

Thickening Theory: Memoir, Affect, and Fat Feminist Futures

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Abstract

This dissertation is about the epistemological potential of fat life writing at the intersection of affect and embodiment. While the field of Fat Studies has its roots in liberation movements of the 1960s and 1970s (Wykes, 2014), contemporary ‘body positivity’ has commodified feminist ideologies to promote a sanitized fat politic that seeks participation in normative structures or what Da’Shaun L. Harrison (2021) calls “Desire/ability” (p. 12). Moreover, feminist studies has, at times, been epistemically ignorant around issues of ‘fat’, despite a feminist interest in the body and its meanings. As healthism and neoliberal ideals of individual responsibility have taken root, particularly through ‘body positivity’ and Health at Every Size (BP/HAES), a singular, “problematic model of fat subjectivity” (Murray, 2005, p. 155) has emerged.

This project endeavours to contribute to ideas of messiness, ambiguity, and an acknowledgement of the contradictions of fat life, thereby challenging the assimilationism and achievement feminism (Farrell, 2021) at the centre of contemporary fat politics and thickening existing approaches to fat. Following the history of personal narrative in feminist theory, works by authors Roxane Gay, Lindy West, and Samantha Irby are analyzed in this thesis, highlighting the everyday affective encounters they archive with an emphasis on the role of race, queerness, and disability. Through their own stylistic and tonal choices, each author generates important contributions to fat studies’ interest in cultural depictions of fatness, particularly the ways in which fat bodies are shaped by and shape the world. By mobilizing the work of Hil Malatino on “side affects” (2022), Sianne Ngai’s “ugly feelings” (2005), Rosemarie Garland-Thomson’s “misfitting” (2011), and Sara Ahmed’s (2006; 2010) work on orientations and affect, this project aims to strengthen fat epistemology and contribute to a fattening of feminist studies which takes seriously the uncomfortable, the ugly, and the irreverent.

Acknowledgements

I would like to start by thanking top surgery, my playlists, movies, spousal access to health insurance, grilled hot dogs, sparkling water, the resurgence of lesbian pop music, trans horror novels, knitting, allergen reducing cat food, and the *Hadestown Original Cast Recording*. Though they will never see this, I would also like to thank Roxane Gay, Lindy West, and Samantha Irby for all the lessons their writing has taught me.

During my PhD, I was diagnosed with Autism Spectrum Disorder, Obsessive Compulsive Disorder, C-PTSD, and Generalized Anxiety Disorder. To say that this shed valuable light on some things I always suspected about myself would be an understatement. To say that it was only affirming would be a lie. It has been a long, complicated process that impacted my capacity to write, think, and theorize. I found new ways to set up boundaries, limit the access that others have to me and my time, and vocalize my needs and vulnerabilities. This has not been an easy task for somebody like me. For this, I would also like to thank myself.

Neko Case – “Nothing to Remember”
NoSo – “Parasites”
boygenius – “Souvenir”
MUNA w/ the Trans Choir of L.A. – “Kind of Girl”

This project would not have been possible without the people who make up the chaotic and beautiful tapestry of my life. First, the very first person I ever knew: my big sister, Caitlin. Thank you. I cannot image who I would be if you were not my sister—so much of what is good in me is because of you. You are my hero. To our little brother, Arin, I am very proud of you and the life you keep building for yourself. Caitlin and I are continually in awe of your bravery and strength. To both of my siblings: I hope that I have made you proud. Being your sibling is the greatest gift in this life; it is woven into the fabric of who I am. *I’ll love you forever, I’ll like you for always.*

To the two pals who have been around for almost two decades, Clarisa Greene and Samantha Wilson: it was all worth it. Clarisa, thank you for being the kind of person who can make singing in the car feel like the most exciting adventure. We have seen one another through so many seasons that I can no longer remember our first, but *the root of the root and the bud of the bud* remains. Thank you for growing with me and being my family through it all. Heart in my heart. I love you very much. Sam, thank you for being the person who I can always be honest with and is honest in return. The way we laugh together is proof of magic in this world. I would find you in every lifetime. Until the wheels fall off, I love you.

