstretched, standing before a train; her bra is triumphantly exposed and the copy reads, “I dreamed I stopped them in their tracks with my Maidenform bra.” The shot makes the image confront us suddenly, with the same provocative and triumphant gesture as the model’s pose in the ad. Soon thereafter, we learn about the premise that will structure the entire episode. The client for Sterling Cooper is not, in fact, Maidenform but Playtex, whose executives have suggested that they would like to do something in the same vein as their competitor. Next to Maidenform’s imaginative and colorful, almost surrealistic, ad, Playtex appears dowdy and old-fashioned; their ad is in black and white, and as we learn from the dialogue, stresses fit and functionality over the evocation of a female fantasy.

⁶⁰ This is precisely what happens to Pete Campbell, who is the one chatting up the model when she makes the cited comment. When Pete goes back with her to her place for a sexual encounter, he is disturbed to come face to face with her mother; the model, teasing him, says, “What, you didn’t think I had a mother?” Pete, in pursuing her sexually, has flattened her into a sexual fantasy and is disturbed to find her a whole person. When he comes home, he is the one made flat, confronted by his own reflection.

The irony of the situation is that both Playtex and the men of Sterling Cooper assume that the creation of a female fantasy to be marketed to women can be done entirely without the input of women themselves. Peggy is initially consulted about her own personal consumption, asked quite directly by Ken which brand she wears and why; she replies that she agrees with the women they surveyed about the superior fit of Playtex. This is the last time her opinion is asked, however; from this moment on she becomes increasingly ignored. Her contribution is reduced to the sort of focus group feedback the secretaries regularly provide, while the men do the creative work. They go out and come up with their own brilliant idea over drinks, scribbling their concept on a cocktail napkin. Peggy's exclusion from the creative process represents the ways in which women's voices are excluded, even when the product is supposed to be marketed to them. Because, as Paul says and the others assume, "bras are for men," women do not even need to be at the table when determining how lingerie is meant to be sold; the male fantasy of seeing the bra trumps the female experience of wearing it. The patronizing attitude toward Peggy, and by extension all women, is epitomized when Freddy dismisses Peggy's objections, telling her to "go write me some titillating copy" and giving her a slap on the thigh with his folder. The bodily gesture, bordering on sexual harassment, visibly jars Peggy, driving home the point that this is also about sexism that has bodily consequences.

More importantly, the proposed campaign itself shows the short-sightedness with which the men approach the representation of women. The men's idea is derived from the idea that all women fit into two archetypes, embodied either by Jackie Kennedy or Marilyn Monroe. Paul, who takes credit for the idea, pitches it to Don by saying "Women right now already have a fantasy, and it's not going up the Nile. It's right here in America. Jackie Kennedy and Marilyn Monroe: every single woman is one of them." He illustrates the point by opening the office door and pointing out women in the secretary pool; the camera shifts from woman to woman as Paul pronounces them either "Jackie" or "Marilyn." The group of men standing at the door appraising women without their knowledge as the camera follows seems perfect for a Mulvey-esque reading of the male gaze. As Phil Maciak writes, "This show loves staging — almost literally — textbook examples of the male gaze," and this is one of those times. However, as Maciak goes on to say, the overt gaze in these moments is put there deliberately; the camera is "controlled by

these men's eyes so that those eyes can see something unexpected, jarring. The camera lingers on Joan's ass so that what it will eventually see is Peggy Olson coming to life in the background" (Maciak). In this scene, that is precisely what happens; when the camera returns to the group of men in the doorway, Peggy's presence among them stands out, both because she is a woman and because her clothing stands out in the round of dark suits. As soon as the door closes and the discussion resumes, Peggy also provides a critical voice, saying that, "I don't know if all women are a Jackie or a Marilyn. Maybe men see them that way," (21.03). Paul, in response, argues that "women want to see themselves the way men see them." Whereas Peggy suggests a possible divergence between men's perception of women and their self-perception, Paul insists that women want to be exactly what men want; in this conversation it becomes clear that the campaign idea reflects a male fantasy of female fantasy, rather than a fantasy women have for themselves. Moreover, while Paul argues that the "to-be-looked-at-ness" of the bra trumps its practical value, Peggy argues for an experience through embodiment; after all, when asked why she wears Playtex earlier, she had mentioned its fit (2.08).

To criticize Paul's simple labeling of all women's bodies, Peggy also points to her own embodiment, asking "Which one do you think I am?" (21.18). As predicted, she is not perceived as either; instead Ken quips "Gertrude Stein." At one level, this is an admission that the easy binary categorization of "Jackie vs. Marilyn" is flawed; at the same time, it suggests that to be neither one nor the other means not to be a "real" woman at all, to be excluded from proper femininity and to share your identity with those stigmatized by alternative sexuality or embodiment (Stein as queer, masculinized and fat). It is also interesting that Ken would choose Stein given that Peggy's body is again thin at this point and therefore quite different from Stein's iconic roundness. Perhaps this comment indicates that the spectre of Peggy's formerly fat body still hangs over her, but it also simply indicates that Peggy is considered "other." Peggy's difference is also significant in terms of her entire character arc; Peggy's failure to be either "Jackie" or "Marilyn" sets her apart from the other female characters. At this point in the series, Joan is very clearly "a Marilyn" (or, as Paul says, "Marilyn's really a Joan and not the other way

around”),⁶¹ while Betty plays the role of “a Jackie,” both in her physical presentation and her long-suffering tolerance of her husband’s infidelity for the sake of “keeping up appearances.” Peggy, by being neither “the beautiful wife” nor “the sexy mistress,” has a position outside of the typical feminine roles of the time, one that both marks her negatively but also empowers her to a certain extent.

The “Jackie vs. Marilyn” binary is simplistic to begin with, but it is flattened even further when Don makes the pitch to the Playtex executives. By this point, the campaign has given up presenting the “Jackie” and “Marilyn” as two separate types and instead come to present them as two different sides of every woman. As Don says in his pitch, “Jacqueline Kennedy, Marilyn Monroe. Women have feelings about these women because men do. Because we want both, they want to be both” (35.57). The proposed advertisement emphasizes this duality by showing the same model posed in two different sets of lingerie, in black and white; the bra is to be called the “Harlequin.” Don’s pitch continues Paul’s earlier assertion that women want to be what men want, but in making this subtle step from two types of women to two sides of Woman, it doubles the expectations. It is no longer enough to be “Jackie” or “Marilyn”; one has to be both or, in common parlance, “a lady in the streets but a freak in the sheets.”

Peggy defies this prescription by being neither. In “Maidenform,” she begins to test the boundaries of what she is allowed to do; the episode, however, posits this mostly in terms of what she is allowed *to see*. When she objects to Freddy that “all [she] had to do was be in that bar” when the idea was dreamed up to be included, he replies, “Believe me, you didn’t want to be in that bar,” implying that she would have seen things that were improper for her gender. Likewise, she is not notified when casting begins, although a number of men have gathered to ogle the women auditioning. In the end, however, Peggy manages to wrangle her way into an outing with the guys, which significantly takes place at a strip club. Taking Joan’s advice to “learn to speak the language” of the men and “stop dressing like a little girl,” (35.50), Peggy puts on a sexy dress and arrives uninvited to the club where the men of Sterling Cooper are entertaining the Playtex executives. Despite the minor victory of inserting herself into the men’s

⁶¹ This comment adds another, intertextual level to the commentary, reflecting both how Joan’s character has been created in the series to evoke Marilyn Monroe and how the actress Christina Hendricks has become a sex symbol in her own right through *Mad Men*.

circle, it is clear that she cannot simply be “one of the guys.” Even though she is in the audience with the men, enjoying the show of exposed female bodies, she is also objectified and infantilized when the Playtex executive pulls her on his lap and asks what she wants for Christmas. Moreover, the camera presents her as the object of Pete’s gaze, which appears to disapprove of Peggy’s performance. Instead of objecting to either Pete’s judgemental look or the Playtex man’s harassment, Peggy goes along with it. As a career woman on the rise who questions the sexism around her, Peggy enacts a feminist fantasy of success, but the scene makes clear that Peggy will have to navigate uneasily between viewer and viewed, creative subject and objectified body.

Toward the end of the episode, however, the reflections shift to the men. Don, as confident as ever in his pitch to Playtex about the “flattering mirror” that the Jackie/Marilyn dichotomy presents to women, loses his veneer of perfection in the final scene. The episode closes with Don’s uneasy viewing of himself in the mirror and a conversation with his daughter, Sally, that reminds him of the unbridgeable distance between his image in her eyes, as perfect husband and father, and his reality—a serial philanderer who has a reputation among women. What shocks and disturbs Don is not only the thought that his daughter’s idealization of him is fragile and unwarranted, but the realization that women are talking about him in a way he cannot control. In the end, the episode which on one level is about men’s mistaken assumption that women see themselves only in relation to men turns out to be also about how men see themselves, and their own fractured masculinity, reflected in women.⁶²

Like Peggy in “Maidenform,” Rae of *My Mad Fat Diary* also finds herself caught between different images of femininity that she cannot fulfill on account of her embodiment, allowing the series to reflect on the body and femininity in a larger sense. One episode that introduces this

⁶² One could view this return to Don in “Maidenform” as characteristic of the series as a whole. Although the women in the series grow and change and get more screen time, Don is never quite decentered. As Emily Nussbaum writes about the series finale in *The New York Times*, Don Draper “finally proved himself as the show’s protagonist, making his place at center stage, as both man and brand, seem not just inevitable and logical but also deeply original.” Whether one shares Nussbaum’s view of Don’s centering as original, one may be disappointed as a feminist that his expected marginalization never fully occurs. Depending on how you view it, this return to Don is either disappointing, because it refuses to put Peggy center stage, or simply a reflexive reminder that all of this, or at least a significant portion, is about the vision of one single man—not Don, but Matthew Weiner, the show runner. In the end, although *Mad Men* is certainly the product of women as well as men, both in front of and behind the camera, it remains more tilted to the men’s side, more concerned with how the changing world of the 1960s produced crises of masculinity rather than how the rising career women of the time viewed themselves.

theme is “Alarm,” the first episode from the second season. The plot of the episode revolves around Rae’s developing relationship with Finn as she counts down the days to the beginning of college and struggles with her own self-image. Like in “Maidenform,” the episode presents different types of feminine bodies in comparison to each other; this is clear especially when the girls go shopping for lingerie (S2.01: 19.18). The shopkeeper describes the breasts of the three girls, saying first about Izzy: “30 B. These breasts are good, but small. They need lifting.” Then she moves to Rae, saying: “38 F. These breasts are good, but big. They need shaping.” Then Rae’s voiceover cuts in, saying “I felt like was in ‘Goldilocks and the Three Bears.’ Of course, guess whose tits were just like the baby bear’s porridge...” At this point the camera moves to a close-up of Chloe’s chest, the shot freezes, and a drawn sign appears at the top of the frame, announcing “Perfect Tit Awards.” After a first place ribbon, accompanied by a honking sound, appears, Rae’s voiceover finishes her sentence, proclaiming Chloe’s breasts “just right.” The shopkeeper affirms Rae’s pronouncement, saying “These breasts are very good. I don’t like them ‘cause I like a challenge and these breasts don’t bloody challenge me.” From this scene, it would appear that Chloe’s body is naturally perfect and both Rae and Izzy fall out of the frame of idealized femininity. It soon becomes clear, though, that Rae feels herself even further from the ideal than Izzy. As her voiceover in the shop continues, she says, “The worst thing, though, [...] was that a lot of this stuff was so nice. It was so pretty and delicate. It just wasn’t made for someone whose body wasn’t pretty, wasn’t delicate” (19.55). While this voiceover goes on, the camera shifts to a poster-sized advertisement on the wall of the shop, a typical lingerie ad with a thin model and the words “Hi Boys” in big letters. As the ad appears and the voiceover ends, a sound something like the drone of traffic begins, suggesting the emotional turmoil it inspires in Rae with its almost hypnotic powers. The image will appear multiple times in the episode, each time reminding Rae of her own inability to live up to the body standards it represents.

Despite Rae’s idea that the lingerie is not made for her body, she buys something and rushes to her new boyfriend Finn’s house, only to find him in the shower. The scene clearly enacts an erotic fantasy of Rae’s, and provides the viewer with similar voyeuristic pleasures. As Rae creeps to the partially-open door, we first see her face, and then a shot of Finn’s naked body from behind. As Rae’s eyes shift to his butt, so does the camera, just as the opening guitar line to

the Dire Straits song “Money for Nothing” kicks in and Rae mutters “Holy fuck” under her breath (21.24). Eventually Rae turns away from the door and goes home, but the image of Finn’s naked body refuses to disappear from her mind. As she flips through television channels at home, Finn’s butt appears everywhere, even appearing in the teletext as an 8-bit image under the headline “Hot Bum Makes Girl Cry” (22.17). In the voiceover Rae says “I feel like my mind has been poisoned by beauty” (22.21). While the naked image of Finn fulfills certain desires of both Rae and the viewer, it also creates a dilemma for Rae. Like the “Hi Boys” ad, the image of Finn naked presents a haunting ideal of bodily beauty that seems unattainable for Rae, who believes that her body is completely incongruous with his. Instead of acting on her desire, then, she repeatedly turns away from the sexual encounter. Unfortunately, Rae misdiagnoses the problem, finding fault in her own body rather than the advertisement, which has “poisoned” her mind with beauty in another sense.

Rae’s comparison of herself with the other girls continues, not only Chloe but also Izzy and especially the thin and popular Stacy Stringfellow. Just as she gets a view of Finn naked in “Alarm,” Rae catches a glimpse of Stacy nude as she gets into the shower after physical education class in the following episode “Radar”. Again, Rae cannot help but compare her own body to Stacy’s, and both to Finn’s. She assumes that Stacy and Finn have compatible bodies, while hers falls out of the frame. But *My Mad Fat Diary* does not allow Rae to succumb to the overwhelming power of the image, instead suggesting that she may be able to fight her own lack of self-esteem if she fights the image itself. This is made clear in “Radar” in which Rae sets fire to the “Hi Boys” billboard in a spectacular manner. The scene is later revealed to have been only a fantasy, but it nevertheless suggests that there is potential to disrupt the images of idealized femininity that have damaged her. If Virginia Woolf advocated for women to kill “the angel in the house” for the sake of their liberation, Rae must kill the Victoria’s Secret angel in her mind. The process is not perfect but, by the end of the second season, Rae has made so much progress that she feels comfortable entering into a sexual relationship with Finn, finally revealing her naked body to another person, something she has been unable to do throughout the entire series.

III. CURVES AND ARCS: INDIVIDUAL CHARACTERS AND THEIR WEIGHT LOSS PLOTS

Given that these series are so self-reflexive about images and femininity, one would expect that their “politics of the referent” would reflect a feminist project as well, extending to the weight loss plots to be discussed below. Unfortunately, this is not always the case. For *Mad Men* especially, there is a clear conflict between the avowed feminist politics of the show and the apparent lack of female embodiments that fall out of an idealized feminine frame. When characters challenge the prescription of thinness and become marked as fat, the series achieves this with the use of “fat suits” and body doubles, obscuring the actual female body of the actresses and implying that they will soon return to their “original” states. In *Huge* and *My Mad Fat Diary*, by contrast, fat actresses are employed and popular discourses of weight are challenged. In the following sections, the character arcs of the major characters in each series will be discussed in their relation to feminism and makeover culture.

***Mad Men* and Fat Women: Weight Loss, the Body, and QTV Storytelling**

To understand the weight loss story lines of *Mad Men*, it is important to consider how its particular storytelling shapes them. Generally accepted as part of the core canon of QTV in the current “golden age” of television, the series is often praised as a prime example for the resurgence of serial storytelling in primetime dramas. Brett Martin, for example, describes *Mad Men* as perhaps “the purest use of the new form of serialized TV” (261). According to Martin, series creator Matthew Weiner had a talent for distributing narrative pleasures across time: “Weiner understood innately the rhythms of thirteen one-hour episodes, the ways they could be made to serve an overarching narrative while simultaneously acting as discrete hour-long weekly ‘movies’” (261). The balance between episodic closure and narrative extension, Martin implies, is the key to producing episodes that both stand alone and move the narrative along in longer arcs. It is also necessary for the sake of verisimilitude. In the end, Martin concludes, “*Mad Men* used the ongoing, open-ended format to approach a kind of radical realism that went way beyond

whether, say, the refrigerator in the Draper home was the perfect shade of 1962 olive green. The show, in a vividly un-TV-like way, insisted on portraying how the passage of life *feels.*" (261). Paradoxically, Martin implies, this "feeling" of reality is produced not by the continuous development of events, but actually the *discontinuities* in the narrative, and it is presumably this refusal to fill in narrative gaps that makes it "un-TV-like." To support this claim, Martin cites Weiner on *The Sopranos*, the show he wrote for and very much admired before striking out on his own to make *Mad Men*:

The first season of *The Sopranos*, you literally felt like you were being dropped out of an airplane every episode," Weiner said. "You constantly had the sensation that you missed an episode: 'Everybody in this story seems to know that guy. Do I know that guy? Was he on last week? No, they act like they know that guy because they have a life without you. (Matthew Weiner, qtd. in Martin 261-262).

What makes *Mad Men* feel real, Martin implies, is that the characters live "a life without you"—while the viewer is privy to certain moments in the lives of characters, he or she does not occupy a privileged position that allows access to every event. Likewise, not all characters' motivations are laid bare for the viewer's scrutiny. Instead, the feeling of watching *Mad Men* is sometimes like experiencing "a child's rapt view of his parents' glamorous, mysterious doings" (Martin 262). Narrative gaps are employed strategically to produce this effect. This becomes especially clear in the breaks between seasons, which always involve a jump in time, sometimes up to an entire year. Incidentally, it is also these narrative gaps that allow the weight gain and loss plots of Peggy and Betty, respectively, to exist within the narrative—as will be discussed below, both story lines straddle the gap between seasons, opening up a space that fails to fully explain what happened in between.