The Talking Heads – “This Must Be the Place (Naïve Melody)”
Said The Whale – “Islands Disappear”
Meredith Brooks – “Bitch”
Dionne Warwick – “I Say a Little Prayer”

During the years I have spent in Ottawa, I have been fortunate enough to meet people who have changed me for the better. To Sophie Raniere and Daniel Fishbein: wow, how lucky am I to exist at the same time as you? The support you have shown Drew and I is immeasurable, and we are incredibly fortunate to call you our family. You’ve made our lives richer in every way. Daniel, thank you for always being a reader. I am honoured that somebody with your mind dedicates time to read my thoughts (both absurd and serious) and I am grateful that you lent your eye to these chapters. Soph, it is not an understatement to say that I have been profoundly changed by having met you. You are, without a doubt, one of the most vital presences in my life. I love you enormously.

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Wicked Original Broadway Cast Recording – “For Good”
The B52s – “Rock Lobster”
ABBA – “Fernando”
Ryan Gosling – “I’m Just Ken”

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I wrote this dissertation from the safety of the home that I have made with my partner, Drew. The dwellings we’ve shared have been my very first home; the first places that I have ever felt safe and truly known. I may never be able to articulate what you mean to me. Thank you for teaching me, laughing with me, loving me, and watching all the movies I choose. A love so dear and Queer is something I never could have imagined. You are the best person I have ever met. *I love you, ardently and irrevocably.* To our cats, Sybil and Charlotte: you cannot read. But it has been so special to have you in our lives, and you teach us more about tenderness and silliness every day.

boygenius – “True Blue”
Cornelius Brothers & Sister Rose – “Too Late to Turn Back Now”
The Cranberries – “Dreams”
Alanis Morissette – “Head Over Feet”

This PhD has been an extraordinary and challenging experience. I am so fortunate to have had remarkable educators and mentors. To my supervisor, Michael Orsini, I cannot thank you

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Billy Joel – “Vienna”
Fleetwood Mac – “Don’t Stop”
Jensen McRae – “Let Me Be Wrong”

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Queen Latifah – “U.N.I.T.Y.”
Tracy Chapman – “New Beginning”
Mon Rovia – “Heavy Foot”

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Finally, in the spirit of this project, I would be remiss if I did not sit with moments of discomfort. First, throughout my PhD, we have watched the continuation of a genocide against Palestinians and their land. I feel proud of my work and yet I feel deep, unwavering shame at the ways in which my institution of learning has contributed to the genocidal, colonial project known as ‘Israel’. I admire the professors who have continued to speak out against the very institutions that employ them, and I endeavor to be the educators that they are. I am in awe of the strength

and the bravery of the students who organized, camped, and refused to be silent, and the willingness of this new generation to be bold. We owe them a better world—from the river to the sea. Second, I faced transphobia from my peers both at the Institute and in other academic spaces. I rebuke any claim to feminism by those who seek to eradicate transgender people from feminist theory, academics, and activism; and I abhor the ways that my Black, brown, and Indigenous trans peers are not only maligned but both harmed and killed at alarming rates. Queer and trans Palestinians have been slaughtered while Zionists attempt to pink-wash a genocide which many Western gays happily co-sign. Empire is fundamentally anti-Queer, and we must never endorse its existence. All trans people deserve to live rich, full lives, and we will continue to do so.

Nemahsis – “Miss Construed”
Kate Nash – “GERM”
I Am Roze – “Dollar”
Paris Paloma – “Good Boy”

To bad fat queers near and far, this is for you.

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Preface

This dissertation contains epigraphs at the opening of each chapter. Though traditionally excerpts from books, I make use of poetry, quotations from novels, as well as music. I find music to be a useful tool for orienting myself towards my work and have a practice of making playlists that are thematically resonant with what I am writing. At times, my personal reading practice of dog-earing the bottom of pages that move me bleeds into my academic work, so there are several epigraphs that are from poems or novels.

Where music is referenced, I endeavor to use artists who reflect, as much as possible, my political commitments. This includes lesser known/independent artists, queer musicians, and of course, fat artists. However, these are not the sole reasons for their inclusion. I am drawn to sounds and words that give me a feeling of being ‘embodied’; something I do not generally experience in my day-to-day. When I listen to certain music as I am reading or writing, those sounds/words collide with what is happening on the page and allow me to be ‘here’. This has always been part of my reading practices, both personal and academic.

This project is not about me, but it is *of* me. Music, poetry, fiction, films; these are the things that help me be in my body, feel the keys beneath my fingers, and write. It is my hope that these songs, poems, and other quotations help orient you towards this project, allowing you to situate yourself within the themes and feelings that run through it. Perhaps you will even find a new favourite song.



Chappell Roan’s song about compulsory heterosexuality, “Good Luck, Babe!”, belts: “*You’d have to stop the world just to stop the feeling / You’d have to stop the world just to stop the feeling*”. This song is thematically relevant not just for its queerness, but for the way it touches

on the connection between the social and feelings. To be in the world is to feel, and our many encounters with others impact those feelings and their impressions on us. You would, indeed, “have to stop the world just to stop the feeling”. This thesis is interested in how our feelings—our affects, our emotions—are part of our encounters between flesh and world. Each piece of life writing, in its own way, tells stories about these encounters and the feelings that result from and/or are shaped by them.

While Roan is part of a *new* era of lesbian pop, the song “Closer to Fine” by The Indigo Girls remains an iconic piece of lesbian folk music. Amy Ray and Emily Saliers sing: “*There’s more than one answer to these questions / Pointing me in a crooked line / And the less I seek my source for some definitive / (The less I seek my source) / Closer I am to fine*”. This song tells the story of searching for answers while accepting that they may not be straight-forward, that we cannot find perfection. This echoes the themes of this project around being a ‘bad fat’ and embracing the complicated and messy aspects of our fatness. There is no definitive way to ‘be’ fat, no singular fat subject or subjectivity. Instead, there is the messiness of embodiment and perhaps if we move further away from definitive answers we can make more room for playful fat subjects. I find that this song also reflects our very interest as academics in finding answers and asking questions. It echoes our feminist curiosity to ask what we need to know and to seek knowledge in a variety of places.

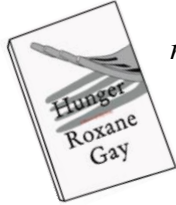
Pivoting briefly to poetry, Chapter One includes an excerpt from Leah Pesa Kushner’s “Sanctuary”. Part of the seminal fat studies text *Shadows on a Tightrope: Writings by Women on Fat Oppression* (1983), Kushner writes: “*when i move i shake / when we all move together we shake so big and loud and fat / clearly cast / you will have to see us / and you will have to hear us / and you will be moved*” (p. 73). This is not a project that advocates for the mainstream

liberal project of body positivity. It is fat—purposefully—without the intention of shrinking. This poem reflects the themes of this work: to be loud, obstinate, fat; fatness that moves the world and refuses to move *for* the world. In many ways, the language in Kushner’s poem could be perceived as a warning: you *will have to* see us, you *will* be moved. This is forceful language that combats the hyper (in)visibility of fatness.

At the same time, citing this poem pays homage to an early fat studies text, *Shadows on a Tightrope* (1983), and its enduring legacy. While I am critical of fat liberation approaches in liberal activism as well as academia, I am indebted to the fat studies voices that came before me, and I have great respect for their contributions. To love something means you can critique it, and I hold that very closely.

My own non-normative embodiment as fat and trans locates me in the world and in my work. Ezra Furman is a trans musician who wrote the music for the television show *Sex Education* (2019-2023), including a re-release of the song “Body Was Made”. Furman sings, “*My body was made this particular way / Recurrent desire never totally tamed / Oh honey, I’ve tried and tried to explain it away / But my body was made*”. I am interested in the ways that non-normative embodiments, including their very human desires, are pathologized, demonized, and explained away. The works analyzed in this dissertation make clear the desire for food, for love, for stability, even for frivolousness, that fat people are never meant to voice. At times, they are also contradictory explorations of how to explain what Gay (2017) calls the “why” of the fat body. In other words, each text touches on the ‘reasons’ for corpulence and troubles the expectation of an easy explanation for being fat. In their own ways, they are not totally tamed but complex, ugly, funny, and full.