This tendency to employ temporal gaps in the narrative, particularly between seasons, however, also produces irritation in some viewers. Lili Loofbourow, calling herself the "resident crank" of the Los Angeles Review of Books blog "Dear TV," argues that *Mad Men*'s narration is often unsatisfying precisely because it seems to be "allergic to *transitions*" (emphasis in original). She continues:

Whenever the “huge” thing happens on *Mad Men* — the moment we’ve been waiting for or the event we’re surprised by — the series goes stingy, retracts, and skips the aftermath. Seasons end on a cliffhanger and start again at some point in the future that pointedly ignores the appetite the finale created. Missing is what I, as a viewer, care most about: how the people I’ve watched and loved for so long are affected by whatever massive event I last witnessed. (Loofbourou, “*Mad Men Fantasies*”)

Loofbourou concludes from this narrative “stinginess” that the aesthetic of *Mad Men* is one that “privileges stasis over transition.” And while she admits there is both a “certain realism” as well as potential “poetry” in this stasis, she laments the seeming unidirectionality of *Mad Men*’s plots, particularly for those characters who occupy the most time and attention. As she writes, “Our core characters haven’t had arcs; they’ve had lines.” That is to say, the arcs of the core characters—a group to which both Peggy and Betty belong—have not risen and fallen, but rather remained flat. The characters seem doomed to repeat old mistakes, relatively unchanged by the experiences they have, as devastating as they may be. Why, Loofbourou asks rhetorically, does the series always return to the point from which it departed? Loofbourou even goes so far as to suggest that the series violates the boundaries of its genre in adopting this aesthetic; she wonders, “Why effectively limit a drama with this much texture to the constraints of the sitcom, which is structurally *forced* to continually reset to a baseline the way *Mad Men* repeatedly *chooses* to?” This lack of change not only reflects a certain narrative poverty, which Loofbourou associates with the sitcom, but also becomes even more glaring against the setting of the series in the decade between 1960 and 1970, a time marked by great upheaval. As incisive as Loofbourou’s arguments are, I would counter that the lines of *Mad Men*’s characters are not, in fact, flat, but rather that their arcs simply return to where they started; instead of flat lines, these story arcs are merely “boomerang plots.” Like in the sitcom, things happen, but they do not bring the characters who experience these events further, but rather bring them back to where they were. While a sitcom may complete this narrative circuit in the course of a single episode, however, *Mad Men* stretches this path over multiple episodes or a season, particularly utilizing the temporal gaps between seasons, between climactic moments and new beginnings, to slip in a

reversion to the mean. This return is sometimes even spatial; when Peggy strikes out on her own to join CGC, she thinks she is leaving Sterling Cooper and Don, only to be returned to her old workplace when the two agencies merge. Just as there seems to be no character growth within the world of Sterling Cooper and *Mad Men*, there appears to be no escape from its diegetic space either.⁶³

The weight plots of both Betty and Peggy are exemplary of Loofbourow's observations and this tendency of *Mad Men*'s plots to boomerang. Peggy's weight gain is chronicled in a series of episodes in season one, but her weight loss is completely left out, swallowed up by the temporal gap between the finale of season one and the premiere of season two, which takes place over a year later, in 1962. In Betty's case, it is the gain that is effaced by the season gap, while her weight loss is shown intermittently in the following season. Both arcs are significant in that they encompass both weight gain and loss, returning both characters to their baseline shapes in a matter of episodes. The two women have hardly had time to adjust to their changed embodiment before their bodies again revert to the previous size, seemingly unchanged and unmarked by the process. When the women become thin again, their bodies also become less contested and their size undiscussed; there is little suggestion that either woman finds it difficult to maintain her regained figure, or is particularly haunted by her fat past. These omissions are significant given that the real experiences of weight loss rarely conform to this simple return. In choosing to present weight gain and loss in this manner, *Mad Men* fails to imagine some truly interesting questions; what would it be like for either woman not only to *become* fat but to *stay* fat? Is it possible that the experience of having been fat and subsequently lost weight changes a woman's relationship to her body? Does the memory of having been fat matter?

It is also important that the bodies of the actresses remain untouched by the experiences; their fatness is produced by padding and prosthetics, easily removed when the narrative returns them to thinness. These techniques do not only obscure the actual female bodies of the actresses; they

⁶³ This is significant in that transgression—often the literal crossing of a spatial boundary—is identified by classical narratology (particularly Yuri Lotman) as necessary to produce a narrative event; without such transgression, nothing really “happens” in the text. In some ways, Peggy's entry into the world of Sterling Cooper apparently fulfills this criterion, but in fact, when the series begins, she is already in the building and there she stays. Ingrid Hotz-Davies has suggested to me that this pattern in *Mad Men* is perhaps indicative that serial television as a whole produces an absence of narrative events in Lotman's sense.

also mask the labor required for them to maintain their familiar figures. Both within and outside the narrative, then, *Mad Men* effaces the difficulty of weight loss and the labor necessary to produce lasting change, instead handling it as a temporary plot device that can be abandoned as easily as it was conjured up. This omission of labor runs counter makeover culture, which is, as Jones argues, all about the *labor revealed*. Instead of presenting the body as a project to be worked on, *Mad Men* assumes that the bodies of its female characters are pre-given and natural, even as it deconstructs their presentation in terms of femininity.

The following sections will examine how *Mad Men* creates both weight storylines with Peggy and Betty, and how these plots relate to questions of femininity as well as change vs. stasis, both in individual episodes as well as across seasons.

“All of a Sudden There’s Less of You”: Peggy’s Weight Gain and Loss

Weight loss becomes a theme in *Mad Men* late in the first season. Peggy’s weight gain first appears in “Shoot,” in which Ken Cosgrove comments that she is a “lobster” because “all the meat is in the tail.” In the same episode, her skirt tears at work and she is forced to borrow an outfit from Joan; with this telltale split seam, Peggy has very clearly entered “fat” territory. The sexist comments of the men show us that the weight gain has not gone unnoticed, and that her status in the office, more readily tied to her appearance than her competence, is threatened by this fact. It is only in the following episode (“Indian Summer”), though, that the whole topic of weight loss products and their advertising is introduced. As usual, the issues surrounding the product to be advertised dovetail with the issues of the protagonists, in this case Peggy. At this point, Peggy is still a newcomer to Sterling Cooper and Don’s secretary, rather than the savvy creative copywriter she will become. In “Indian Summer,” she is asked to do her second creative assignment, assessing a weight loss device called the Passive Exercise Regime that claims to stimulate the muscles of the abdomen to simulate calisthenic exercise. What it actually does is stimulate the wearer sexually, as Peggy soon finds out. On one level, the PER is simply emblematic of the flood of weight loss products that promise fantastic transformation and, more often than not, fail to deliver. Products of this type, in which the muscles are meant to be

electrically stimulated, are well-documented in the history of weight loss, and persist to this day, although their effectiveness is contested.⁶⁴ However, the apparently incidental effect of sexual stimulation here is in fact quite important to the episode and the series' feminist concerns. The contrast between the two functions of the product—the ostensible function of producing weight loss and the actual function of providing sexual pleasure—echo the similar contrast produced by the later episode “Maidenform” (as discussed above) between appearances and experiences of the body. Rather than projecting male desires onto the female body as in “Maidenform,” however, “Indian Summer” allows Peggy to utilize her own female body as a source of knowledge that runs counter to the ostensible aims of the product. Whereas weight loss seems to suggest a conformity with gendered notions of the body, and to stress again the visual sense—how women are to be seen by men—the alternative, sexual pleasure, offers a potential for women’s experience of their own bodies for their own sake, for a feeling of being in the body. The PER therefore offers a feminist fantasy of using the master’s tools against him, in which the ostensible patriarchal goals of the product are abandoned in favor of subversive female pleasure.⁶⁵

The theme of female pleasure therefore becomes central to the episode. This is true not only for Peggy but also for Betty; while Peggy encounters the product and attempts to design a way to market it, Betty is shown at home, experiencing her own sexual dissatisfaction. By alternating scenes with Peggy and Betty, the episode offers a look at both sides of the consumer-producer equation. While Peggy and the team represent the sales side of the product, Betty represents the ideal consumer—a beauty-conscious, sexually frustrated housewife from the suburbs. In the end, both women turn to masturbation to satisfy their desires. In this sense, this episode of *Mad Men* celebrates the decision of women to experience pleasure in their own bodies and determine their own sexual satisfaction. At the same time, the episode is about the difference between fantasy

⁶⁴ While the success of such Electrical Muscle Stimulation (EMS) products for weight loss is debatable, one can easily buy these devices, and a number of fitness sites online recommend their use for reducing fat and building muscle. In medicine, meanwhile, research is being done into gastric electrical stimulation to produce weight loss by controlling the rate at which the stomach is emptied (see, for example, Mizrahi et al, published on the NIH website).

⁶⁵ This fantasy, of course, may be illusory; as Audre Lorde argues in her famous talk, “the master’s tools will never dismantle the master’s house. They may allow us temporarily to beat him at his own game, but they will never enable us to bring about genuine change” (Lorde 111).

and reality; masturbatory pleasure is so attractive to the female characters precisely because sexual encounters with men in real life never seem to measure up.

The first look at Peggy in “Indian Summer” is a shot of her at her desk on the phone, talking to her mother, who is trying to set her up on a date. From this beginning, it is clear that Peggy is being subjected to the expectations of her family which prioritize her finding a husband over her career. Shortly thereafter, the PER is introduced in a group meeting of the guys. Initially, the device—a box with some dials and a wearable belt—is shown but its intended purpose is unclear. When Don asks about research results, Ken responds “Weight loss is a hard thing to prove” and it becomes clear that this is the goal of product. Don immediately contradicts, however, saying “No, it isn’t. It’s before and after pictures, since the dawn of time.” Don’s comment recalls the traditional mode of makeover, placing “before” and “after” pictures next to each other, and emphasizes the apparent simplicity and timelessness of such teleological transformation. Brainstorming, Don easily comes up with a name and a motto along these lines: “The Electracizer—for a slimmer, better you”. As soon becomes clear, though, this particular product cannot be marketed in the traditional way because the product does not, in fact, work. As Pete says, “there’s a fair amount of testimonials, but unfortunately none you can take a picture of,” implying that the women who produced the testimonials are either not attractive or thin enough to convince audiences that they have become “slimmer” and “better” by using the product. The men of the office corroborate the apparent failure of the product to induce weight loss—they have brought the device home to their wives but no one has reported weight loss. Freddy says of his wife: “She says the scales are the same, but she hasn’t given up on it like she does with diets after a week.” The puzzle, it seems, is that women view the product favorably and stick with it although it does not produce the desired effect. Ultimately, though, it does not matter; as Ken cynically says, “Who cares if it works?” As long as they make money off the assignment, he suggests, it does not matter if the claims are true.

Although the truth claims of the product are not really important, this initial puzzle functions importantly as a way to propel the narrative and invite Peggy into the creative team to solve the riddle. Rather than a conscious choice to get a woman’s point of view, however, Peggy’s inclusion is framed as the result of a spontaneous gesture; she is only asked because she

conveniently walks in at the right time to bring Don a glass of water. As Freddy appraises her newly fatter appearance, the viewer sees, through his gaze, that he is considering her for the job; as soon as she exits the room, he makes the suggestion. Both Ken and Sal waste no time in getting in their barbs, suggesting that she's "obviously losing some kind of battle" and the device may have to be let out a little to fit her. Freddy, however, continues to praise Peggy: "She did a heck of a job on Belle Jolie. Maybe lightning will strike twice." Again Peggy's talent is framed as a serendipitous, unlikely event, rather than a consistent potential, but at least Freddy acknowledges her previous success and advocates for her ability. Pete, on the other hand, expresses his dissatisfaction, saying "I don't think Peggy's the answer. I promised Buchwald we'd go with our big guns." The "big guns," it is clear, are men, not secretaries moonlighting as creative types. Nevertheless, as Don observes, the "big guns have been silent" here; in other words, the men have failed to understand the product and how to advertise it. Thus Don takes up Freddy's suggestion and calls Peggy into the office, saying "This device is a new product. I would like you to give us your thoughts on it." Don astutely does not lead with the weight loss, getting Peggy interested first before saying what it is supposed to do. When the purpose is clear, Freddy says, "You'd be perfect for it." Peggy, instead of surmising what he is implying, asks "Why?" In the viewer's mind, there are two likely answers: a) because she has gained weight and b) because she is a woman, and most likely, the answer is a combination of both. Don, choosing the presumably less offensive answer to his mind, says "Because you're a woman." Weight loss is a feminized activity, and admitting this seems to be more socially acceptable than telling her she is fat. Peggy, not responding to the sexist and sizist implications, immediately sees the opportunity as a way to do more creative work, although Don is clear to tell her that "[i]t's an assignment, not an account." Freddy, again emphasizing her gender, ends the scene by packing up the box and telling her, "Go ahead, sweetheart. Take it for a spin." The implication is that while men would be taking a car "for a spin," the only machinery a woman gets to operate is a weight loss device.

Taking her assignment seriously, Peggy prepares to test the product on herself when she is at home in her nightgown. After slipping on the belt and lying down, she flips the switch and closes her eyes. As the product begins to hum, Peggy's eyes fly open and she yelps, immediately



Peggy prepares to try out the PER for herself in “Indian Summer.”

turning off the device and standing up to take off the thing, giving it a final kick at the end as if it has betrayed her. Peggy’s surprise and sudden rejection of the sensation the belt produces reflects her Catholic upbringing, which has clearly relegated sexual pleasure to a shameful activity.

Peggy’s shame is also reflected the next day in her inability to communicate her findings directly to Don. When she submits her report the following morning, she finds it difficult to express the sensation, instead repeating “I wrote it down.” Don, frustrated, says “Peggy, you’re saying even less in here than you are now.” When Peggy argues that it is “hard to put into words,” Don abruptly tells her she has failed, prompting Peggy to make an attempt, saying “You definitely feel something...that I think some women...would like to feel,” and continuing, when Don still does not get it, “It vibrates...and that coincides with how you wear it.” Don finally understands what she is trying to say, while Peggy offers her conclusion that the vibration was the explanation of the product’s success, and therefore “probably unrelated to weight loss.” Don, surprised but undeterred, closes the folder and tells her to keep working: “We now have a benefit. We just have to figure out how to put it into words. Have another go at it.” This scene reflects both the taboo around sexuality in general, as well as the lack of vocabulary to describe women’s sexual pleasure in particular. Peggy and Don must communicate in euphemisms, and the product must be marketed in this way as well, giving the potential consumer a hint of its true

benefit, while adhering to the sexual codes of the day, which prohibit the explicit naming of masturbation.

Pitching her ideas to the men the next day, this is precisely what Peggy does, easily recalling the typical gestures of feminine weight loss in her presentation:

Women lose weight so they'll feel good about themselves. Healthier, more attractive. Rejuvenate has a Latin root which literally means 'the return of youth.' The Rejuvenator gives you the flush and glow that you not only might have after hours of exercise but certainly, as a young girl, isn't it nice to feel that way whenever you want? Combined with a sensible diet, the Rejuvenator—you'll love the way it makes you feel.

Peggy's pitch starts from the typical makeover message—weight loss makes women appear healthier, more attractive, and younger, and this makes them feel good. But it also emphasizes internal feeling, rather than external markers such as one's appearance, the number on the scale, or even a husband or boyfriend's approval. Instead, Peggy cleverly performs a sort of sleight of hand—starting from the feeling and then moving to the product, which does not explicitly claim to produce actual weight loss but instead simulate that good feeling. Of course, the joke is that, as the viewer knows, the "flush and glow" advertised is produced by orgasm, rather than any calisthenic benefit. However, as Peggy suggests, the product is attractive because it offers its user the ability to determine her pleasure on her own terms—"whenever you want."

Peggy herself opts for this pleasure at the end of episode after leaving a date with a man whom she finds rude and insulting. Peggy, excited about her new job, is dismayed when her date calls out her pretensions and implicitly critiques her appearance, saying "Let me tell you, you can act like you're from Manhattan, but you don't look like those girls." Peggy does not compromise or back down to please him, instead taking pleasure for herself and reaching for the PER as the episode closes. The PER thus performs a dual function for Peggy in the episode; it becomes not only a way for her to experience sexual pleasure without entanglements with men who do not respect her, but also the thing that helps her to advance her career, which comes complete with a pay raise and a new title of junior copywriter. While Betty, the frustrated housewife, must make do with pressing herself up against the washing machine for a modicum

of sexual stimulation, Peggy is on her way to being satisfied in multiple ways. Moreover, these moments of masturbatory pleasure differs significantly in that Peggy's choice is deliberate, while Betty finds stimulation accidentally in the course of a domestic task. Betty's situation indicates a double lack; she cannot have her husband, Don, as he is busy sleeping with other women, nor can she abandon her ideas of respectability and enter into an extramarital affair with her fantasy man, a salesman who comes to the house. Caught between the two, she indulges in the fantasy but cannot have her desires satisfied by either. Peggy, on the other hand, is not married or in any binding relationship, and consciously delays being in one. In terms of Peggy's complete character arc, this episode is important in showing how she is unwilling to compromise herself for the sake of a romantic relationship; instead she is content to satisfy her own desires in her own way.

The PER device, now dubbed the Relax-a-cizor, also makes a significant appearance in the final episode of the season, "The Wheel." Peggy, freshly promoted and still fat, if not fatter, is with Ken in the studio, casting and recording a radio advertisement for the product. The choice of a radio spot is clever, as it privileges the voice of the woman speaking over the sight of her body, ensuring that it need not conform to the thin ideal advertised by the device. The copy of the ad has been slightly modified and refined, but it hits all the points of Peggy's earlier pitch: "It's true by simply relaxing I can get all the benefits of calisthenics. A simple regimen of three twenty-minute sessions per week combined with a sensible diet will restore your youthful glow. I love the way it makes me feel. The Relax-a-cizor—it's my little secret." The final tag, "my little secret," hints at the sexual properties of the device without being explicit, as it could ostensibly just be read as the "secret" weight loss method that produces the hidden labor of weight loss.

These scenes easily expose the clichés of the advertisement copy, but they are more significant for Peggy in showing how she herself has bought into a particular image of femininity, even as it contradicts her own embodiment. Initially, when faced with a choice between a thinner, younger and arguably more beautiful candidate (Annie), and an older, less attractive one (Rita), Peggy chooses the one who looks more like the part, while Ken actually prefers the other one, saying "Believe it or not, I like Rita. She's got that voice—randy and knowing. [...] Annie belongs on TV with Rita's voice dubbed in." Peggy contradicts, arguing

“Whatever the special properties of the Relax-a-Cizor are, what we are selling is confidence, a better you. That woman isn’t a better anything. Annie is a confident, beautiful woman. You can hear it in her voice.” When it comes to actually recording the advertisement, however, Peggy is quickly dissatisfied with Annie when she realizes she does not possess the “confidence that comes with beauty” she had assumed. Peggy, attempting to get the ad right, asks Annie to repeat the copy, interrupting and interjecting directions multiple times, such as “Well, try and imagine you’re you, Annie, and now you have everything. You’re beautiful, you’re slim, you’re the beloved prize of a handsome man, and you have everything when you use the Relax-a-Cizor.” Each injunction for Annie to be more confident, however, simply produces the opposite effect. With each direction, Annie becomes more lost and insecure, eventually breaking down in tears. Peggy does not understand what is going on and tries to prompt Ken to restore her confidence with a compliment, while Ken offers his observation that “a woman who looks like that will never sound confident because she never is confident,” or, in a more predatory turn of phrase, “the juiciest gazelle is the easiest to catch.” The truth, it seems, is that thin beauty does not produce confidence, as Peggy had assumed. It is Peggy, who is at her least conventionally attractive moment in the series, who is the confident one in this scene, a contrast represented in the visual juxtaposition of Peggy’s resolute face in the box and Annie’s tearful face on the other side of the glass. Deeply annoyed to admit that Ken was right, Peggy eventually issues a curt dismissal to Annie and tells Ken to “call Rita, the older lady you liked? She’s probably at home with the Relax-a-Cizor right now.”

Peggy’s disdain for Rita is ironic, given that she herself has used the Relax-a-cizor for pleasure, but it also indicative of Peggy’s larger complicity in producing a certain type of femininity that conflicts with her own experience. Anne Helen Petersen has noted that Peggy, from the beginning of her creative career at SC, has been selling a fictional version of femininity, just as Don sells an idea of happy childhood and family that he himself has never really experienced. As Petersen writes,

Peggy’s been selling the dream so long, she’s bought it as her own reality — or at least that reality to which she should aspire. As far back as the Season 1 pitch for Belle Jolie, she’s excelled by putting herself in a subject position different from

her own: the girlfriend desperate to ‘mark her man’; the mom, popsicle in hand, offering to ‘break it, share it, love it’; even the Mohawk Airlines pitch —‘What did you bring me, Daddy?’ — had her taking the position of the doting daughter of a well-to-do father, as opposed to finding him dead of a heart attack at the age of 12, which was her reality.

Annie’s failure to align her voice with her appearance of confident beauty is simply another sign that this attempt to achieve femininity and to “have everything” is illusory. Moreover, this more pessimistic scene puts a damper on the potential of the Relax-a-cizor to threaten patriarchy, painting it as yet another product whose marketing to women makes them feel inadequate, rather than empowered. The repetition of the ad copy in Annie’s ever shakier voice represents, in a way, the constant messages about being adequately feminine that women are fed and encouraged to repeat for themselves; constantly repeated and interrupted, though, the lines take on a haunting quality that disturbs the speaker rather than building her up. Peggy’s confidence at this moment, coming from a place of relative power and professional success, offers a more authentic and stable alternative.

The scene in this episode is all the more significant, though, because Peggy’s world is about to be rocked by a true crisis of female embodiment when she goes into unexpected labor and delivers a baby at the end of the episode. The sudden revelation of Peggy’s pregnancy answers the riddle of her weight gain throughout the season, and also opens a whole host of questions for her further development in the coming season, particularly in her attitude toward motherhood. The immediate aftermath of this event, however, is largely left out, falling into the gap between season one and season two. This is precisely the kind of moment that Lili Loofbourow complains about when she bemoans *Mad Men*’s “allergy” to transitions. When *Mad Men* returns in 1962, Peggy is again thin and working at Sterling Cooper with no discernible difference. The men of the office speculate on her absence and weight loss, but do not come close to knowing the actual reason. The viewer, on the other hand, receives glimpses of the transitional phase. In one important scene, Don visits Peggy in the hospital following childbirth, urging her to move on in a characteristic turn of phrase: “This never happened. It will shock you how much it never

happened.” Don’s encouragement is important, and the two soon become linked both in their secrets, and their ability to continue despite them.

Only in rare moments does Peggy speak of what has happened and give the viewer a sense of how she feels about it. At the end of the second season, Peggy finally reveals to Pete, the baby’s father, what happened. When Pete confesses that he is in love with her, Peggy is visibly upset, but maintains her composure, telling him that she could have shamed him into being with her, repeating twice “I had your baby, and I gave it away.” When he says he still doesn’t understand, she gives the following speech in calm and measured tones, one of the most memorable monologues of the entire series:

Well, one day you’re there. And then all of a sudden there’s less of you. You wonder where that part went, if it’s living somewhere outside of you. And you keep thinking maybe you’ll get it back. And then you realize, it’s just gone.

Peggy’s description of her experience is interesting in a few ways. First of all, it is not narrated in first person, but instead in second person, which suggests both a generic possibility (this could happen to anyone) and also alienation; Peggy puts a certain distance between herself and the events, reflecting a common dissociation between self and body in trauma. Secondly, this description does not name the pregnancy or the baby as a baby at all—it is barely personified. Rather, it is subsumed under a more abstract loss, a part of the self that is gone and cannot be recovered. Peggy’s loss of weight and rejection of motherhood are intrinsically tied together. Told this way, Peggy’s weight loss story becomes legible as a tale of loss, rather than triumphant reclaiming of social status. In slipping Peggy’s weight loss into this other plot, *Mad Men* refuses to make Peggy a heroine of her own weight loss story, someone who loses weight by her own will, but rather makes weight loss an incidental feature of a much more important story, and one that is much more ambivalent. It also makes the abstract loss of the child much more concrete as an embodied, physical change. In some ways, this loss may be viewed as a necessary one for Peggy; her decision to give away her child is what allows her to pursue the “other things” she wants, as she mentions to Pete. Her loss is also emblematic of the types of bodily sacrifices that many characters in the series make for the sake of their careers, whether it is subjecting their hearts to stress (Roger), overburdening their livers (nearly everyone), or even being hit by a car

and getting shot in the face by birdshot (Ken Cosgrove).⁶⁶ As a woman, however, her sacrifice is different; it is maternity, and the excess weight that comes with it, that must be abandoned.

This initial event is also crucial for Peggy's entire character arc. The fact that her pregnancy was unplanned and unnoticed does not preclude her right to mourn, particularly as she goes on to advance her career at the potential expense of reproduction and motherhood. As the series closes, it returns again to the topic, again emphasizing its role in her trajectory. In the late episode entitled "Time & Life," Peggy reflects on her decision as she confesses to Stan what has happened all those years before. The conversation echoes her revelation to Pete in the second season, but Peggy asserts her right to her decision more confidently here, painting it in terms of gender equality, saying "no one should have to make a mistake just like a man does and not be able to move on. She should be able to live the rest of her life just like a man does." When Stan realizes she is talking about herself rather than hypothetically, she goes on to say "I'm here and...he's with a family...somewhere. I don't know, but it's not because I don't care. I don't know because you're not supposed to know or you can't go on with your life." In this crucial late moment, the series returns to consider an alternate path for Peggy and makes the strong case for Peggy's right to her own choice. Unfortunately, the series never returns to the fact of her weight loss to ask how the feeling of "suddenly there's less of you" changes her feeling of being in the body, no hint, for example, how Peggy might have dealt with the conflicting feelings produced by positive feedback due to her weight loss and negative judgment from those (like her family) who knew its cause, and the feeling of loss. While it considers how Peggy might have experienced the event in *emotional* terms, it does not consider how those translate to *bodily* terms. Instead, her body returns to its previous shape, as if nothing has happened.

⁶⁶ Ken's story highlights the fact that the men in the series also have vulnerable bodies. In the course of wooing executives from Chevrolet in the sixth season, Ken not only gets involved in a car crash which gives him a limp but also gets shot in the face with birdshot. Ken, frustrated with the situation and high on stimulants, gives a madcap tap dance performance in front of Don, saying that he "has no power" and that he is Chevy's "favorite toy" but that he cannot do anything about it because "it's [his] job." The absurdity of Ken's dance highlights the absurdity of the demands that being an account executive place on him and his body. Compelled to go along with whatever Chevy wants for the sake of keeping them happy, Ken is reduced to a powerless plaything who can be broken at any time. And indeed, the incident with the birdshot signals the coming end of Ken's success at Sterling Cooper. Having lost his sight and given up the Chevy account, he is diminished in his power and pushed out of the firm. This cautionary tale shows that one must give the body to the company wholeheartedly—drink, smoke, and engage in other risky behavior—while maintaining one's bodily integrity and control. The men are constantly threatened by the "spectre of uselessness" (Richard Sennett), the possibility of losing their careers and their sense of masculine self-worth that comes with it, should they not be able to maintain this bodily control.

That Incredible Closet: Betty's Weight Gain and Loss

In the fifth season of *Mad Men*, Betty is revealed to have become fat. While her second husband, Henry, appears to be indifferent to this fact, insisting he does not even “see” it, his mother Pauline comes to chastize Betty into losing weight. Attempting to motivate her, Pauline asks “Don’t you want to get back into that incredible closet of yours?” Getting back in the closet ostensibly means wearing the clothes that make her able to appear on Henry’s arm as the politician’s dutiful wife, but the closet metaphor is particularly significant given its current epistemology and connection to queer identity. Theorists like Kathleen LeBesco have argued that the alliance between fat and queer concerns is not only strategic, but fruitful. As LeBesco argues in her chapter “The Queerness of Fat,” “fatness can be read as a mere subset of queerness” because any non-normative sex is “queer” (88). The structural similarity extends beyond the fact that both gay and fat sex are considered deviant or abnormal to the politics of “outing” in both fat and queer identity. While fatness may appear to be a stigma that is visible and therefore not “discreditable” (in Erving Goffman’s terminology), there is a clear spectrum of how fat people address their own weight. According to this logic, declaring oneself fat and proud may be viewed as a sort of “coming out,” while not commenting on one’s own weight or being apologetic about it is akin to staying in the closet. In this sense, Betty getting back into the closet represents a double return—to normative sexuality as well as to gender-normative weight.

The motivation for Betty’s weight loss story, however, was reportedly not a desire on the part of the showrunner to highlight weight issues, but rather the fact that the actress January Jones was pregnant at the time. In order to hide her growing belly, therefore, the writers of the show added a storyline that allowed her to wear padding and more expansive clothing, such as the large pink housecoat that appears multiple times. As such, Jones appears as Betty only sparsely in the fifth and sixth seasons of the show; after she (Jones) gave birth, Betty’s weight loss arc finishes and she returns to her previous shape (clearly highlighted in the ninth episode of the sixth season, “The Better Half”). Soon, Betty begins to again appear more frequently and weight loses its thematic presence. It is almost as if Betty’s body as a body and Betty as a



Betty tries to get her dress zipped up with the help of her children in “Tea Leaves.”

Source: “Recap: Mad Men 5X03—Leaves,” *A Big Picture Window*
[\(wordpress.com\)](http://wordpress.com)

character with potential insecurities about that body only become visible when she gains weight; as she loses that weight, she returns to her roles as a wife and mother and her body again becomes immaculate—it is assumed that it is easily beautiful and therefore unproblematic. While she is still concerned with her own beauty, knowing that it is her capital, producing this beauty ceases to be depicted as much of an effort; the labor of performing her femininity is again effaced.

Betty’s weight loss is most clearly thematized in two episodes of the fifth season, the third (“Tea Leaves”) and the ninth (“Dark Shadows”). In “Tea Leaves,” it is first revealed that Betty has gained weight and her character operates as the key focus of the episode, from not being able to zip up her dress in the first scene to finishing her daughter’s ice cream in the last. Likewise, “Dark Shadows” is bookended by two scenes with Betty, and their formal mirroring of each other even goes further—the episode is opened by Betty carefully weighing her breakfast and closed by her eating meager portions of Thanksgiving foods. Both episodes exhibit an internal thematic unity and development while reflecting more generally on Betty’s longer character arc.

For Betty, her weight gain is primarily presented as an impediment to performing her duties as wife of the politically ambitious Henry. It is from the very first scene of “Tea Leaves” that this

is made clear; Henry is calling to her up the staircase to leave for some dinner event, and Betty is enlisting the help of her children to zip up her dress, but to no avail. The very first shot of Betty in this episode, and thus the fifth season, is a close-up of the zipper that will not go up, setting the stage for the entire storyline. Eventually, when Henry comes to the bedroom to see what is going on, he finds Betty sitting in bed in her dress, claiming she cannot go to the event because of an unnamed “woman’s thing.” Henry leaves and Betty stays. Betty’s failure is immediately contrasted in the following scene, in which Betty’s ex-husband Don and his second wife, Megan, are getting ready for a business dinner with a client. While Megan stands speaking to her family on the phone, Don easily zips up her dress. The act is easy, carefree, as if Megan does not even have to worry about her figure. The message is clear: Megan fits into her role as woman and wife, while Betty does not. This fitting in is both literal and symbolic.

The equation between fitting a certain size and fitting a role as a wife is underscored also by Pauline, Betty’s mother-in-law, who arrives in the next scene with Betty to tell her she should seek diet pills to lose weight. When Betty retorts, “Why haven’t you taken them?” Pauline replies that she would were it not for a heart condition and adds, bluntly, “And honestly, at my age I don’t have to please men anymore.” Pauline, past the peak of sexual attractiveness, is freed from society’s standards of weight, but Betty is not. Interestingly, it is Pauline, an older woman who is herself fat and unapologetic about it, who tells Betty that she should lose weight, rather than her husband Henry. This is a telling example of women enforcing patriarchy on each other.

In “Tea Leaves,” the gender aspect of Betty’s weight problems is complicated by the addition of another strand in the narrative: mortality. When Betty goes to the doctor in the hope of getting diet pills, he first suggests that she, like other housewives, has gained weight to a “psychological cause.” Betty rejects this diagnosis, and the doctor himself revises it when he discovers a node on her thyroid. While this may offer a physiological explanation for Betty’s weight gain, it also offers the possibility of her own mortality; the doctor fears it may be a malignant tumor. From this point on, Betty vacillates between a serious concern for her legacy should it turn out to be cancer, and the seemingly more frivolous insecurity about her fatness. Betty tells a friend that she is “leaving behind such a mess” and even has a Scrooge-like dream in which she has apparently died and her apology to her daughter Sally goes unheard. But she also even seems to embrace the

diagnosis before it is even pronounced, speaking as if she already knows she has cancer and that it is the cause of her weight gain: when her friend Joyce, who is undergoing cancer treatment, says that “everything tastes like sawdust” to her, Betty replies, “Everything still tastes good to me. Turns out I have the only kind that makes you fat.” In looking to cancer as an explanation of her weight gain, Betty rejects both the doctor’s hypothesis that it has a psychological root and Pauline’s suggestion that she has simply gotten too comfortable with Henry and given up a little on herself.

Despite her qualms about her legacy, the potential diagnosis of cancer seems to offer Betty comfort, too. This knowledge appears to change her behavior—she is shown getting intimate with Henry again after an apparent gap in their sex life, and also cherishing her family. Perhaps, it is suggested, this will function as a wake-up call that allows Betty to re-evaluate her life in a positive sense. When the tumor is revealed to be benign, though, her relief is clearly mixed with a certain disappointment, leading her to bitterly say to Henry, “It’s nice to be put through the wringer and find out I’m *just fat*.” Her facial expression is pained and her tone is exasperated. It is Henry who has to remind her to be grateful that it is not cancer, saying “Hey! Listen to me, I feel like I’ve been given a gift, like Scrooge seeing his tombstone. This is what it could be, but it’s not going to be.” As Henry’s line illustrates, the cancer scare opens up a whole different narrative path for Betty that is then rejected. In the end, as she says, she is “*just fat*.” But being “*just fat*” is bad enough, such that Betty would almost prefer the seemingly noble suffering of cancer. The call from the doctor resolves the episode’s plot and returns the story to the beginning of the episode, leaving open the larger questions about Betty’s character, which include the seasonal arc of her weight loss, but also, and more importantly, the question that follows her in the entire series: “Will she ever find fulfillment?”

The openness of Betty’s development is highlighted by the final scene of “Tea Leaves,” which serves no purpose except to suggest that Betty’s struggles with her weight will continue. Betty and Sally are at the kitchen table eating ice cream. Sally insists she is full and leaves the rest of her sundae, going to watch TV. Having finished her own ice cream, Betty takes Sally’s sundae and eats it. As she eats, the shot moves from a close-up to a wide shot of Betty alone at the table and the song “16 Going on 17” begins to play, bridging the shot and the closing credits.

The lyrics of the song, taken from the musical *The Sound of Music*, are telling: “You wait, little girl,/On an empty stage/For fate to turn the light on.” The lines reflect both Betty’s visual isolation in the shot—the “stage” is empty of other characters—and the plot of the episode. Betty is continually waiting for a fulfillment that does not come; the cancer diagnosis, it is implied, would have been a way of fate “turning the light on.” Paradoxically, it is the specter of her own mortality—the possibility of fate turning the light *off*—that could have given her some direction, but it did not come. The lines continue “Your life, little girl,/Is an empty page/That men will want to write on.” These lines also parallel the episode’s plot nicely, echoing Pauline’s admonishment that Betty is subject to the desires of her husband and has to shape herself accordingly. On another level, these lines can be read self-reflexively; Betty’s life as a character in the series has been written by men, both the men in her fictional life and the creators of the show, who are overwhelmingly male (although the episode itself, like several of those focusing on Betty, was co-written by Erin Levy). Her future is still an empty page to be filled by the show’s producers.

Given that it nicely complements the plot and themes of the episode, the inclusion of “16 Going on 17” is very clever and fitting. However, it also has the side effect of infantilizing Betty as a character, suggesting she is still, after all, as young as *Sound of Music* character Liesl, who gladly echoes Rolf’s lines and accepts his patronage. Betty, it appears, is stuck in a sort of perpetual adolescence in which she still defines her worth in relation to men’s appreciation of her beauty. Even the cancer scare is nothing more than a missed chance; it will not be a decisive turn in her trajectory. This apparent stasis has led some critics to become frustrated with Betty as a character. For example, the *Huffington Post* named her one of the “Worst Characters on TV” in a list they published in 2012, during the fifth season. The justification given was as follows:

We’re not buying that Betty brings us a critique of the restrictions placed on mid-century housewives or a compelling commentary on the changing nature of gender roles. Don’t get us wrong, those are interesting topics, but her unchanging narcissism and her selfish petulance simply bore us to tears. (*HuffPo*)

Importantly, it is not that she is narcissistic or selfish that is the problem; certainly, there are enough characters on *Mad Men* who also continually struggle with their own self-importance

(Pete or Roger, for example). Rather, it is the perception that these characteristics are “unchanging” that seems to be the problem; although things happen to Betty, she does not develop as viewers (or at least those at *Huffington Post*) would hope. Moreover, they argue that her failure to develop undermines the supposed critique of gender roles offered by the series. Her narcissism and petulance are read as shallow qualities that make her character one-dimensional and boring. This critique may be warranted; it can be argued, after all, that Betty is often used for aesthetic effect in the series rather than as a round character. But it is also telling that narcissism and petulance are read as childish qualities in Betty, a female character, whereas Don’s equally ridiculous outbursts are unlikely to have him labeled as such. And when Betty is her usual thin and beautiful self, these qualities are forgiven. It is precisely when her body no longer fits this role that her character flaws become more apparent and less forgivable.

In “Dark Shadows,” six episodes after “Tea Leaves,” Betty’s desire for weight loss is shown in more detail. The implicit comparison between Betty and Megan in “Tea Leaves” also becomes explicit in “Dark Shadows.” The key scene here is in the first part of the episode when Betty comes to pick up the children from Megan and Don’s apartment. Betty appears to have lost some weight, but is still self-conscious about her appearance, as one sees when she checks herself in the mirror before ringing the doorbell. Entering the apartment after being let in by Sally, Betty timidly wanders around the apartment. Medium shots of her are contrasted with point-of-view shots showing her scanning gaze of the living room and its modern furnishings; underlying music creeps in, suggesting her anxiety and intimidation. The scene reaches its climax, however, when she accidentally catches a glimpse through the window of Megan getting dressed. The camera lingers on Megan’s partially-exposed figure as the framing of the shot, with objects in the foreground, highlights its voyeuristic quality. When Megan reappears in the living room, the opposition of the two women is represented visually in a wide shot as they face each other at a distance in front of the windows. As Megan says goodbye to the children, we also see Betty’s pained expression. The emotional strain of the encounter on Betty is made more apparent later, in a following short beat, when Betty, having arrived home, rushes to the refrigerator and takes out a can of whipped cream, putting a large quantity directly into her mouth. Knowing that she was weighing her breakfast at the beginning of the episode, the viewer senses that this is a

transgression brought on by the stress of the previous scene. Betty herself, however, appears to immediately regret her consumption, rushing to the sink to spit out the cream and wash out her mouth.

This panicked moment of consumption on Betty's part, and thus her weight gain in general, is suggested to be directly related to her emotional state. This is part of another theme of the episode, namely the relationship between physical sustenance and emotional satisfaction. Generally, the show implies that Betty's self-control in regard to eating is linked to health, both physical and psychological. But there also moments of disconnection; when Betty goes to her Weight Watchers meeting in the second act, she shares that she had a "good week in here" (i.e. in terms of weight) and a "bad week out there" (i.e. in terms of emotional events). Although she has lost half a pound, that is, she is still struggling with the "trying experience" of her encounter with Megan, in which she "saw, felt a lot of things [she] wished [she] hadn't." The leader of the Weight Watchers group also tries to counter the idea of "good weeks" and "bad weeks" being entirely dependent on weight, reminding her clients that "there are good weeks and bad weeks for thin people too" and saying "We always talk about our goals in pounds, but that's not all it is, is it."