Singer-songwriter Neko Case has been on repeat throughout this Ph.D., and in 2024 I was fortunate enough to see her perform “Night Still Comes” in Ottawa. Although the song contains many beautiful lines, Case asks the question: “*If I puked up some sonnets, would you call me a*



miracle?”. For me, this question is asking: “Is it ever going to be enough?”. What will it take to be seen when you are purposefully ignored? What more can you do to be treated like a human being? For fat people, the answer to all these

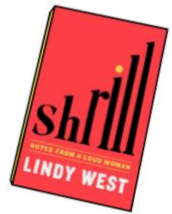
questions lies in weight loss. We are offered “miracle cures”, most contemporarily in the form of Ozempic®. We are told to atone for our bodies in ways that may include harm, so long as the result is the same: “You’ve lost weight, what a miracle! *Finally*”. This is something I unpack further in Chapter Two, particularly Roxane Gay’s discussion of bulimia. Puking up food or puking up sonnets; what a miracle, indeed.

Also opening Chapter Two is Jensen McRae’s “Happy Girl”. By her own description, this song is about “the language gap between feeling pain and explaining it”. The second verse explains: “*I took the years like a pill so / I’m supposed to be cured / Lost weight and smiled for the camera / What a happy girl*”. Subtle sarcasm runs through this song, that being the ‘happy girl’ in question is not as real as it looks; that you can hide behind the “happy” veneer that people want to see. This is certainly echoed in Gay’s *Hunger* (2017), but it also points to the ideas around weight-loss *as* happiness. If you lose the weight and smile for the camera, then that must mean you are happy. But there is no guarantee that what is perceived as a “happy object” (i.e. weight loss) will *actually* give you happiness.

Moreover, McRae’s quip about being ‘cured’ reflects several themes in Chapter Two. For one, this idea that the passage of time is what it takes to be healed, and indeed that one can be ‘cured’ in the first place. Her language of taking “the years like a pill so [she’s] supposed to be

cured” echoes the pressures to conform to normative constructions of ‘health’ and ‘wellness’ (and neoliberal productivity) under capitalism. Gee, who wouldn’t be happy?

The epigraphs for Chapter Three are perhaps most overt with their sarcasm and annoyance. August Ponthier, who like Chappell Roan is part of a new wave of lesbian artists, presents the story of being a killjoy in their song “Hardcore”. Ponthier sings, “*I know I’ve ruined a night or two / I couldn’t hold back my views / Family dinner turned off the news / Stuck in a silent room / And I’d rather die by the truth / And hide away feeling shades of blue / I’ve ruined a night or two*”. Ponthier’s song title plays with the lyrics itself. The song is about being tender but still speaking up. They tell the story of being a killjoy at dinner, “ruining” the night with the truth. To be crying in your room is not very “hardcore”, yet in their opinion, the killjoy is always painted as being “hardcore”. Likewise, Lindy West’s *Shrill* (2016) tells stories of being that “hardcore” person, unwilling to let things slide by in the name of getting along, “ruining” the atmosphere when you do not laugh when everybody else does. West (2016) also addresses the ways she began taking up space, both metaphorically and literally; no longer making herself palatable and no longer hiding away.