In the following Weight Watchers scene in the episode's third act, however, the link between emotional distress and weight is restored; Betty has not lost any more weight and is clearly disappointed. In the interim, she has suffered another traumatic experience, this one perhaps even more wounding. Halfway through the episode, in the gap between the two meetings and at the beginning of the third act, Bobby shows her a picture he has drawn at Don and Megan's of a whale with three spears coming out of its flesh. Betty, caught by the picture, initially compliments it, saying "It's very nice," though she adds the puzzled comment: "I don't know why he's smiling, though." When she turns the page over, however, she discovers a note for Megan from Don. While the note is shown in close-up, Don reads it in the voiceover. It is a banal artifact—a short handwritten message to say that he has gone out to buy a light bulb—but the love that it conveys for Megan is a reminder that she, Betty, is no longer the object of his affection. Moreover, the rhetorical flourish he adds, writing "When I come back, I'll see you better," offers extra pain to Betty by stressing the visual. Megan is the one that Don wants to see,

not Betty, and particularly not with her current shape. The injured whale on the back is simply a symbolic representation of Betty herself, who sees herself as fat and wounded, but still must smile to keep up the charade of happiness.

In the meantime, her relationship with her second husband is affected by her weight loss program. In one scene, she comes down to the kitchen at night to find Henry preparing himself a steak because he “can’t eat fish five times a week.” Although he is not angry about this situation, the implication is that, in focusing on herself and her own weight loss, Betty has neglected her duties as a wife to provide food for her husband. Betty is apologetic, and in the subsequent conversation, very encouraging to Henry when he expresses his frustration with his job, saying that whatever comes they will endure together. Betty also uses neoliberal self-help rhetoric of the sort one finds at Weight Watchers, saying “It’s so easy to blame our problems on others, but really we’re in charge of ourselves.” The illustration of her newfound self-control comes shortly thereafter; Henry offers her a piece of his steak and she only accepts on the condition that it’s after midnight and can be counted for the next day. The whole speech is so perfect that it almost reads as artificial, a conscious effort to perform the role of perfect wife which not only includes working to lose weight but also supporting her husband in his aspirations. Control of her eating is correlated with control of her emotions. Both Betty’s weight gain and her attempt to lose it again apparently negatively impact her marriage. In painting Henry as understanding and supportive, though, the series suggests that it is rather Betty’s own insecurity and her unrealistic expectations of herself that are the culprit, rather than men’s expectations of women.

The holiday of Thanksgiving offers a particular context in which both food and emotions, especially gratitude, play an important role. In the meeting leading up to the holiday, the Weight Watchers leader argues that food is the wrong way to seek happiness: “[...] the food is just a symbol of all the other things. We should fill ourselves with our children, our homes, our husbands, our health, our happiness.” In the following scene with Betty that closes the episode, it appears she is doing her best to take this advice to heart. Her plate is decorated with small helpings of each dish, and when it comes to her turn to say what she is grateful for she says “I’m grateful that I have everything I want, and no one has anything better.” Despite the emotional tumult of the intervening scenes, Betty has returned to the careful eating of the first scene with its

measured helping of cheese and toast and grapefruit, and she is again playing the role of happy wife and mother. Her family obliges by being well-behaved and pleasant. The pleasant atmosphere of the scene is complemented by visible pleasure on Betty's face while she is eating. But looking at the meager helpings on her plate, one cannot help but wonder if this will really be enough for her, if she will be satisfied in either sense, physically or emotionally. Like with "Tea Leaves," the closing music of "Dark Shadows" also complements the episode. The song, "Sweepin' the Clouds Away," admonishes the listener: "Don't go 'round moping, hoping happiness will come" and continues, "If you want happiness, just help yourself to some." Like "16 Going on 17," this song stresses the addressee's passivity of waiting for life's events to happen but suggests that happiness is not something that one receives, but something one makes. Activity and will, as propagated by the song and the earlier self-help rhetoric, seem to enable every positive change, whether losing weight or attaining happiness. Of course, it is unlikely that you can just "help yourself" to happiness in the same way that you help yourself to turkey and stuffing. Likewise, the viewer familiar with Betty as a character is likely to be skeptical that even losing weight will give Betty complete fulfillment.

Interestingly, "Tea Leaves" and "Dark Shadows" do not suggest that women and men deal with completely different issues, or that only Betty suffers from insecurities because she is a woman and housewife. Although both episodes focus on Betty, they also provide a counterpoint to her problems in the male characters of the show. Harry Crane, for example, admits to Don that his wife "has [him] on a diet" and that his dissatisfaction at home is also linked to food. After Don comments on the volume of food Harry eats in a marijuana-fueled binge, Harry retorts that his advice to people who want to get married and have children is to "eat first"; otherwise, he says, the family will eat everything and leave nothing for him. Likewise, "Dark Shadows" offers a parallel plot for Don that echoes Betty's. Just as Betty is envious of Megan, Don is envious of the young new copywriter Michael Ginsberg, who has become increasingly successful as a creative at the firm while Don has been distracted by his new marriage. Both are afraid of being replaced someone younger and more dynamic. The difference is, however, that the men have both careers and families from which to draw their satisfaction. Betty has only her home life and her roles as wife and mother to fall back on. Likewise, in "Dark Shadows," Don's competition

with Michael is a mental one, whereas Betty's is perceived as a physical challenge; to prove their worth, Don must return to exercising his mind, while Betty must reform her body.

At the close of the series, however, Betty's arc takes a devastating turn, permanently tilting away from happiness. In the penultimate episode, "The Milk and Honey Route," the cancer that she narrowly escapes in "Tea Leaves" returns, this time for real, in her lungs. The forecast is bleak, leading Betty to make an honest effort to settle her affairs. Instead of letting go of her tight bodily control, however, Betty clings to her eternal beauty, writing a letter to her daughter Sally with detailed, explicit instructions about how she is to be dressed and presented at her funeral. As Anne Helen Petersen writes in her *Buzzfeed* piece "In Praise of Betty Draper, Difficult Woman," Betty's "not terrified of dying, but of being presented, in death, in a way that betrays the image of precise propriety she'd spent years cultivating. That image, after all, is her life's greatest work." Sally, in opening the letter before the appointed time, jumps beyond the end of the series, giving the viewer a glimpse of the end of Betty's arc as it extends beyond the series to an inevitable death. Betty's lung cancer is significant, not only in that it recovers the narrative strand seemingly abandoned in "Tea Leaves," but also that it links directly to Don's pitch for tobacco brand Lucky Strike in the very first episode. Faced with the evidence that smoking causes cancer and cigarettes can no longer be marketed with health claims, Don finds another way to sell the product, creating the iconic "It's Toasted" slogan in the process. But Don, despite his constant smoking and persistent cough, is not the one who suffers lung cancer—he lives to capitalize on the feel-good New Age sentiment captured in the iconic 1971 Coca-Cola commercial that closes the series. Betty, who in some ways never even made it out of the 1950s, will not live to fully enter the 1970s. The only consolation for Betty, perhaps, is that she will be young and beautiful in death, or at least will have her thin figure. The tragedy is that she will never exist beyond a point when she no longer has to please men, when she can "let herself go" in a meaningful way. After finding her way back into her "incredible closet," the only way out again is death.

Betty's death can also be read metaphorically; Betty, unlike Joan or Peggy and despite her final attempt to renew her education, has failed to emerge out of the 1960s as a "new woman," who performs outside the home as well as in it. Betty, as an image of the perfect housewife and also a symbol of the unfulfilling life this housewifery entails, must die for the new feminist icons

to be born. Betty, the last bastion of “keeping up appearances,” dissolves as the series closes, leaving us with Peggy and Joan, with their career ambitions and ambivalence toward domesticity and motherhood.

A Different Kind of Willpower: *Huge* and Transformation

Huge, a comedic drama created by mother-daughter team Winnie Holzman and Savannah Dooley for ABC Family, aired for one season in the summer of 2010. *Huge* centers around the lives of a number of characters as they spend their summer at a weight loss camp entitled “Camp Victory.” The protagonists include the participants of the camp, the teenagers that have been sent there by their parents, as well as the staff. The director of the camp, Dr. Dorothy Rand (Gina Torres),⁶⁷ also plays a prominent role, both as an authority figure in relation to the kids, and as her own character as she navigates complicated relationships and a troubled relationship to her own body; as a former camper herself, she is apparently a living weight loss success story, but the series critically complicates this narrative throughout its short ten episodes.

From the very beginning, however, it is clear that one particular camper, Willamina (played by Nikki Blonsky), acts as the main character and emotional center of the series. While the series is interested in the trajectories of its other characters, Will is not only at the center of the plot, but also functions as an important critical voice questioning the premise of the camp and its weight loss rhetoric. Her nickname “Will” is fitting in that her forceful will is apparent from the very beginning of the series. In the very first scene, the campers are getting ready for their “before” weigh-in. Will’s first line, more to herself than anyone else, is “Can we, like, take a moment and just ponder how sick this is? Just get a bunch of fat kids, stick ‘em in bathing suits, and add cameras...” (0.27). Instead of expressing her personal anxiety about the weigh-in, Will takes a critical look at the setting, which employs shame to coerce the “fat kids” into losing weight from the very beginning. On another level, the comment is an ironic reflection on the series itself, as it does exactly that—puts fat kids in the spotlight and adds cameras. But Will’s voice assures the

⁶⁷ From now on, I will refer to her as either “Dr. Rand” or “Dorothy” to reflect her different roles; “Dr. Rand” when she is acting as the camp director, and “Dorothy” when the narrative follows her personal life.



Will shows her defiant side, refusing to be ashamed of her body in front of Dr. Rand (partially visible bottom right).

viewer that the series will not be yet another show exploiting fat bodies in the grueling process of weight loss for the sake of the viewer’s voyeuristic pleasure. Instead, her continuous commentary will deconstruct ideas of fatness as they appear. In the next instant, for example, Will says “You know, this could be my summer to *gain* weight. I feel like inside me there’s an even fatter person just trying to get out.” (0.49). Will inverts the usual rhetoric of makeover culture, which presumes to reveal an authentic interior, or, in the case of weight loss, the “thin person inside.” In doing so, Will exposes the teleological ends of makeover, which accepts personal transformation only if the end product matches social ideals of thinness, and posits an alternative, authentic self that celebrates fatness.

In concert with her rhetoric, Will’s embodiment is often strong and defiant. From the beginning, she asserts her physical presence and flaunts her body for effect. This is also made explicit in the first scene, which also sets up the conflict between Will and the camp director, Dr. Rand. While everyone is dutifully wearing their bathing suits as they wait to be weighed in, Will is still dressed in a t-shirt and shorts. Soon Dr. Rand approaches her to remind her that campers are required to wear their bathing suits for the weigh-in and the “before” picture, using typical weight loss rhetoric: “This is the start of a very important journey and we ask that you begin by

taking an honest look at yourself” (2.59). Will responds in a sarcastic tone, “That sounds so great, but I lost my bathing suit.” Unfazed, Dr. Rand tells her she can use the “community suit,” which prompts Will to reconsider. Despite the large height disparity between the two women, highlighted by shots of them facing each other, with Becca’s face in the background as the witness to the standoff, Will remains defiant, even as she begins to comply with Dr. Rand’s injunction to remove her clothing and reveal her bathing suit. Instead of reacting with shame, Will turns the event into a spectacle, performing a playful parody of a burlesque striptease complete with sound effects which draws the cheers of those watching. Shots of Will are intercut with the reactions of the crowd, which range from admiration (Ian) to clear dismay (e.g. Chloe). Throughout the performance, she keeps her eyes trained on Dr. Rand, challenging her. The camera work does not eroticize the spectacle, instead focusing on the unbroken gaze between Dr. Rand and Will. What is important here is not Will’s worth as a sexual object, but rather her agency as a subject who refuses shame and stands defiantly in the face of authority, turning the traditional shame of the “before” state on its head. This scene shows us, within the first five minutes of the series, that Will not only “talks the talk” of body acceptance, but also “walks the walk.” As she says later in the episode, “Everyone wants us to hate our bodies. Well, I refuse to.” The striptease puts these words into action. While there is a residual doubt at the very end of the scene, when Will rhetorically asks herself, “Oh my God, why’d I just do that?” (5.04), Will remains defiant of social expectations. Of course, under her tough exterior, Will also suffers from feelings of vulnerability and hurt, especially in her relationship to her parents. This acknowledgement does not weaken her political stance at all, nor does it invalidate her critique of the weight loss setting and sexist politics therein, but rather makes her a round character. Will, even as a sort of feminist hero, is not without her own struggles and self-doubt, something that makes her a “strong” female character in the better sense of simply a round, fully-formed character.

Will is also importantly contrasted with Amber, a relatively thin, conventionally attractive, and feminine blonde who has paid her own way to come to camp. In her positive attitude toward makeover culture and femininity, Amber often serves as a foil for Will, as well as a romantic rival. Like the conflict between Will and Dr. Rand, the opposition between Amber and Will is

also evident in the first scene; before Will performs her defiant striptease, another camper, Becca, tries to reassure her by asserting the special positive qualities of the camp, including the potential for sexual experience: “People hook up. [...] See, everyone’s overweight, so the playing field...well, more like there is one” (01:17 min.). As Will ponders this statement, the camera switches into her point of view as she appraises a guy. This gaze, and Becca’s assertion, suggests that the camp will offer the possibility of sexual empowerment for the teens despite its anti-fat setting. In the next moment, however, Will realizes that the guy she was looking at is looking at Amber. Becca, noticing this play of gazes, is forced to revise her earlier opinion, saying, “Okay, I guess it’s not that different from the real world,” (1:46). In these few seconds, the series both subtly suggests that there is potential for Will to be appreciated for more than her weight, but also reminds us that the special setting of the camp does not mean that the campers are entirely freed from societal pressures. The fact that the majority of the characters are fat allow them to be seen for their individual differences; as Lesley Kinzel of the blog *Fatshionista* says, “Seeing so many fat characters, it almost removes the weight as a plot point, and you got to focus on the characters as individuals” (qtd. France). Within this group, though, there are still hierarchies tied to weight and gender; even here, being thinner is better, and conventional femininity is valued. Amber, emblematic of all the things that Will rebels against, provides a compelling contrast.

The main question for the character of Will throughout the series, however, is whether she will allow the camp experience to change her in any way, whether physically or emotionally. From the beginning, Will rejects the entire premise of the camp. In protest, she suggests that she is resolved to actually gain weight. As part of her rebellion, she not only indulges in junk food, but also secretly sells it to others. Things come to a head at the end of the first episode, when Will attempts to run away. The confrontation between Dorothy and Will importantly takes place outside the camp, in a diner, where Will and Dorothy coincidentally meet. It is the food Will has ordered (a large meal of fries and a chocolate shake) that “tells” on her; as she attempts to sneak out, the waitress calls out to her, “You want your fries, honey?” Dorothy becomes aware of her presence and says “She does,” inviting her to sit down. Will complies and they have another tense conversation, mirroring their encounter at the beginning of the episode. Dorothy notes that Will has left the camp without the prospect of a bus or train, from which she concludes “You’d

rather risk your life than change it.” When she admonishes Will to eat her fries before they get cold, noting that “[she’s] not a camper anymore,” Will refuses, again showing her resistance to any prescriptive recommendation for her body. As she says, “I’m not eating them in front of you. And no, I don’t want to change. Why should I? Just ‘cause my parents are ashamed of the way I look?” Dorothy attempts to show her understanding, saying “I know why you’re running away. I know you’re scared.” Again she is rebuffed by Will, who says “I’m not scared. I just think everything you stand for is crap. [pause] No offense.” Will refuses to accept Dr. Rand’s assumption that she can read Will’s body, what it wants (fries) and what it feels (fear). Instead of personalizing her grievances in terms of what she wants or does not want to do, Will makes a critique of the entire weight loss makeover premise. Dorothy, unfazed, neither defends her position nor gives in, but eventually agrees to call Will’s parents and let her go. Of course, however, the series would not continue if Will were truly to choose this option. Instead, she repents in the end, apologizing for selling contraband food and asking to stay. While the episode reminds us that there is the “real world” outside its own diegetic space of the camp, it brings Will back into the fold. What appears to motivate her is not a genuine feeling of shame or desire to lose weight but rather the sight of the girls in the cabin and the possibility of friendship. After being accepted back into the cabin, her continued resistance to weight loss is demonstrated when she rhetorically asks the girls, “How about me? Do I look any fatter?” But the episode concludes with her and bunkmate Amber bonding over the fantasy of the chocolate shake, which Will now regrets not having eaten. In this way, the series reaffirms the camp setting as a particular one that might produce friendship and fat community, suggesting that connection between the two is possible through the negative experience of deprivation. However, Will’s relationship to weight loss and the camp authority remains open.

Letters Home

By the second episode, however, the series suggests that development is a possibility for Will, even if it does not follow the track prescribed by Dr. Rand or the camp. In “Letters Home,” the series presents several complex interwoven story lines. Inverting the trope common to the

camp experience of the “letter home,” *Huge* instead shows the failure of characters to communicate with their families. The episode profiles three characters and their struggles—Trent, who cannot write to his mother because she is dead; Dr. Dorothy Rand, who faces the challenge of telling her mother that she has reconnected with her estranged father; and finally, Will, who refuses to write to her parents out of anger. All of these problematic family communication situations are contrasted with the seemingly perfect family of the Dodsons, who come to drop off their daughter, Danielle, and stay to spread their good cheer to the dismay of Dr. Rand. It soon becomes clear that both Dorothy and Will find the Dodsons a little unnerving in their perfection; as Will says, “That family is mind-boggling. They’re like from a whimsical children’s book” (10.56). Their representation of the ideal family is not only evident in their nuclear composition (mother, father, two daughters), but also in the alliteration of their names, which all begin with D. Far from simply representing an unobtainable ideal, however, the Dodsons, especially mother Deb, serve an important role as a catalyst for Will’s development.

When the episode opens, all the campers are writing home. Voiceovers share excerpts of their letters while shots move from teen to teen as they write. Meanwhile, however, Will is cutting pictures out of Chloe’s magazine, which she has requisitioned. In the following beat, Dorothy tells her father that Will’s parents have written, hoping to hear from her, suggesting that Will has refused thus far to write them. When she passes on this information to Will, however, she reacts with indifference (9.20). This opens the first question for Will’s path in the episode: will or will she not write her parents? As the act continues, however, a new plot is opened in regard to Will and ball sports. Complaining at lunch that organized sports are responsible for “four of the worst moments of [her] life,” Will is nonplussed when she is chosen to join a basketball game. Her utter apathy and passivity in the game prompts a confrontation with the athletic Trent, which builds to the end of the first act and culminates with him shouting, “You know what, don’t play! Why don’t you go sit on your fat ass and complain some more!” This confrontation continues the tension between the athletic demands of the camp and Will’s resistance set up in the first episode, and shows the different ways of reading Will’s behavior. While Will frames her refusal as a valiant exercise of agency over her own body, Trent suggests that it is simply attributable to laziness and a cultivated indifference. Moreover, the position of this scene at the end of the first

act means the conflict is a sort of cliffhanger, asking whether Will's antagonistic attitude toward sports and everything at the camp will continue.

The real possibility of Will changing is suggested, however, in the second act of the episode. The next time she is supposed to be playing basketball, Will attempts to get out of it by staying in the cabin, where she inadvertently runs into Deb, the cheerful mother whose enthusiasm is contagious. Instead of castigating Will for her behavior, Deb reacts positively, praising her for her creativity. Will admits that she hates basketball, to which Deb responds, "Well, that makes sense. You're more the artistic type" (28.29). For the split second that occurs between these two sentences, the viewer expects, as does Will, that Will's hatred for basketball will be attributed to her body and her fatness; "of course the fat kid hates sports." Instead, Deb seeks a positive talent out of Will's negative attitude. She proceeds to compliment Will's "art," namely the collage of body parts spelling "screw body fascism." Even in response to such a provocative statement, Deb responds with cheery enthusiasm.

Deb: I like your artwork, on your bunk.

Will: Oh thanks.

Deb: Oh look, the letters are made with little body parts! It's so creative.

Will: It was just something I threw together. I was bored.

Deb: Your parents must be so proud of you. To have that kind of imagination at your age.

Will: We're really not that kind of a family.

As Will utters this sentence, the shot switches to the family pictures on Dani's bunk. The Dodsons, it is suggested, are "that kind of a family," while Will's family is decidedly not. Throughout the scene, it seems that Will is unused to receiving praise and does not quite know how to react, downplaying her own achievements. Faced with criticism, she becomes defiant and confident; faced with praise, however, she becomes much more subdued. Even if Deb's praise first appears somewhat patronizing in contrast to the serious message to Will it is attempting to convey, it is significant. Deb, as a counterexample to Will's own mother, offers her something different, something that is also tied to a more compassionate attitude toward fatness. As Deb

continues to speak, she says, “It was Dani’s idea to come here. I think she’s beautiful. It’s hard. You want to support them but you don’t want them to have to go through the same pain you went through...” Here Deb reveals that Dani’s situation is the inverse of Will’s; whereas Will is forced to come to Camp Victory by her parents, Dani chooses it for herself. Deb supports this decision, although she seems to mourn it a bit as well. In alluding to her own pain, however, it is unclear what the exact source of this pain is—the judgment that comes with *being* fat, or the pain of trying to *become* thin? What does it mean to support her daughter in this case—to support her decision to come and attempt weight loss or to try to empower her in other ways? In the ambiguity of this statement, Deb’s dialogue illustrates the particular dilemmas produced by “choice feminism”—how does one support women’s choices about their own bodies while acknowledging that choices are not equal—some are rewarded and others condemned—and this judgment is socially mediated?

The episode also tries to ask the question: can Will be fundamentally opposed to the camp’s premise and still learn something from the experience? Deb, after praising Will, offers her one question, saying in regard to basketball, “What exactly do you hate about it?” Will has no answer for this question, and so is actually encouraged to rejoin the basketball game. With the Dodsons on the sidelines cheering, Will throws herself into the game and, to the amazement of all involved, including Will, even manages to score a basket. The specialness of the moment is highlighted by slow motion and extradiegetic music, and then the cheering of all involved, even the brash trainer, Shay. Will is visibly triumphant.

Later, Will reflects on the experience in a letter she writes to her parents, tying together all the questions posed by the episode about her. As Will’s voiceover reads the letter, we first see a shot of her writing, but soon other images of the Dodsons appear as the voiceover continues. Will writes:

Dear Mom and Dad, a crazy thing happened today. I, your daughter, played basketball. And I liked it. I actually scored. But you’re never gonna know that. I can’t tell you what’s good about this place because you’ll just pat yourselves on the back like, ‘didn’t I tell you she’d love camp?’ Then you’d feel totally justified for making me come here. And it’s not that simple. I can’t forget that you sent me

here, that I'm not...good enough for you. You tell me all the time—when you comment on how my shirts don't fit or exchange little looks when I reach for dessert. I try not to care. But it hurts. It hurts! And I'll never say that to you either.

In the end she tears up the letter. But this is hardly important—the letter is more important for Will herself, and for the viewer, than for her parents. Here Will opens up a discursive space for herself, one that allows her self-expression and reflection but does not cave to the demands of her parents to have contact and the satisfaction of having their decision justified. She can be vulnerable and admit the things that have hurt her, as well as celebrate her own successes, without sacrificing her outwardly defiant attitude. This is not a conversion to the dogma of weight loss—Will's stance against “body fascism” stands, just as the words next to her bunk remain. Instead, it is a way of developing in another direction, pursuing self-knowledge and exploring one's own potential.

As the episode closes, we see various types of failure—Dorothy finally writes to her mother, but fails to mention her father, leaving that plot open. Meanwhile, the daughter of the Dodson's, Dani, fails to make it at camp, instead suffering a panic attack that prompts her parents to take her home. Her last conversation leaves us only with the prophetic words that “Even when people leave, they leave a mark. They *change* us.” (38.00). That the Dodsons, even in their short presence, have changed Will is made clear in the final scene, in which Will is shooting baskets after hours. Salty, Dorothy's father, joins her and gives her pointers. In this final moment, the episode suggests not only that Salty will become a sort of mentor for Will, but also that she has changed—her newfound love of basketball will continue the rest of the season. Most importantly, the episode suggests that Will will perhaps develop a less antagonistic attitude toward her surroundings, and will find ways to grow in her body that are not dependent on weight loss.

Poker Face

The continued tension between bodily transformation and bodily acceptance, especially in regard to Will and her own personal battle against the rhetoric of makeover culture, finds

significant expression in the seventh episode, “Poker Face.” The plot of the episode revolves around the first weigh-in of the summer after the initial “before” weigh-in of the first episode. The title of the episode speaks to the various “poker faces” that characters put on to approach both the scale and their feelings toward themselves and others. In creating the episode around the weigh-in, “Poker Face” explores the temporality of anxiety produced by the weight loss makeover, in which the scale has the ultimate authority to mark the progress of makeover. Instead of acquiescing to that authority, however, it focuses on the affective effects in anticipation and response to its judgments, rejecting quantification. Unlike a reality weight loss makeover, we do not see the numbers on the scale; we do not, for the most part, even learn how much each character has lost. Instead, we see the expectant faces responding to the scale—the affective response to the quantification of weight loss.

This episode’s temporal placement in the season is also significant; instead of being placed at the end of the season, it is two-thirds of the way through. Placement at the end of the season would more clearly conform to a makeover culture format which stresses the “before” and “after,” while expanding the space between them. The avoidance of this type of plotting may be partially due to the series’ early cancellation, which cut short all character arcs at a mere ten episodes, but it is also likely that this decision was an intentional move to decenter the weight loss makeover narrative in the series, privileging instead other types of character development. The season finale is instead a two-part episode called “Parents’ Weekend,” stressing the personal relationships of the characters rather than their weight loss.

“Poker Face” opens with the girls in their cabin speculating that a weigh-in is coming. The impending weigh-in is confirmed in the first scene after the credits when Dr. Rand tells the staff that it is coming, but warns them not to pass this information on to the campers so they do not worry about it. Nevertheless, the campers know that the weigh-in is approaching and the ensemble offers a range of anxiety and expectation leading up to the event. Will, however, faces a different anxiety than most. While the others hope that they have lost weight, Will is caught between the physical demands of the camp and her expectations from herself to stay true to her fat embodiment and identity.

In this respect, Will is clearly contrasted with the other characters, who employ different strategies to keep up their spirits as the weigh-in approaches. Dr. Rand, for her part, espouses a feel-good rhetoric that stresses effort rather than tangible numeric results, like the coaches and trainers of weight loss makeovers. In a circle “sharing” session, she says, “These high expectations, whether they come from us or the people we love, can be destructive. All anyone should expect of you, all you should expect of yourselves, is that you try your best.” (8.54). At this point the camera shifts to show the face of a skeptical Will, as Dr. Rand continues to say, “And I see you all doing that.” The camera returns to a smiling Dr. Rand looking at Will; in a reverse shot, Will rolls her eyes and looks away. After the session, Becca and Will are walking back to their cabin; Becca is giving herself a sort of pep talk, saying, “It’s amazing. I can tell I’m getting into shape. Even just this walk is easier—I don’t get so out of breath. I feel great. I’m definitely going to share next time.” (9.54). At this point, Will interrupts in an outburst of frustration, saying “I just want to scream every time we’re in that circle! ‘No pressure. As long as you’re trying as hard as you can to shrink to an acceptable size’ …” (10.06). Here Will exposes the hypocrisy of the camp’s weight loss rhetoric, bursting Becca’s optimistic bubble in the process. The apparent need of the camp to quantify weight loss and change with a weigh-in belies Dr. Rand’s focus on “trying your best” as well as Chloe’s earlier assertion that “it’s not about the number, it’s about how you feel.” If these things were true, then there would be no need to have a weigh-in in the first place. This scene also sets up the conflict between the friends Will and Becca, which will continue throughout the episode.

Will’s anxiety about her own weigh-in and potential weight loss becomes clear in a later scene in the second act (18.47). Will and her friends are lying on the grass when they see a scale for the weigh-in being rolled by, prompting them to again discuss the weigh-in. Ian asks whether they are required to again wear their bathing suits, to which Becca replies, with a hint of grim feeling, “Every time.” This exchange reminds the viewer of the first episode and comments on the repeated shaming that the weigh-ins entail. Will, frustrated with the conversation, asks whether she can change the subject, saying “I’m just so sick of hearing about the weigh-in.” Ian replies, “Easy for you to say—you’ve actually *lost* weight.” Will, surprised, responds with “What? Shut up.” Alistair then reminds her of her statement at the beginning of the summer that

her goal was to gain weight. Will attempts to distance herself a bit from this plan, saying, “Why does everyone take me so seriously? I said that just to mess with people. I’m not an idiot. You’re exercising this much, you’re gonna lose something besides your mind.” Here Will acknowledges that it is a possibility that she has lost weight, but still attempts to escape the discussion of weight loss as a competition. Nevertheless, she gets sucked in, continuing to assert that she has not lost more than Ian, who insists on making a bet that she has indeed lost more than him. Will, exasperated, calls him an “assface” and insists that she “will not partake in a bet designed to prove how much weight [he hasn’t] lost.” Ian, instead of reading this as her way of protecting his self-esteem, guesses that she is trying to say he hasn’t lost any weight. Becca, attempting to defuse the situation, repeats Chloe’s earlier phrase, saying “It’s not about the number, it’s about how you feel.” The scene ends with another scale being rolled away.

This scene highlights Will’s difficult position between avowed rejection of weight loss rhetoric and the apparently successful subjection of her body to its regime. Will seems genuinely surprised that others have noticed her weight loss, although she tries to manage expectations by rationalizing that only an “idiot” would expect not to lose a little weight given the level of physical exertion required by the camp. Moreover, the bookending of the scene with the scale highlights the fact that, despite the other rhetoric, the purpose of the camp is ruled by the numerical model of weight loss; whatever conversation happens in between, it begins and ends with the spectre of the scale.

Will’s continued resistance to change is also apparent in her interaction with Dr. Rand. Dr. Rand, like Ian, suggests that Will has changed. When Will is in her office, she praises her, saying “I see the change in you, Will, and I think it’s to be commended.” (24.29). Will responds, in typically defiant fashion, “I haven’t changed.” Dr. Rand insists, saying “I just mean I see how you’ve opened yourself to this experience.” Will continues to be dismissive, saying “Whatever.” At this point, Dr. Rand notices that Will is fiddling with a burr in her hair, which appeared in the previous scene with Ian. Dorothy offers help, but Will dodges it, attempting to leave but blocked by Dorothy. Worn down by her insistence, Will eventually submits and Dorothy gingerly removes the burr. This moment of physical intimacy and care is the first positive interaction between Will and Dorothy, building a bit of trust between them. One might well wonder,

however, whether this act also symbolizes the removal of an irritating element in Will's life or rather the excision of the "prickly" part of Will's personality through the camp experience. Nevertheless, it is clear that it will take more than one moment for Will to accept Dr. Rand as an ally. When it comes to the weigh-in itself, Will is brusque, hopping heavily onto the scale and telling her "Let's just get this over with, ok?" (34.24). When Dr. Rand looks at the scale and says "I'm really proud of you," Will takes the card with her recorded weight and tears it up, dropping the pieces in front of Dr. Rand and storming out. How much Will has lost remains undisclosed, but her apparent frustration coupled with Dr. Rand's approval suggests that it is significant.

The conflict with Becca also comes to a head after the weigh-in. The girls happy with their loss are celebrating by dancing in their cabin while Will remains nonplussed (35.54). Becca is clearly happy, and appreciative when Sierra, another camper in the cabin, compliments her weight loss, saying "It really shows. You look great." Will interjects, "What are you saying she looked like before?" This question reveals the double-edged nature of such compliments, which always imply a less attractive "before." Becca, however, is not happy to have her success again deflated by Will, and this time lets her know.

Becca: You know, some of us choose to come here and maybe that makes us idiots to you, but I can't help it. I wanna lose weight.

Will: I just—is this really what *you* want? If this was the sixteenth century and everyone thought this was beautiful and being thin was ugly, would this still be what you wanted?

Becca: It's not the sixteenth century, Will.

Will: You know what, forget it.

(Will gets up to leave)

Becca, calling after her: Why can't you just be happy for me?

Will: Because I don't wanna get infected by this crap! I can't.

(Will storms out of the cabin)

This conversation presents a very real confrontation between two points of view that compete among feminists in today's view of weight loss. Will, representing the radical feminist body-positive agenda, invokes a historical temporality, hearkening back to a more accepting (and

possibly illusory) past, while Becca stresses the realities of today and her right to her own desire to lose weight. Interestingly, Will posits her resistance as a way of protecting herself from being “infected” by weight loss rhetoric; as in “Letters Home,” when she suggests that the teen magazines “poison” girls’ brains, Will asserts makeover culture as a polluting agent that must be contained and combated. This is a reversal of the usual idea of fat itself as an impure material that must be expunged from the body through weight loss. Instead of marking Will’s renewed dedication to fighting weight loss, however, Will’s heightened resistance in this episode appears to be due to the situation becoming more dire. Perhaps, the episode suggests, it is too late; Will is already “infected” in spite of herself. From this perspective, her weight loss is a measure of the body’s disobedience to her will, a type of betrayal.

Interestingly, the episode also seems to take a friendlier position toward the “propaganda” of teen magazines that Will was decrying in “Letters Home.” In a conversation with Amber, Chloe offers her the “Body Peace Treaty” in *Seventeen* magazine as an affirmation of self-worth regardless of body change; both girls sign the page where the signatures of a number of female celebrities are reproduced. This “Body Peace Treaty” is in fact an actual piece from *Seventeen*, and represents a sort of intrusion of the “real world” into the diegetic world of the series. While earlier mentions of teen magazines in the series were clearly used to parody such publications, this offering seems to function more as an advertisement for *Seventeen*. The irony—that a publication such as *Seventeen* would promote body acceptance at the same time it focuses inordinately on gendered body ideals and beauty—goes uncommented here.

It is significant in “Poker Face” as well that the storylines of Will and Amber cross. Both Will and Amber are disappointed with the outcome of the weigh-in, though for opposite reasons. While Will insists on not losing weight, she is faced with the fact that her body has indeed changed. Amber, on the other hand, desires losing weight but is faced with a disappointing result of only one pound lost. While the other girls celebrate their weight loss, Amber rushes to the bathroom to tearfully scrutinize her body. The contrast between her dark mood and the happy celebration in the main part of the cabin is highlighted by the lighting and cheerful music, which continues in the background even as Amber is reduced to tears. Both girls, the show suggests, are changing, but the change they need will not necessarily be the change they expect or desire.

Whereas Will will have to become more moderate in her critique and open herself up a bit more to change, both bodily and otherwise, Amber will have to give up her goal of weight loss in favor of accepting her body for what it is.

“That’s the Big Improvement?”: *Huge*’s Ultimate Ambivalence

Huge’s first and last season ends with a two-part episode (1.09 and 1.10) called “Parents’ Weekend.” At this point, the summer is presumed to be about half over, and this middle point allows the characters and the series to reflect on how far they have or have not come. Will, despite her ongoing struggles with her parents, is disappointed to learn that they are not coming to visit her and see how she has surprisingly adapted to camp life. The series thus leaves out this anticipated confrontation and instead comes full circle to the conflict between Will and Dr. Rand (Dorothy) that was set up in the very first scene of the series. Unlike their previous encounters, however, their conversation in the final scene of the episode (and thus the series) is less confrontational. It also importantly takes place in the evening, and in private, under the open sky, unlike the very public daytime spectacle in the first scene. Instead of being accused by Dorothy of breaking the camp’s rules, Will accuses herself, confessing that she stole brownies from the kitchen and should therefore be punished i.e. expelled from the camp. On the surface, Will’s confession seems to indicate that she has come to acquiesce to the discipline demanded of her. After all, she has given up her completely antagonistic stance; she has stopped selling candy and participates in the athletic activities. Even the brownie theft was prompted by Amber, rather than Will. Instead it is Will who is hesitant to take the brownies, knowing that doing so would betray the trust that Salty, the camp cook, has placed in her. Perhaps Will is giving in, subjecting herself to the disciplinary regime of makeover culture. However, the viewer knows that this is not really a conversion story; Will has not magically transformed into a “happy camper,” as she has just had an argument with her friend Becca and still has not found a way to connect romantically with her crush Ian. The viewer suspects, therefore, that this confession is simply another attempt to get out of the camp, to escape the space and its demands entirely. Dorothy, who already knows of Will’s transgression, refuses to fall for it and send her home. Instead, she grants Salty a

significant share of the blame for showing her where the key was and allowing her access to the pantry. Her mildness in responding is indicative of the relative rapprochement that Will and Dorothy have achieved; they no longer confront each other directly. Of course, Dorothy's decision to keep Will in camp is also a way of letting the narrative continue in its allotted space; Will cannot simply leave the camp if her story is to continue. Given that *Huge* was abruptly canceled after this episode aired, it is likely that this episode was written with the hope of continuation in mind, rather than the intention to come to a clear stopping point.

Although this ending was not necessarily planned as the end of the entire series, it does produce an interesting final moment. Beyond this initial conversation about confession and forgiveness, Will and Dorothy quickly move to a different phase in which they have an open conversation about the merits of weight loss. It begins when Will asks with honest curiosity, "What were you like...when you were fat?" (41.48). Dorothy responds simply, "I hated myself." When Will counters "And now you don't?", she answers only, "Less." Will, clearly frustrated with this answer, says "And that's it, that's the big improvement? You hate yourself less?" Again Dorothy's answer is calm and confident: "Yes." Here, beyond the makeover rhetoric of the camp, Dorothy exposes a different side of herself; she is still struggling to love herself and weight loss has not solved all of her problems. As we know from the rest of the series, she still deals with compulsive eating and has difficulty with intimacy. The improvement is marked, but marginal, rather than a dramatic contrast of "before" and "after." Will, who has criticized this makeover paradigm from the beginning, is nonetheless disappointed to find that Dorothy herself does not entirely believe in the promise of weight loss. Her assessment, as well as her delivery, is dry and unromantic. At the same time, Dorothy's assured "yes" betrays no insecurity, suggesting that she believes that, while it does not conform to the total transformation promised by the camp, hating yourself less is actually a big step.

This final moment is interesting in that it preserves the teleology of weight loss, the "better" state that should be attained, while seriously undermining the "before/after" paradigm. While Dorothy's "before" and "after" might correspond to the designations "fat" and "thin," the change in her feeling about herself is only marginal, sliding slowly on a scale of "hate/love" without ever reaching the "love" side. She still describes her change in negative terms (hating less) rather than

positive (loving more). Weight loss, she suggests, is not intrinsically tied to a dramatic increase in self-esteem. Instead, it seems the project of the self is an ongoing process, one that can be helped along by weight loss but not brought to a conclusive end by reaching your “goal weight.” It is also important that Dorothy’s story is placed in a paradigm of addiction; like a recovering alcoholic, she still attends Overeaters Anonymous meetings and, as the twelve-step model of such groups prescribes, still sees herself as a *recovering* overeater, rather than *recovered*.⁶⁸ While scholars such as Valverde and White-Mair argue that twelve-step programs like AA somewhat undermine the neoliberal logic of self-improvement in their focus on powerlessness rather than entrepreneurial conquest of the body’s desires, the understanding of “recovery” as a perpetually unfinished process within these groups dovetails well with makeover culture.