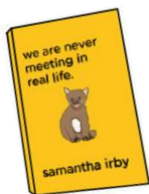
Somewhat ironically, Brye’s song “Diet Culture” both critiques fatphobia and in some ways could be seen as falling into the liberal approaches I seek to critique. She sings, “*And I know their worst fear is to look like me / And that fact makes me want to kill somebody / I’m eating at the counter and you’re talking’ about your weight / I usually don’t hate you, but today I’m enraged*”. This reflects the moments of snapping that I discuss in Chapter Three, as well as the overarching themes of anger that are present throughout this dissertation. It also reiterates that while the insidiousness of fatphobia reaches everyone, it is not felt or experienced the same by everyone. Or, as Aubrey Gordon (2023) writes on ‘thin’ and non-fat people: “[They] may

describe themselves as ‘feeling fat’ or may not describe their own bodies as thin. But the privileges we receive are based more on how others perceive us than how we perceive ourselves” (p. xxi). What is considered ‘fat’ might be mutable in popular culture, but there remains a distinct reality where some fat people are undeniably fat no matter how this definition shifts. Even if you understand the source of a person’s fatphobia, it becomes exhausting listening to their thin laments. And heaven forbid you eat lunch! Sometimes, being *enraged* is the only option.

A shift from sarcasm to irreverence, “Hater’s Anthem” by sibling folk-pop band Infinity Song opens Chapter Four. The Boyd siblings synchronize:

I love the way it feels to be a hater / Something so sweet about thinkin’ that I’m better / Just to wake up every morning / Lay in bed and somehow never ever / Rise to the occasion / Or even hold up under pressure / But we all know that it doesn’t even matter / If I waste away and no one thinks I’m clever / Just as long I’ve got my ego / And it tells me I’m superior / I could probably go a lifetime / Being barely mediocre / I’d still convince myself every time that I’m better / Than you.

Much like Irby’s (2013; 2017; 2020; 2023) work, this song is particularly facetious and has fun with its own hatred. ‘Hating’ can be a positive thing, remaining committed to your gut instinct and often your politics. At the same time, there is something funny about this song in the context



of fatness. Of course, fat people are assumed to be lazy: lying in bed under a mountain of food, never “rising to the occasion”, being mediocre. But in many ways, Irby’s (2013; 2017; 2020; 2023) work asks, “so what?”. Maybe all those things are true and what does that change? Does it prove fatphobes right? Or does it simply mean that there is nothing you can do to atone for your embodiment.

Returning to poetry, Chapter Four is also opened by the Grace Nichols poem “The Fat Black Woman’s Motto on Her Bedroom Door”. Stylized by Nichols in all-caps, the short poem

reads: “*IT’S BETTER TO DIE IN THE FLESH OF HOPE / THAN TO LIVE IN THE SLIMNESS OF DESPAIR*”. On the one hand, hope is expansive—it is full of flesh. Despair is not—it is slim; hope slowly chipped away. In a more obvious connection, this echoes Irby’s (2013; 2017; 2020; 2023) sentiments around absurd diets and what one must give up in order to live a slim life. At the same time, this poem flips the narrative of death so often associated with fatness and places the blame where it really belongs: If anti-fat rhetoric is truly about ‘health’, about living or dying, then surely trying to survive without nourishment will kill you first. Is it better to eat water-soaked cotton balls for a chance at slimness than to live in the abundance of flesh? Irby’s (2013; 2017; 2020; 2023) texts say no.

I would be remiss if I did not include something from a band whose music is meaningful to many Queer people, myself included: MUNA. “Loudspeaker”, from their debut album, is an anthem for those who have experienced abuse. Indeed, fatphobia is abusive; it oppresses and violates and perpetuates violence against fat people. I find comfort in the boldness of all MUNA’s music, but this song is particularly special. Katie Gavin’s voice belts: “*I don’t know where the blame lies / But you better believe I’m not gonna carry it all / I don’t know where the shame dies / But it’s helping me to scream this is not my fault*”. Fat shame is not ontological to fat life, somehow implanted in the DNA of our adipose tissue. It is manufactured through an anti-fat world that seeks to eradicate embodiments that fall outside of the white supremacist framework of ‘normal’. Even if we are to ‘blame’ for our fatness, we are not to blame for the way it is treated. It is not our shame to carry.