In this final moment, it is also unclear where Will stands. We do not know if she has lost weight or not; certainly if she has, the change has not been dramatic enough to be visible. At the very end, the series moves away from the entire discussion of weight loss to two final, somewhat curious lines. In her final line, Will says, looking at the sky, “Back home I never noticed the stars. But here you can really see them.” Dorothy responds, “Yeah, you really can.” This final exchange both makes a gesture outside the diegetic space, even beyond earth, while also again stressing the uniqueness of the camp setting, which allows a change in perception; here you can see something that you do not notice at home. This change of perspective is inherently valued, producing the camp space as a setting that isolates, nurtures, and thus transforms the people within it. The content of that change, however, is left more ambiguous; it is unclear what effect seeing the stars would have on Will’s development. If they are symbolic, what do they actually symbolize? Is it simply the connection to the cosmic, a world that is much larger than ourselves?

In any case, it is clear that Will’s story, like those of her campmates, is not complete. The fact that the characters remain at camp in the end, rather than being successfully re-integrated into their “real” lives as would happen in a typical reality TV makeover, suggests that the

⁶⁸ See Valverde and White-Mair: “‘Recovering’ alcoholics are not on the way to being cured: AA firmly believes that ‘once an alcoholic, always an alcoholic’. In contrast to medical usage, then, ‘recovery’ does not mean getting healthy or becoming normal. It means learning to live with one’s dysfunction as peacefully as possible. The paradigm of recovery that has spread beyond AA to a myriad of other self-help groups, therefore, while appealing to or evoking the paradigm of disease, simultaneously undermines that paradigm, since AA members believe they can be healthy without being cured, happy without being normal.” (Valverde and White-Mair 398-399)

transformation is unfinished. Again, this is likely due to the fact that *Huge*, as a PTS, left the narrative open to provide for a second season; the incidental cancellation in the middle of the structuring temporal arc of the summer simply interrupted these story lines. However, it is precisely because it is a PTS with such an open structure that it allows for this type of aperture between episodes and seasons. In many RTV makeovers, episodes are self-contained, assuring that the series could be canceled at any time without abruptly ending any particular narrative strand. In PTS, though, the tendency is to keep narrative strands ongoing for the purposes of longer arcs. The cancellation of *Huge* assured that the built-in tension between this structuring frame (the summer) and the tendency for continuation never came to a head. One could imagine that, had *Huge* continued, the second season would have finished the summer and subsequent seasons would have had to go in a different direction, either starting a new summer after a significant temporal gap or, less likely, moving the setting entirely.

One can also imagine a whole host of scenarios for Will had the series continued, but it is unlikely that any of them would have entailed a significant weight loss. While Will's aversion to the makeover paradigm propagated by the camp becomes milder, her body does not entirely submit to the demands of the camp. Certainly, her marginal weight loss, as implied in "Poker Face," is never quantified, nor readily visible. In fact, although some characters report weight loss, there is no dramatic change in any of their appearances; the actors and characters remain fat. In this way, *Huge* evades the teleology of weight loss even as it operates within a setting that is designed to produce it. One could argue, moreover, that it reframes the conflict implicit in makeover RTV; rather than pitting protagonists against their own bodies, *Huge* attempts to show a community of fat people caught up in the struggle against a system that devalues fat and "micro-hierarchizes" people according to weight. Each person on the show must work to find themselves in the face of the very strong ideology of weight loss and its teleological drives. In its myriad characters, *Huge* shows how difficult it is to resist the dominant ideas of fat as unhealthy, unattractive, and a social handicap. These assumptions are in the media the teens consume, in the pressure they face from their parents, and built into the very setting of the show. Most characters act according to these pressures, either finding themselves devastated by their inability to conform to their own expectations, like Amber, or unambiguously celebrating their weight loss,

like Becca. Will, initially diametrically opposed to this rhetoric, finds herself adopting a more ambivalent stance toward the end. As the series' anchor, Will therefore embodies the ultimate ambivalence of the series itself to makeover culture. While Will fears being "poisoned" or "infected" by gendered makeover rhetoric, she changes in spite of herself. This change significantly does not a turn toward the trappings of conventional femininity; her clothing and presentation remain the same. Even the physical activity she comes to like, basketball, is not gendered feminine, unlike yoga or pilates. Nevertheless, there is a change, as ambiguous as it may be, as if the series is unwilling to give up on the idea of change itself entirely. This change seems to entail a relative openness to "the camp experience," not only allowing it to act upon the body, but also and more importantly choosing to deepen social relationships; instead of positioning herself as a brave outsider who fights the system alone, Will finds friends and embeds herself more deeply in social relations. This may entail a softening of her political position at times, or at least the sensitivity to censor her criticism for the sake of others, as with Becca, but it does not translate into choosing a completely different path for herself, but rather more compassion for those who choose weight loss. Allowing these competing viewpoints to co-exist in productive tension is one of *Huge*'s strengths. In this way, it answers Kathleen LeBesco's call for fat activism to "embrace the contradictions of the lived experience of fatness [...] recognizing that sometimes fat is healthy, and sometimes it's not; that every person, fat and thin alike, has moments of self-control to parallel their times of abandon; and that diets do work sometimes, though the choices one makes in order to achieve considerable weight loss frequently reduce one's quality of life," (116). In its complication of fat issues and its willingness to consider the process of weight loss in all its complexity beyond the simple makeover paradigm, *Huge* makes a significant contribution. As Dodai Stewart wrote about the *Huge* finale: "Whether *Huge* will change how fat people are portrayed on TV remains to be seen. [...] But for one summer, overweight characters lived full and complex lives on screen; a person's body type was not a punchline, tokenism or sideshow, and actors without the traditional superslim Hollywood physique were encouraged to shine. And that is huge."

***My Mad Fat Diary* and the Alternative Journey of Body Acceptance**



The image freezes as Rae prepares to enter the “big wide world.” Voiceover: “But, well, there is a difference between snacking and bingeing and I don’t binge anymore.”

My Mad Fat Diary centers around the life of Rachel “Rae” Earl and the way she deals with both the “mad” and “fat” aspects of her experience as a teenager. In this sense, the “mad” and “fat” of the title inform the themes of the series, while the “diary” structures its form. The diary form not only connects the series to its autobiographical source material, the memoir by Rachel Earl herself entitled *My Fat, Mad Teenage Diary*, but also works as a stylistic device, or rather a stylistic framing that involves a variety of devices. The diary form mediates the story both aurally, through a voiceover, and visually, through the modification of the images with drawings and words in pencil, as they would appear in a diary. Moreover, the diary frame allows the narrative to depict not only Rae’s “real” experiences, but also her fantasies, both daydreams and nightmares. The cumulative effect of these techniques is that the narrative is personalized for Rae and very clearly takes her perspective, while putting distance between what she experiences and feels for herself, and what she shares with others. This is true from the first scene of the first episode, “Big Wide World.” The episode opens with a sort of teaser—Rae meeting her new therapist, Kester, for the first time, a week after being released from the clinic. Rae is clearly closed to Kester, hugging her diary to her chest and answering him in monosyllables. When

Kester refers to the diary she is supposed to be keeping, Rae preemptively warns him that she will not let him read it. Kester, in response, insists that he does not want to read it, saying “I don’t want to read it. It’s private, it’s for you.” (1.03). He then asks what she has been up to the following week, and Rae insists “Not much.” At this point the diary frame intrudes with big letters “L I E” over the image and Rae’s voiceover saying, “Big lie. This week has in fact been pretty momentous.” The transition to the next scene is also introduced by a musical tie-over. At this point, the narrative breaks into two lines—what Rae tells Kester, and what she tells her diary—producing a dramatic tension between them. We, as the viewers, are privy to both.

From this point at the end of the first scene, the diary frame takes over and the narrative begins to tell the events of the previous week retrospectively. The date—Wednesday, July 10th—is given, written on the screen and spoken in the voiceover, as an extreme close up of Rae’s face shows her waking up. In the following moments, while Rae is packing to leave the clinic, we hear this monologue: “Dear Diary, I’m 16, I weigh 16 and a half stone, and I live in Lincolnshire. My interests include music, vegging out, and finding a fit boy—oh, scratch that—*any* boy to quench my ever-growing horn. Unfortunately, I already have a lover that makes me look pregnant—food.” At this point, Rae opens a drawer and a heap of candy wrappers is revealed; drawn pictures of other food items appear over them. Rae continues speaking, saying “But, well, there is a difference between snacking and bingeing, and *I don’t binge anymore*,” putting particular emphasis on the last clause as the image freezes to show Rae from below, her hand on the doorknob. Finally, as Rae opens the door and enters the corridor, she says, “And if anyone ever finds this diary, and reads it, and comes to the conclusion that I’m crazy... they’d be spot on.” At the beginning part of this statement, the camera shows various rooms of the clinic as she passes and adopts an unusual movement, as if it is rocking back and forth, presumably to signal the unsteady mental health of the patients depicted. In the pause of the ellipses, however, the camera switches to showing Rae straight on (or “spot on,” as the voiceover suggests); her face is steady and even graced with a mischievous smile. In this foregrounding, she is cemented as the focal point of the series, the grounded center in the midst of chaos.

This opening monologue not only serves to locate Rae in space and time, but also shows themes that will become important in the series, particularly her troubled relationship with food

and her desire for sexual intimacy. The “mad” of the title is implied by her release from the clinic, but at this point it is unclear what exactly happened to force her to be admitted in the first place. Over the course of the series, her previous destructive behavior, which goes much beyond bingeing and into self-harm and attempted suicide, will be revealed. One might assume that Rae’s release from the clinic indicates that she has arrived at the end of some process of self-transformation. As she says in the voiceover, she has spent “four months locked away, four months convincing people my finger is no longer on the self-destruct button. Finally, I was leaving. Finally, I was free.” (5.42). In a sense, she has completed a makeover of her mental health; she is in the “after” stage. In this way, *MMFD* varies significantly from the vast majority of makeover shows and those depicting weight loss, which would tend to start their depiction at the beginning of the intervention into Rae’s health, perhaps charting her admission to the clinic and subsequent recovery, ending with her release. Instead, *MMFD* starts at the moment when she is sent back home and into the “real” world, showing what happens after the “after.” This shift is significant in that it makes the clinic the safe baseline and the “big wide world” of the first episode’s title the wild space that must be conquered by Rae. For Rae’s return to freedom is merely the beginning of another journey, of living in the world, one that is just as difficult, if not more, than living locked away. Periodically, Rae even finds herself longing for the relative safety of the clinic, unsure that she can face the pressures of her life outside. But eventually she will find the strength to face her fears and make her way, most through a change of her own self-perception rather than her body.

Initially, Rae believes that her journey to her goals must go through weight loss. In the first episode, this is represented by her constant struggle to avoid binge eating. Unfortunately, food occupies a difficult and problematic space in her life, both as a comfort in times of stress and a sort of lubricant in her relationship to her mother, Linda. This is clear from their first scene together, as her mother picks her up late from the clinic (8.02). When conversation becomes tense, her mother tells her there are Blue Ribbon biscuits (cookies) in the glove compartment. Rae takes them out hesitantly, and offers them to her mother, who refuses them on the grounds that she is on the “alphabet diet,” a ridiculous scheme in which you “only eat food beginning with a certain letter” each week. The silly logic of the diet is further subverted by Linda, who

says she started with “S” because she got “loads of Scotch eggs on the cheap,” but she is proud that she has already lost six pounds. Rae, obviously resentful of her mother’s attempts to lose weight herself while feeding her daughter junk food, slyly suggests that the Blue Ribbons have wafer in them, and therefore conform to her “W” week. Linda allows herself to be swayed, and Rae escapes the appeasement of food. When they arrive home, though, it becomes clear that there is more food temptation in store. The cupboard itself seems to exert a hypnotic power on Rae; repeatedly it is shown with a glow from behind its doors, sometimes accompanied by an eerie childish tune like those played by ice cream trucks. At the first glance, Rae resists the charms of the cupboard; the voiceover stresses her resolve to avoid bingeing by repeating the earlier sentence: “There is a difference between snacking and bingeing, and I don’t binge anymore.” But later, when she is publicly shamed during a fire drill and forced to stand on the street without a shirt, she returns to the cupboard and binges, illustrated by a pile of wrappers that echoes the collection of them in the drawer in the opening montage.

From the first episode, Rae’s problematic relationship to her own body is clearly connected to her reliance on eating junk food. But the episode also indicates that Rae was not always so self-conscious about her own body. This is illustrated in a dream-like sequence in which the series stages a conversation between Rae in her current form and herself as a prepubescent child, several years earlier. The bridge to this scene is Rae trying on bathing suits and feeling uncomfortable; as a child, her voiceover says, this was much different: “There was a time when I refused to wear anything other than a swimsuit.” (28.10). From here we shift to the imagined conversation, which takes place in a supermarket. 16-year-old Rae tells her younger self she should stop eating biscuits because she will get fat and “you won’t be able to wear a swimsuit and boys won’t like you.” Younger Rae, however, remains undisturbed, saying “And even if I did like boys, and I was fat, and I wore a swimsuit, they’d like me anyway.” When disbelieving older Rae asks “Why would they like you?” she confidently responds “Because I’m brilliant,” and illustrates the point by taking a bite of pastry. This scene suggests an alternate possibility for Rae beyond shame of her body, a possibility that she can be fat and confident and sexually satisfied at once. Paradoxically, she must look to a moment from her past to recover the innocent and

confident relationship to her body in the future. Rae may not believe it at this moment, but the show suggests it as a possibility, and in fact this narrative thread will be picked up later.

In a sense, Rae's insecurity is simply part of puberty. Who hasn't felt a new self-consciousness in the face of these bodily changes? Rae's discomfort is heightened by the social perception of her weight, but she is not the only one who has problems. The show reminds the viewer of this point later in "Big Wide World" when it is revealed that Archie, her crush at the time, avoids swimming at a pool party for fear of revealing his "backne" (back acne). The two make a pact to overcome their insecurities and enter the pool anyway; eventually, Rae does just this, only to get stuck in the slide on the way down, which not only calls attention to her fatness in a stereotypical kind of scene—the fat person literally not fitting into the built environment—but also reveals her legs, which are covered in scars, presumably where she has cut herself in bouts of self-harm. These twin shames—her fatness and her self-destructive behavior—threaten to destroy the tenuous place she has found in this new group of friends and throw her into another spiral of depression. The rupture of this embarrassing moment is heightened stylistically by the disruption of the music and all the faces of her friends turned toward her. The suspense is further heightened when the show immediately cuts to commercial break, and returns to an entirely different scene afterward, rather than the pool party. This narrative jump to Rae's conversation with Kester is both a chronological leap forward to the end of the week as well as a diegetic recall of the very first scene. More importantly, it creates a narrative gap in which the viewer is suspended with questions. Will Rae be incredibly embarrassed and run away from the situation or be able to improvise so that she can retain her new friends? When the episode returns to the pool scene at the very end, it is revealed that Rae has achieved the latter, making a joke of her own weight and smoothing over the awkwardness, and her friends have responded positively. Through the resolution of this potential crisis, the series strikes an optimistic note, suggesting that Rae will somehow get through these tough times and find her way in her own body and life, even if temporarily at the expense of making a joke about her body.

After introducing all these themes in the first episode, *My Mad Fat Diary* continues to focus mainly on the "fat" aspect of Rae's struggles in the second episode, "Touched." The action of the episode is set in motion by the early revelation by Chloe, Rae's best friend, that she has a

boyfriend. Rae, however, is hopeless about her prospects of dating her crush Archie or finding a boyfriend at all. Chloe, attempting to reassure her, gives a speech that is apparently well-intentioned but patronizing, saying “My sister used to be big, so I know what this is like. And I know that boys don’t like it, and it’s not right, but that’s just the way they are. You know, they think if they go out with someone who’s big then the other lads will just take the piss. I’m sorry, but it’s the truth.” (1.30). Chloe’s assumption that she knows “what it’s like” because her sister was “big” may be a sign of empathy, but it is also telling of the real distance between her experience and Rae’s. More importantly, while Chloe astutely diagnoses the fact that men are afraid of dating a fat woman for social reasons, her resigned statement that “it’s just the way it is” is unsatisfying, and it leaves Rae with the feeling that the only way she could be appreciated romantically is by losing weight. As Rae’s stormy face is intercut with shots of the scale, landing on her weight, the voiceover bridges to the next scene with the lament “I am a body dysmorphic, without the dysmorphic. I am a bulimic without the sick” and ending with an emphatic “I am fat.”

This moment poses some interesting questions for feminism and intersectionality in the way it links Rae’s body issues with anorexia and bulimia, while stressing the distance between herself and them. In this moment, and throughout the series, Rae is compared with other women, especially Chloe, her best friend outside the clinic, and Tix, her best friend in the clinic. While Rae often sees herself at a clear disadvantage to the beautiful Chloe (see above discussion of “Alarm”), the series shows us that Chloe also faces serious issues regarding her own body, most importantly in her struggle to maintain her sovereignty over it when men attempt to exploit her sexually. In a later episode that takes Chloe’s perspective directly (also through her diary), it is revealed that Chloe fears that she has little to offer men beside her body, whereas Rae has wit and charm. In this sense, both Chloe and Rae are afraid of being reduced to their bodies and their sexual desirability or lack thereof. Likewise, the character of Tix offers a significant contrast to Rae. Small and fragile, Tix refuses to eat, compulsively exercises, and has violent outbursts when she is touched. Rae and Tix encourage each other, giving each other the ironic and aspirational nicknames “Skinny” (for Rae) and “Fatty” (for Tix). Rae even carries a gift from Tix, a decorated medical bracelet with these nicknames. In making Rae and Tix allies who struggle with similar

issues, the series places them simply on opposite ends of a spectrum of weight-related issues and compulsive behavior, rather than representatives of completely separate problems. This is in line with those fat scholars and feminists who try to see weight issues on a spectrum and women's bodily insecurities as products of a sexist system. As Cecilia Hartley argues, for example, the "sexism inherent in sizism" is what "produces both the slender and the fat body" (61). Both women who are anorexic and those who are extremely fat can be seen as "attempting to remove themselves from their bodies, to live from the neck up" (Hartley 69). More importantly, "[e]ither extreme, being fat or being anorexic, can therefore be seen as a rejection of the body as the object of the male gaze" (Hartley 69). *MMFD* supports this hypothesis in showing how both Tix and Rae respond with anxiety to sexual attention; their fear of being "touched" is first a fear of their bodies being "seen." Meanwhile, Chloe also struggles with the hypervisibility of her body. In offering sympathy to all of these different characters, *MMFD* resists the urge to demonize thin women in favor of fat women, and argues for a feminism across the thin/fat divide.

At the same time, the series is realistic about the different challenges that these women face. Their eating behavior may be just as disordered and compulsive, but the value that is granted to them varies greatly; those pursuing weight loss through disordered eating are encouraged by societal approval, so much so that Rae almost wishes she had the "dysmorphic" and the "sick" to make her body thinner by any means. As a number of fat feminists and body activists have attempted to explain, "skinny shaming" and "fat shaming" are not equatable because the structural scales of power tilt one way; all women may be subject to body shaming, but only fat(ter) women are at a disadvantage in their lives due to systemic prejudice (see Georgina Jones in *Bustle*). *MMFD* not only acknowledges these facts, but also advocates for Rae as a character able to assert her embodiment without caving to social pressure. She is presented as admirable and strong; Tix, who continually says that she wishes she were more like Rae, is the one who never makes it out of the clinic, who never gets better, who dies of a heart attack linked to her compulsive exercise and self-deprivation. Rae turns out to be the strong one who lives on and makes a tenuous peace with her demons, not because she changes her body but because she alters her perception of herself.