Following MUNA is an excerpt from Ocean Vuong’s autobiographical novel *On Earth We’re Briefly Gorgeous* (2019). Written as a letter from a son to his illiterate mother, this book is in many ways about reading and writing as much as it is about being in the world. Vuong (2019)

writes: “*A page, turning, is a wing lifted with no twin, and therefore no flight. And yet we are moved*” (2019, p. 190). In Chapter Five, I riff on the book as an object. Not just a literal object, but a space for fatness to expand and be simultaneously contained and let loose. At the same time, reading can be a solitary experience (as can a Ph.D.), yet the tactile sensation of a book moves me as I move it. We can be moved by what we read while moving the book along with us.

Before concluding with another song, the final chapter of this dissertation has an excerpt from Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick’s (1994) *Fat Art/Thin Art*. Often discussed in fat studies, I do reflect on “The Use of Being Fat”, particularly alongside Lucas Crawford’s “fat presence” (2017) in Chapter Three. However, I had already envisioned using a slice of another poem among these epigraphs, and it felt fitting as part of the conclusion. Sedgwick (1994) writes: “*in the fat of the shoulders, artful, improbable / brand, the double outside curve, / an ear. / For hours (showers, clothes) it doesn’t fade*” (p. 4). Fatness leaves an impression, and impression can be left on fat. Sedgwick (1994) writes about the impressions left by a lover, by the clothing we wear, by where we move. In many ways, the texts that this dissertation analyzes are archives of the impressions left on and by fat. Whether it is how interactions with the world—other people, other objects—leave an impression—be it the mark of chair arms or the wounds of anti-fatness—or the scars left by skin that refuses to shrink itself. Fatness will not fade; it will be present, and it commands presence.

This project plays with negativity and negative affects, but this is not at odds with a desire to be hopeful. Queer indie supergroup boygenius (composed of Lucy Dacus, Phoebe Bridgers, and Julien Baker) end “Afraid of Heights” with the following outro: “*You called me a crybaby / But you’re the one who got teary / Tellin’ me what you believe / How we’re stuck in entropy / How it hurts to hope / Oh, it hurts to hope for more / Oh, it hurts to hope the future /*

Will be better than before”. It is not always easy to be obstinate, to be the fat killjoy, to take up space. Often it feels as though the unrelenting weight of fatphobia—of white supremacist violence, of how-many-stages-late capitalism—will never stop crushing us. My chest tightens and my stomach drops. I swallow my anger and my tears, and I endeavour to create something that will help shift the needle, even a little bit.

The *misfit* (Garland-Thomson, 2011) nature of this project is not because I believe that these things are easy, but precisely because they are not and we must try and do them anyway. The comfort of liberal progress can only keep you warm for so long, and as we are seeing, that progress can be taken away faster than it is gained. The texts analyzed in this dissertation teach me to be hopeful that fat folks have messy, complicated, beautiful, ugly, and magnificent futures ahead. I argue that to be hopeful is not at odds with being critical. I am critical because I am hopeful, and to be hopeful is to be full of belief. I am filled with what feminist theory has instilled in me about our humanity and the significance of our lived experiences. It is my hope that you take from this project a belief in fat not as ‘additive’ to our feminist work, but as full of its own complex and rich epistemologies, affects, and encounters.

Introduction

*You'd have to stop the world just to stop the feeling
You'd have to stop the world just to stop the feeling*
- Chappell Roan, "Good Luck, Babe!"

*There's more than one answer to these questions
Pointing me in a crooked line
And the less I seek my source for some definitive
(The less I seek my source)
Closer I am to fine*
- Indigo Girls, "Closer to Fine"