In “Touched,” however, Rae is still at the beginning of this growth. After lamenting that she does not have the kind of eating disorder that makes you fashionably thin, Rae enters a daydream scene in which she enacts the common fantasy of taking off her “fat suit.” (2.40-3.25) Almost erotically, the camera travels down her back as she unzips her skin and allows her fat to drop onto the floor, then drags the whole thing down the steps and removes it from her house entirely. This fantasy reflects the way that fat is commonly discussed and understood as something external to the self, something in excess of and beyond one’s “true” identity and thus “inessential to personhood,” to use Christopher E. Forth’s term (“Introduction: Materializing Fat,” 16). Whereas Will in *Huge* subverts this conventional understanding by insisting there is an “even fatter person inside waiting to get out”, Rae allows herself to indulge in the fantasy of leaving behind all her fat and emerging as a thin person. Throughout this scene, of course, one thing we do not see is Rae’s face. The thin woman who steps out of the fat is almost anonymous, as if neither Rae nor the viewer can quite imagine her face on a thin body. And the fantasy ends with a reality check—a lone tear falling on the scale where it remains between 16 and 17 stone—and then the movement into the opening credits.

In a following scene with Kester, the theme of Rae’s dissatisfaction with her own body continues. It begins when Rae tells Kester that her mother is in a “sham relationship”; the relationship must be fake, Rae argues, because Karim, her mother’s boyfriend, is good-looking, while her mother Linda is not: “she’s like me. She’s a blob, a blob with a gob.” (8.30). Behind this humorous, rhyming phrase is the root of Rae’s disbelief in her mother’s relationship; she cannot believe her mother is authentically desired by Karim because she cannot believe she herself is worthy of the romantic attention of men she desires. Kester follows up on this theme by making the observation that Rae often walks the long way to her chair, which he surmises she does to avoid the mirror. Rae insists that “Hardly anyone likes looking in a mirror. In fact, no one likes looking in a mirror.” (9.28) Kester, in response, goes to the mirror himself and assesses his own appearance, saying frankly,

“You know what, Rae? I’m 47 years old and I still get blackheads. I have bags under my eyes that make me look like I’ve battled a lifelong addiction to heroin.

And having said that, I do look fantastic. Yeah, I look great. You know what, perfect wouldn't be a stretch too far. I think I look perfect."

Kester's confidence despite the frank appraisal of his weaknesses makes an impression on Rae, but she refuses to do his assignment of looking in the mirror and finding something to like about herself.

Instead of completing Kester's self-esteem exercise, Rae embarks on a complete self-improvement course when Archie asks her out, saying in the voiceover "Bollocks to looking in the mirror and whispering sweet nothings to myself. If I wanted Archie to touch me, it was imperative there was a lot less of me to touch." (14.53). In rejecting Kester's suggestions, Rae is choosing external validation over internal confidence, change of the body over change in her mind. What follows is a whirlwind montage of various activities—Rae jogging while local bullies call her "Jabba the Jogger," Rae throwing out all the sweets in the cupboard, Rae going to the library and checking out books called *How to Lose Weight* and *Being Orgasmic* from the local library, Rae buying condoms. This montage recalls both the typical training montage of sports films, as well as scenes one often finds in the weight loss programs of reality television—particularly the indiscriminate trashing of all "bad" foods from the cupboard. But *MMFD* subverts both of these paradigms by quickly deflating Rae's efforts on two counts—not only does she fail to lose weight (though not surprising in the short time of the montage), but she also gets a dressing-down from her mother, who returns home upset that her daughter has been buying condoms and checking out sex books in her name, but also (and this appears to be the worst offense) throwing out "35 pounds of confectionary for no reason," which she dumps out onto the table for the sake of demonstration. Instead of being viewed as the necessary steps to a "better self," these actions are judged to be pointless.

Her weight loss efforts thwarted, Rae nonetheless gets a kiss from Archie, leading to a second date. In preparation, a second self-improvement phase begins when her friends insist on giving her a makeover. Rae resists, saying "I don't do makeovers. That's not me." (29.17), but is soon convinced anyhow. As she arrives to her date, the result is on display; her make-up is done, she is wearing pink and heels. At this point, it seems Rae has resigned herself to seeking physical change in a different way, without weight loss; as she says in the voiceover, "If you want to make

someone touch you and you can't change the way you look, I guess the next best thing is to hide it—with make-up, with clothes, with whatever you can find." (31.30). This makeover represents a second attempt to return to conventional femininity, this time by other means; if the first phase reflected weight loss makeovers like *I Used to Be Fat*, this phase represents fashion makeovers like *What Not to Wear* that accept the fat body as it is, but nonetheless attempt to "elide fat by shifting emphasis to parts of the body that are seen as most attractive" (Sender and Sullivan, 136). In Rae's case, however, this second makeover is as unsuccessful as the first one. Archie fails to show for the date, and Rae is reduced to tears that make her mascara run. She also returns to self-destructive behavior, turning the water to scalding in the shower. This incident reveals a narrative pattern that recurs throughout the series; whenever Rae attempts to perform conventional femininity, particularly by dressing up or wearing fancy lingerie or whatever, her desires are thwarted. This is not to say that her desires are always thwarted and her destiny as a fat woman is to remain alone; in fact, the series *does* allow her desires to be fulfilled, but only when she is more comfortable in her own skin, not trying to escape it or cover it in the trappings of conventional femininity.

In the case of Archie, Rae is both relieved and disappointed later in the episode when she finds out that he is gay and was simply experimenting with Rae to be sure. When confronted, Archie says, "You don't know what it's like, having this big, bloody secret that could come out at any moment. It's horrible." Of course, this statement produces dramatic irony because we, and Rae, know that she does know what it is like to have a secret. In Rae's case, there is both the secret of her clinic stay and suicide attempt, as well as the "obvious secret" of her weight. In showing the similarity of their situations, *MMFD* suggests that there is a potential alliance between fatness and queerness, as LeBesco and other have suggested. Both Rae and Archie are still in the closet at this point. The struggle for Rae to "come out" is apparent throughout the series, particularly manifested in her inability to reveal her body, not only to potential sexual partners but even initially to herself. In "Touched," this inability is so basic that she cannot even view herself clothed in the mirror. As a viewer, one hopes that Rae will simply overcome this issue, but the series acknowledges that it is a slow process. At the climax of the first season, Rae tells her friends about her clinic stay, but her acceptance of her own (nude) body comes later. So

when Rae asks Archie why he does not simply “be brave and tell people” so that he could “be free to be [himself],” she is also asking for herself. Archie’s response, citing R. H. Tawney, is that “[w]hat’s freedom for the pike is death for the minnow.” This quotation rings true for both of them, and once again highlights the disparity between certain kinds of insecurities or stigmas and others; what may be easy for one person exposes another person to serious risk. Indeed, Rae and Archie’s differing views on this count will become a source of tension between them; while Archie will advocate staying “under the radar,” Rae continually urges him to come out.

Ultimately, their shared experience of having secrets will act as a source of support.

At the end of the episode, Rae takes a small step toward “coming out” as fat by altering her self-perception, rather than changing her body. This is demonstrated most obviously when, in a late scene with Kester, Rae looks into the mirror of the elevator and says “It’s fucking embarrassing how good I look some days.” (42.50). The process is not finished; she immediately asks Kester “So how long does it take before you actually believe it?” and he responds that “it’s a lifelong project for everyone.” However, this step is significant. As bookends of the episode, her initial conversation with Kester and this late scene show a small amount of growth, a willingness within Rae to at least approach her reflection as it is.

More significant, though, is perhaps the final scene in the episode. This final montage begins with Rae’s voiceover pondering the possibility of not getting the sexual satisfaction she dreams of, saying “Maybe some bodies weren’t meant to be touched” and continuing, “Maybe I’d grow old like her [elderly neighbor Mrs. Dewhurst], alone, never being touched, never feeling good.” (44.21). Immediately, however, this possibility is counteracted when Rae explores the potential of self-love, indulging in a fantasy of a very different kind from the fat suit removal. This one, inspired by a romance novel entitled *Caesar’s Last Love*, involves sexual pleasure and shows Rae in her own body, dressed in ancient Roman dress and having an encounter with a centurion. This fantasy, accompanied by masturbation, allows her to finally cross through the “Mystical Orgasm Gateway,” as she calls it. In this final scene, the series suggests that when no one touches you or you are not ready for that touch, the solution is to touch yourself. This self-love is linked to a symbolic valuing of the self, but it is also importantly material, a genuine experience of pleasure in one’s own body, from itself and for itself. Like *Mad Men*’s “Indian

Summer,” *MMFD*’s “Touched” chooses and celebrates masturbation for its female protagonist at the end of the episode. Rather than make your body conform to societal expectations, rather than wait for society to deem your body “worthy” of pleasure, they suggest, a woman should take it for herself. This is an implicitly feminist message, and one that is potentially radical when it is combined with a body politics that allows fatness and pleasure to coexist in one body. *Mad Men* somewhat weakens this message by giving Peggy romantic satisfaction only when she has returned to a thin shape, but *MMFD* is practically unique in the way it grants Rae every right to sexual pleasure without losing weight—and not just when she appears conventionally feminine, not just with a partner who is also fat and therefore in her “league,” but eventually with Finn, who is seen as one of the “fittest” boys in school.

“Touched” is the only episode in the series that shows Rae attempting to lose weight. Whatever troubled waters await her, and there are many—Tix’s death, her mother’s marriage and pregnancy, Chloe’s involvement with an abusive boyfriend, her own insecurity in her relationship with Finn—Rae navigates them without resorting to trying to lose weight. Instead of a makeover, her journey is about finding herself in her own skin, learning to inhabit her body fully. Remarkably, *MMFD* achieves this also without resorting to the saccharine platitudes that one sometimes finds in body acceptance literature regarding authenticity or “real” bodies. In the final scene of the second season, this process passes an important milestone when Rae is finally able to be naked in front of Finn, her boyfriend. Against all odds, this story has a happy ending. As the voiceover says: “Dear Diary, that’s the thing with diaries. They’re like movies; they’re just stories, filled with the things I saw and the things I felt. But when I look around I realize that everyone’s the protagonist of their own story. And the thing about stories is that not all of them have a happy ending. But some do.” Finally, we see Finn and Rae getting intimate; as Rae drops her robe and they finally kiss, both Rae’s and the viewer’s desires are satisfied.

CONCLUSION

In all three of the PTS dramas discussed in this chapter, serial storytelling allows a more open-ended discussion of weight gain and loss. On the surface, this form of narration precludes

the type of teleological ends and simple “before/after” formats one finds in RTV weight loss makeovers. This type of narrative also gives these series the opportunity to reflect seriously on the body, particularly the female body, and questions of representation. Weight plots inspire these series to reconcile “curves” and “lines,” as well as flat surfaces and three-dimensional bodies. In so doing, all three of these series engage in a self-referential “politics of the signifier,” showing how images are produced and reflecting on how characters conform to roles and stereotypes. In *Mad Men*, this self-referential play is shown in the process of putting together advertising for women and women’s products. In reflecting on advertising for women and advertising using images of women, *Mad Men* is able to deconstruct ideas of femininity and women’s roles more generally. More often than not, it is the disconnect between depiction and depicted, or between producer and consumer, that is shown; ads for women are made by men, or they are made by women (like Peggy) who have very different experiences from those they propagate in their copywriting. Likewise, we see products that purport to do one thing but actually have a completely different effect; the Relax-a-cizor, for example, claims to cause weight loss but actually provides sexual stimulation. In this case, what seems to be a failure of the product turns into a positive benefit, a means for women to have sexual gratification under the cover of beauty consciousness. Even this subversive potential, however, is mitigated in the next episode, revealing the paradox of empowerment promised by capitalism; the more Annie repeats the radio ad copy about the confidence the Relax-a-cizor promises the user, the less confident she becomes. In the same way, the episode suggests, the constant advertisements for products meant to give women confidence work to undermine that confidence in the long run.

In *Huge* and *MMFD*, we see this other side of the equation—the reception of these advertising images, particularly in the lives of teenage girls. The implicit messages about how women should look propagated by advertising images and the media in which they appear (like women’s magazines) influence the characters, often leading them to believe that their fat embodiment is akin to a failure of being adequately feminine. While those who consume these images also ascribe to makeover culture more readily, characters like Will in *Huge* resist the power of these images. Drawing on feminist discourse, Will critiques gender norms and makeover rhetoric alike. Likewise, *MMFD* shows us Rae, who is perpetually haunted by images

of thin feminine bodies; comparing herself to the models in advertisements and her own friends, Rae constantly finds herself lacking. It is only after giving up weight loss as a goal and turning her ire toward the advertising itself that she can gain a modicum of comfort in her body. Showing how images operate in the lives of the characters, *Huge* and *MMFD* deconstruct femininity from the side of the consumer.

All three series therefore operate within a “politics of the signifier,” in Kirsten Lentz’s terms. In terms of the other side, “politics of the referent,” however, these series vary significantly. While *Mad Men* includes Joan, played by the curvy Christina Hendricks, none of the other main actresses can be termed fat by today’s standards. Moreover, the facts that weight is thematized significantly only in the character arcs of Peggy and Betty, and that their weight gain was only effected by padding or the use of body doubles, indicate a disconnect between *Mad Men*’s politics of the signifier and the referent. The series is only really interested in weight as it provides a potential temporary deviation from the original shape of the characters. This deviation in weight functions symbolically to show Peggy and Betty’s failures to fit into their assigned roles. This failure is made literal in the clothing that no longer fits—the burst seams of Peggy’s skirt, Betty’s zipper that will not go up. Instead of allowing these burst seams to stand in for a loosening of their roles and a recapture of freedom, however, *Mad Men* returns them to their thin shapes seemingly unchanged. In doing so, *Mad Men* scarcely reflects on fat embodiment, or fat as a state of being, but rather as simply the high point in a process of weight gain and loss that boomerangs back to confirm the viewer’s idea of what these actresses are “supposed” to look like.

MMFD and *Huge* differ significantly in this regard. In putting fat characters played by fat actresses front and center, and keeping them fat throughout, they are able to depict fat issues more completely. In terms of fat bodies, *Huge* is particularly exceptional in that the majority of the cast is fat, providing roles for a variety of actors and actresses who scarcely get screen time otherwise. Whereas Rae remains the exception in *MMFD*, Will is surrounded by other characters who are identified as fat, albeit those who are desirous of losing weight. Nowhere else on TV, save in RTV shows such as *The Biggest Loser*, does one find so many fat characters together. Of course, this is not incidental; the setting of the weight loss camp demands it. This setting also

guarantees that makeover culture will be an important theme, and it is crucial in setting up the main conflicts in the series, between those who promote and consumer makeover rhetoric and Will, who critiques it. The sheer fact of seeing so many fat characters together, though, normalizes their bodies to a certain extent, paradoxically allowing them to stand out as individuals.

At the same time, one could argue that none of these series entirely revolutionizes the politics of the fat referent. The terms of comparison between bodies may have shifted, but the comparison remains. *Huge* is particularly illustrative in this case because it depicts a fat community; while the campers are empowered by the relative leveling of the “playing field,” the enduring presence of weight and gender prescriptions is clear. On one hand, this reflects a social reality; even within a stigmatized community, new hierarchies are likely to develop. This is especially true of weight given that, as Marilyn Wann argues, it is “micro-hierarchized”; every pound higher or size bigger is judged against the lower weight or the smaller size (“Fat Studies: An Invitation to Revolution,” xv). Nevertheless, while the series questions weight politics more generally, it sometimes implicitly reinforces those hierarchies it criticizes. It is Amber who is valued as more attractive by the camera, and she is also the one who is rewarded in the plot by more sexual attention and gratification. But this issue is hardly limited to *Huge*. All three of these series reveal themselves to be more conservative about showing fat female bodies than those that are thin and considered to be conventionally attractive, supporting the “pornographic signification” of the fat body identified by Mosher.

The larger issue seems to be that all of these series pit women against each other by explicitly comparing their bodies and presenting them as “types.” Both *Mad Men*’s “Maidenform” and *MMFD*’s “Alarm” do this explicitly by contrasting types of bodies, but all three series do this across the story arcs of their female characters. There is Will vs. Amber (*Huge*), Peggy vs. Joan (*Mad Men*), Betty vs. Megan (*Mad Men*), Rae vs. Chloe (*MMFD*). In their constant comparison of feminine types and characters, the series not only imply that competition is a key component of women’s relationships to each other, but also produce a discourse of jealousy, in which the fat (or fatter) woman, presented as less feminine and sexually attractive, is necessarily envious of another woman, who is thinner and/or more feminine. Rae and Will, as the “cool” fat girls who

eschew conventional femininity, are redeemed by their intelligence and taste, while Amber, Chloe, et al must trade on their looks alone. While these women envy each other's qualities and may appear to learn from each other, they do not adopt qualities or techniques from each other. Just as "fat" characters remain fat and "thin" characters remain thin, these women keep their feminine qualities; Rae and Will may experiment with markers of femininity such as make-up, but soon abandon them, whereas Amber and Chloe never abandon these markers. In their eschewing of change and fixing of these characters in their bodies, therefore, these series suggest that there is little flexibility between the "types," no possible transition from one type to the other. This ultimate emphasis on authenticity thus risks falling into the trap of essentialism and masks the performative aspects of gender.

Nevertheless, seen in the larger cultural field dominated by weight loss stories within a makeover framework, these series do important cultural work. More often than not, they resist both the thrust of makeover culture, with its valuing of "change" for itself, as well as the strong teleological impulses engendered by weight loss rhetoric. The PTS allows for character development, but its rather open-ended structure precludes a marked "before" and "after." Instead, these themes are embedded in a much larger narrative; more subtle changes are stretched over the length of seasons and whole series. While no one can deny that a character like Peggy has changed significantly in the course of *Mad Men*—from naive secretary to successful copywriter—this change has taken place over the course of seven seasons and ninety-two episodes, and the main characteristics of her personality, as well as her appearance, have remained fairly consistent. In contrast to the dramatic transformations of reality television, this type of change actually feels more realistic.

Huge and *MMFD*, in particular, are important in that they provide complex story lines for their fat protagonists outside of weight loss. Their writing and casting for fat characters in fictional series stands out. Given their provision of opportunities for fat actresses, one might advocate for such programs as necessary to combat fat phobia and particularly those gendered standards of weight which are arguably harmful for a large proportion of women. However, from my observation of body-positive spaces and comments, there is also relevant critique that it is problematic to expect revolution from series which reject weight loss and its teleology but

nevertheless make weight a theme or place characters within the context of weight loss. For some, the true goal would be to have characters of alternative embodiments who do not have to constantly defend or thematize their weight. If shows could have fat characters who could “just be” fat without having their fatness marked, these people argue, then we would have reached a point of actual acceptance. This does not mean a disavowal of the body entirely, but rather a playful everyday familiarity rather than a fraught antagonistic relationship. This is the merit of a show like Comedy Central’s *Broad City*, for example, which stars two young women and is, as Inkoo Kang argues, currently “dancing to its own groove of radical body comfort — and carving out its singular feminist niche while having more fun than anyone else.” Kang argues that this brand of feminism is pioneering because it rejects body shame while admitting body fascination; protagonists Abby and Ilana explore the body and its orifices in a space that does not admit the male gaze. This provides a potential liberation from fat shame; as she writes, “[w]ho can give a second thought to banalities like belly fat or wide hips, after all, when there are so many other fleshy corners to explore and celebrate?” One could argue, however, that this only works because *Broad City*’s Ilana and Abby are still (relatively) thin; in a world where the sight of naked fat flesh by itself is still considered disgusting, the addition of toilet humor is unlikely to be accepted. Perhaps, after we become more accustomed to seeing different kinds of women’s bodies on TV and grow familiar with such a brand of humor, the two trends will converge, offering a truly feminist space for the fat female body.

CONCLUSION: THE END OF THE ARC

The programs I have discussed in this dissertation all sit at the crossroads of two trends that have contributed to the increased visibility of fat people in media—on the one hand, the medicalized discourse of obesity which sees fatness as both a health and social problem and, on the other, the increased pushback against fat stereotypes by fat activists, scholars, and feminists who resist the narrow definition of health provided by diagnostic measures like the BMI and seek to give voice to a growing sector of the population. Given these two opposing movements, it is no wonder that depictions of fatness would be subject to all kinds of contradictions. Fatness itself presents us with a number of cultural tensions that cannot be fully resolved. It is both biological and cultural. It is both a numerical majority of the population in many countries, according to the medical definitions of “overweight” and “obese,” but also a minority in terms of representation and social discrimination. It is possibly both healthy and unhealthy, associated with both overabundance and malnutrition. It can be read as a tragic indication of social exclusion or a triumphant reclaiming of the body and revolting against social standards. Weight appears to be somewhat mutable, and yet the body’s materiality often proves itself to be stubbornly resistant to change. If modernity has become “liquid,” as Bauman contends, fat represents the solid resistance of materiality to that liquidity. In this way, fatness asks of us serious questions about how much one can, or should, change one’s body to reflect a social ideal.

Narratives of weight loss necessarily work within these paradoxes because they place themselves in the middle of these cultural crosscurrents in order to capitalize on the enhanced politicization of the fat body. As a result, they often portray characters who are fat but want to become thin. Even characters who do not desire weight loss are placed in a social context in which weight loss is seen to be desirable, and are thus constantly being pushed from all sides toward the makeover. In this way, the fat character is necessarily trapped between *being* and *becoming*, between a static fat identity and a transformative process of change that is directed toward thinness. This allows series to “have their cake and eat it too”—to cater to the demand for more representation of fat people while participating in the mainstream discourse that demands fat’s erasure. This metaphor is particularly apt because it illustrates the material consequence of

this contradiction—keeping the image of fat at the same time that fat is literally reduced. Paradoxically, though, even the representation of fat people within stigmatizing contexts normalizes fatness to a certain extent, making it more visible in discourse; the fat character becomes, as Jerry Mosher says, “iconic, deviant, and yet ordinary” (166). And even those protagonists of the weight loss makeover who achieve thinness remain tied to the ghosts of their formerly fat bodies; the “after” image only makes sense in narrative terms when contrasted with “before.”

So, what emerges from the landscape of weight loss in television I have sketched here? What overarching trends can we observe? On the most obvious level, this dissertation has demonstrated the sheer diversity of approaches to the fat body afforded by different genres and programs. While all the programs here refer to a shared body of negative assumptions and connotations of fatness circulating in popular culture, they use these ideas in different ways. Viewing reality television, the denigration of the fat body appears to be clear; it is treated as defective, a barrier to subjecthood, something that can and should be changed. Beyond this narrow genre, however, and contrary to what one might expect from a global media culture that regularly stirs fears of the “obesity epidemic,” the picture is somewhat different. While many genres construct weight plots for their characters, they often do not end in weight loss. Instead, many programs resist the one-way teleology of weight loss even as they invoke it, and provide narratives that stress the *qualitative* experience of weight loss in opposition to the *quantitative* focus of the weight loss makeover. Rather than merely demonstrating the fat phobia in society that attempts to erase fatness, then, weight plots on TV illustrate the complex relationships produced between body curves and story arcs, between plot lines and their ends, between generic form and political content.

As I have argued in the first section, the weight loss makeover has a particular structure all its own. The extreme emphasis on medicalized discourse, quantitative change and a fixed target weight make it distinctive among makeovers, offering viewers a clear-cut one-dimensional transformation with an obvious endpoint that connotes “health.” At the same time, the weight loss makeover certainly participates in the “affective domination” common to all makeovers, using shame to direct their protagonists toward the more ambiguous gendered and racialized

teleologies of the makeover. These teleologies are not always obvious, however, and vary according to subgenre and location. Across these makeovers, for example, we find ethnic minorities being targeted for weight loss and having their weight ascribed to their “unhealthy” ethnic food cultures, but the groups mentioned are different according to the context; in the U.S., Latinos, African Americans, and Pacific Islanders are specifically addressed, while in Germany it tends to be the Turkish who are singled out. Weight loss becomes a way for these immigrants to integrate more fully, to make manifest their desire to be responsible citizens and modify their habits to reflect the mainstream culture of health in their respective countries.

Although the reality television weight loss makeover appears to produce clearly negative depictions of fatness, there are also surprises to be found. While the teleology of the weight loss makeover is certainly gendered, for example, it is not always aimed at a regressive, conventional view of femininity wherein the feminine body becomes the passive object of the gaze. Unlike many cosmetic surgery makeovers, in which the docility of female participants is strictly enforced, weight loss competitions like *The Biggest Loser* also encourage women to become more actively competitive and aggressive, qualities that promise to make them more successful in the competition and, by extension, the neoliberal economy. Of course, this self-determination relies on the submission to a higher authority (the trainers and producers, representative of medical and social authority), showing the paradox of self-determination within neoliberal discourse and “choice” feminism; all choices are equal, but some are more equal than others. Meanwhile, a show like *Dance Your Ass Off* disrupts the docilizing gaze of the makeover in another way, by demonstrating how the fat body may produce aesthetic pleasure for the viewer, as well as bodily enjoyment for the dancer.

In its plots, the reality weight loss makeover distinguishes itself from all the genres considered fictional. Only reality television actually produces long-lasting weight loss on the bodies of its protagonists, utilizing and capturing the dynamism of the body in makeover culture. Fictional genres, by contrast, all employ weight issues in boomerang plots or arcs. Thin characters may gain weight and fat characters may lose weight, but in the end they all return to the status quo. In drama as well as the sitcom, these extreme transformations rarely have long-lasting narrative consequences. This observation disrupts the traditional hierarchies of quality

which place the primetime serial above the sitcom, for example, on the basis of its supposedly superior character development and story-telling. Looking at these plots, we see that sitcoms and dramas do not differ drastically in terms of development; while the drama may construct longer narrative arcs than the sitcom, both return their characters to their status quo bodies. This similarity indicates a certain convergence between the storytelling techniques of the sitcom and the drama, usually thought to be distinct, but now increasingly displaying similar levels of serialization. In this combination we also see the emergence of the “dramedy,” a long-form serial narrative that uses both humor and tragedy to further its narrative arcs. *Huge* and *My Mad Fat Diary* are paradigmatic examples.

In all the different genres discussed, we can see a thread of contradiction between the “politics of the signifier” and the “politics of the referent”—that is, between the ostensible attitudes toward fat bodies produced by discursive means, through narrative and dialogue, and the treatment of actual fat bodies through non-discursive or extratextual discussion. Series often say one thing about fat and do another. So, while a sitcom like *Mike & Molly* may ostensibly promote a politics of the signifier that conflates weight loss with greater health and happiness, it also contradicts this stance with a different politics of the referent which allows (and perhaps even requires) its protagonists to stay fat. Conversely, a series like *Mad Men* may indulge in a highly self-referential politics of the signifier to reflect on images of femininity and its constricting aspects, yet not allow its politics of the referent to match this reflection, obscuring the fat female body and reversing weight gain plots with weight loss so that actresses remain thin.

Again, this distinction reverses hierarchies. While the drama is thought to be more progressive on social issues, and the sitcom more conservative by virtue of its episodic plots, the sitcom proves itself to be friendlier to fat characters. Of course, this friendliness is often predicated on the use of the fat body for humor, either as the target of verbal fat jokes (as in *Mike & Molly*) or in the performance of physical humor and slapstick (as in *Miranda*'s pratfalls). Yet the sitcom allows for fat characters that stay fat in the way that few other series do. Indeed, as I argue, it is paradoxically the static nature of the “traditional” sitcom that grants it a subversive

power in the context of makeover culture, which encourages constant change and self-improvement.

On one hand, the differences I have discussed here can be easily attributed to differences in genre. Reality television must produce bodily change, while the sitcom relies on cyclical plots and recognizable characters, making long term weight loss unlikely. Yet this is only partially true. Generic determinism fails to account for the differences between programs of similar genres. *Huge* and *My Mad Fat Diary*, for example, are primetime serials just like *Mad Men*, yet they do something significantly different with issues of fatness, unifying a politics of the signifier and politics of the referent to produce a fat politics that both reflects on mainstream ideas of fatness and counters them with the real materiality of their characters.

Moreover, these series very often connect to each other across genres. The series *Huge* and *My Mad Fat Diary*, for example, utilize the same biotemporal moment between youth and adulthood as reality television programs like *I Used to Be Fat* and *Jung und Dick!* These programs reflect a relative abundance of programs about fat kids and teenagers that draws on the heightened politicization of children's bodies in the discourse of obesity, which sees kids as prime targets for intervention "before it's too late." On the other hand, adolescence is a fruitful moment for narrative as a turbulent time in which subjectivity emerges, often painfully, out of conflict. All of these narratives thus highlight similar themes of teenage—family conflict, desire for increased independence and one's own identity, pursuit of romantic or sexual experience, etc. The fat body becomes the contested territory on which these battles are fought. Yet, while these series share similar ends—a mature and independent subjectivity—they disagree on the means. Makeovers like *I Used to Be Fat* valorize weight loss as a way of distinguishing oneself, while *Huge* and *MMFD* suggest that its protagonists will be better served by discovering themselves and their fat bodies in new and positive ways rather than changing them. Viewed together, these genres represent the two sides of the makeover debate—one that encourages change toward an authentic self and the other that suggests finding the authentic self "within." They are both teleological in this way, aimed at authentic being, but prescribe different transformations toward this goal.

The Future of Fat on TV

For many viewers, the dichotomy described above is frustrating, as it seems to leave unresolved the problem of fat's mutability. The different genres appear to produce two mutually exclusive attitudes toward fat and therefore two camps of viewers: either you side with the weight loss makeover and believe that weight is mutable and thus should be changed, or you believe fat is fundamentally immutable and therefore become a fan of a show like *My Mad Fat Diary*. Looking closer at these series, of course, it is clear that weight is much more complicated than that—the weight loss makeover does not proceed easily or necessarily succeed, nor are the characters of fictional series destined to stay at the same weight forever. Yet, boiled down, the narrative ends push us toward one reading or the other. There remains a need for narratives that present the body as a dynamic entity without prescribing a one-way movement down the scale.

Another frequent complaint is that even narratives that resist makeover teleology vis a vis weight define themselves and their characters in relation to the popular discourse of fatness. Thus the weight of fat characters must feature prominently in the plot. As Sasha Pasulka says in a CNN article, any physical trait on TV perceived to be an imperfection has to be almost “like a third character” in the show. Likewise, as Sender and Sullivan note, “on makeover shows, as elsewhere on television, there can be neither an unapologetic nor an unexplained self-presentation as fat” (139). Fatness demands explanation, and more often than not, apology. Among viewers, especially fat ones, there is a hunger, though, for narratives that feature fat characters without making fatness one of the key plot points. To see people of diverse embodiments being fully realized characters on screen would be a greater step in the normalization of fat than any number of narratives that explicitly attack weight discourse. New narratives of this sort will require new paradigms of weight and health, paradigms that counter the demonization of fat in popular discourse but also go beyond the “will to innocence” in fat activism. Such paradigms must allow for the dynamism of the body, its permeability and mutability, while not making any particular embodiment the standard-bearer for humanity and the prerequisite for treatment as a worthy subject in either life or narrative.

Whether such representations will arise remains to be seen, but current developments suggest that the conditions are ripe. As the television market itself becomes more fragmented, as we head toward more convergence between media, producing screens within screens, television narratives catering to different viewerships are likely to be developed. Moreover, as fat viewers watch, respond, and organize themselves online, it becomes apparent that a viewership interested in the stories of fat people is emerging. That viewership was not enough to save the series *Huge* from premature cancellation, but it is apparently enough to sustain the narratives of *My Mad Fat Diary* and *Mike & Molly* for a number of seasons. Moreover, as more people come out to discuss their personal experiences with weight loss beyond the “after” of makeover, admitting that it is neither a finished state nor an entirely positive experience, we are more likely to see narratives that utilize the diverse narrative potentials of fictional series to challenge the teleology of makeover.

Moreover, as we see the increasing politicization of the fat body in different countries beyond the English-speaking triad of USA, UK, and Australia, led by international agencies such as the World Health Organization, we are likely to see a proliferation of narratives of fat both arriving to and coming from non-Anglophone contexts and the Global South. These will not just be the reality television formats being propagated from the US or UK and tried out in every possible national market, but also narratives that articulate critique of fat discourse from a Southern position. Just as Western feminism has been importantly critiqued and supplemented by writers and thinkers from around the world who ground their feminist undertakings in their own local contexts, fat studies will have to incorporate more global perspectives and answer to those who question the potentially hegemonic power of the United States within fat studies itself. There is an admitted necessity for more work in this direction which might be called postcolonial fat studies. While such a project is beyond the scope of the current dissertation, I hope that it may nevertheless send some feelers out into the world and thus enables future connections. It is only with more intense engagement in the myriad ways that people across geographic contexts, genders, and genres construct fat that we may yet be able to reconcile body curves and story arcs.

Primary Texts (TV Programs)

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Seasons 9 (2010) and 15 (2013-2014) iTunes.

The Biggest Loser Germany. Sat.1. RedSeven. 2009-2016.

Dance Your Ass Off(USA). Oxygen. Magical Elves Production. 2009-2010.

Dance Your Butt Off(South Africa). SABC 1. 2010-2012.

Dance Your Fat Off(Thailand). Channel 3. 2013.

Family Guy. Creator Seth McFarlane. Fox.

Episodes: “He’s Too Sexy for His Fat.” (2.17). 27 June 2000. iTunes.
 “Don’t Make Me Over.” (4.4). 5 June 2005. iTunes.
 “Sibling Rivalry.” (4.22). 26 Mar. 2006. iTunes.

Futurama. Creator Matt Groening. Comedy Central.

Episode: “Anthology of Interest II” (4.3). 6 Jan. 2002. iTunes.

Honey, We’re Killing the Kids. Host Kris Murrin. BBC Three. 2005.

Huge. Creator Savannah Dooley, Winnie Holzman. ABC Family.

Episodes: “Hello, I Must Be Going” (1.1). 28 Jun. 2010. iTunes.
 “Letters Home” (1.2). 5 Jul. 2010. iTunes.
 “Poker Face” (1.7). 9 Aug. 2010. iTunes.
 “Parents’ Weekend, Pt. 2” (1.10). 30 Aug. 2010. iTunes.

Inside Amy Schumer. Creator Amy Schumer. Comedy Central.

Sketches: “Makeover” from “Meth Lab” (1.6) YouTube
 “Slap Chef” from “Meth Lab” (1.6) YouTube
 “Nutritionist” YouTube

It’s Always Sunny in Philadelphia! Creator Rob McElhenney. FX.

Episode: “Frank’s Pretty Woman” (7.1) DVD

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Little Britain USA. Writers David Walliams and Matt Lucas. HBO. 2008. iTunes.

Mad Men. Creator Matthew Weiner. AMC.

- Episodes:
- “Indian Summer” (1.11) 4. Oct. 2007.
 - “The Wheel” (1.13) 18. Oct. 2007.
 - “Maidenform” (2.6) 31. Aug. 2008.
 - “Tea Leaves” (5.3) 1 Apr. 2012.
 - “Dark Shadows” (5.9) 13 May 2012.

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Season 2. iTunes.

My Mad Fat Diary. Writers Tom Bidwell and George Kay. E4. 2013-2015.

- Episodes:
- “Big Wide World” (1.1) 14 Jan. 2013. YouTube
 - “Touched” (1.2) 21 Jan. 2013. YouTube.
 - “Alarm” (2.1) 17 Feb. 2014. YouTube
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South Park

- Episodes:
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 - “Tsst” (10.7). 3 May 2006. iTunes.

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Appendix A

List of International Biggest Loser Versions

Source: Wikipedia, accessed 10.03.16

Country/Region	Title	Network	Number of Seasons (Years)
Argentina	Cuestión de peso	Canal 13	6 (2006-2013)
Asia	The Biggest Loser Asia	Diva Universal	2 (2009-2010)
Arab World	Al-Rabeh Al-Akbar	MBC 1	4 (2006-2009)
Australia	The Biggest Loser	Network Ten	11 (2006-2016)
Brazil	O Grande Perdedor/ Quem Perde Ganha	SBT	2 (2005, 2007)
China	<i>The Biggest Loser</i> : 超级减肥王(2013) <i>The Biggest Loser</i> : Super Diet King <i>The Biggest Loser</i> : 减出我人生(2015-2016)	CCTV-2 (2013) Jiangsu TV (2015-2015)	2 (2013, 2015-2016)
Finland	Suurin pudottaja Biggest Loser	MTV3	4 (2006-2014)
Germany	The Biggest Loser Germany	ProSieben (1), kabel eins (2-3), Sat. 1 (4-6)	8 (2009-2016)
	The Biggest Loser Teens	Sat. 1	1 (2014)
Hungary	A Nagy Fogyás A Great Loss	TV2	1 (2007)
Iceland	Biggest Loser Ísland	SkjárEinn	2 (2014)
India	Biggest Loser Jeetega	Sahara One	1 (2007)
Israel	Laredet Begadol	Channel 10	4 (2006-2011)
Latvia	XXL	TV3 Latvia	1 (2008)

Country/Region	Title	Network	Number of Seasons (Years)
Mexico	<i>Cuánto Quieres Perder?</i>	Televisa	1 (2008)
Netherlands	De Afvallers	SBS 6	5 (2005-2011)
	The Biggest Loser Holland		1 (2013)
Norway	The Biggest Loser Norge	TVNorge	3 (?- 2016)
Peru	Dale con Ganas	Univision	1 (2012)
Philippines	The Biggest Loser Pinoy Edition	ABS-CBN	2 (2011, 2014)
Poland	<i>Co Masz Do Stracenia?</i> <i>What Do You Have To Lose?</i>	TV Puls	1 (2008)
Portugal	Peso Pesado	SIC	3 (2011, 2015)
Puerto Rico	Transformación Total	WAPA-TV	2 (2010-2011)
Romania	<i>Marele căștigător</i> <i>The Big Winner</i>	Antena 1	1 (2010)
Russia	<i>Vzveshenniye lyudi</i> <i>The Weighted People</i>	STS	2 (2015-2016)
Scandinavia	Bigest Loser	Kanal 5	1 (2005)
Slovakia	Super Telo	STV	1 (2006)
South Africa	The Biggest Loser South Africa	E.tv	1 (2008)
Spain	La Báscula	Canal Sur	3 (2013-2015)
	La Báscula	Aragón TV	1 (2015)
Sweden	Biggest Loser Sverige	TV4	7 (2010-2016)
Turkey	Yeni Bir Hayat	Star TV	1 (2012)

Country/Region	Title	Network	Number of Seasons (Years)
Ukraine	<i>Zvazheni ta schaslyvi</i>	STB	6 (2011-2016)
United Kingdom & Ireland	The Biggest Loser	Living TV	6 (2005-2012)
United States	The Biggest Loser	NBC	17 (2004-2016)
Vietnam	Cuộc chiến giảm cân The Biggest Loser Vietnam	VTV	1 (2016 TBD)