The word *fat* can be a landmine in mixed company. If you refer to yourself as *fat*, chances are you will be bombarded with refrains like: "No, you're not fat, you're beautiful!" or "Don't talk about yourself that way". At this point, your company might be falling over themselves to feel better while you can either feign unawareness ("I'm both, actually!"), take a moment to educate them ("Fat isn't a pejorative"), or find an excuse to leave. Fat, like "crip" or "Queer", has been reclaimed through the work of fat activists and scholars, but not everyone got the memo. After all, "anti-fat attitudes, comments, policies, and practices are ubiquitous. We cannot see the air we've been breathing for years [...] Anti-fatness has become invisible, a natural law" (Gordon, 2020, p. 3). The tentacles of anti-fatness permeate the air, meaning they even haunt the spaces of fat liberation. Fat stands out in mixed company, but fat can also stand out in fat company where there is a pressure to be the 'good' kind of fat, the fat that embodies 'healthy' behaviours and a 'positive' attitude. Perhaps this is why writer Samantha Irby (2023) says, "I'm not friends with the kinds of people who suggest going to dinner and then agonize over whether to get a little oil in addition to the lemon juice on their vegetable-only salads; my friends get the chips. And the queso. And the tacos" (p. 62). Maybe the third option is really to leave and find out where this queso is!

Irby's (2013; 2017; 2020; 2023) texts are among a wave of contemporary memoirs by fat, queer—and often racialized—authors including Roxane Gay (2017) and Lindy West (2016). Unlike West and Gay, Irby's work is less often discussed in an academic setting, and like “many writers of contemporary memoir [was relatively] unknown prior to” (Kirby & Kirby, 2010, p. 23) and even after, the publication of her first book *Meaty* (2013). Now you can find her in conversation with both Gay and West, company that would certainly disarm the tension of *fat*. Each of these authors express fat life in complex and even contradictory ways, a mix of salad and queso. Following the feminist tradition of life writing as an entry point (Simmons, 2008; Speer, 2019), this dissertation analyzes pieces of fat life writing by Gay (2017), West (2016), and Irby (2013; 2017; 2020; 2023) for their epistemological potential, particularly at the intersection of affect and embodiment.

Fat studies scholars and activists Cat Pausé and Sonya Renee Taylor (2021) argue that an important part of fattening scholarship is the use of fat epistemologies, yet the area of fat epistemology is still developing. I have chosen to analyze life writing because of its role in feminist theory, postcolonial theory, and critical race work (Browne, 2015; Speer, 2019). Additionally, as Lesleigh Owen (2012) argues: “Bodies are indeed texts, but they are also lived and breathed; it is in the overlap of these realities that I think fat scholarship has been unfortunately sparse. In other words, although some of us may pretend it is so, fat persons are not brains in jars, and our experiences with the world are not merely intellectual ones” (p. 291). It is essential that fat studies continue to emerge from the social location of fat and fat being in the world, and this dissertation endeavours to highlight the affective and embodied experiences of fat being that are expressed in the work of Gay (2017), West (2016), and Irby (2013; 2017; 2020; 2023).

Life writing remains a tool of communicating affective experiences and embodied knowledges, and its use in social sciences remains not only as an epistemological site, but a place for/as media analysis, and even as a methodology (Maynes, Pierce, & Laslett, 2008). Jessie Speer (2019) argues that while life writing is still often viewed as experiential and not intellectual, it remains a site for theory production “that is deeply grounded in the realm of concrete experience” and connects “social phenomena to the scale of everyday, lived experience” (p. 328). Additionally, it is more common for stories of fat to be found in personal accounts than purely fictionalized ones (Friedman, 2025). If the field of fat studies is to continue building a fat epistemology, then it must be “derived from fat people’s own experience” and “taken seriously in order to know about fat and change how knowledge and power are currently used against fat people” (Cooper, 2016, p. 33). This has, unfortunately, not been the case for much of the work on fatness and the body in the academy, including within feminist studies (Kyrölä & Harjunen, 2017) where there has been a lack of attention to the cultural constructions of fat.

At the same time, much of the fat studies canon is not only white (Zerafa, 2023) but is invested in the promotion of ‘good’ feelings and behaviours amongst fat people. It is difficult in a time of increasing anti-fatness and elimination of the most ‘liberal’ achievements to turn away from the mobilization of ‘good’ feelings and ‘positivity’, but it is imperative that we resist the idea that becoming “desire/able” (Harrison, 2021) will bring liberation. The interest in proving that fat is, or can be, ‘healthy’ and ‘good’ not only reinforces negative connections between fatness and morality but contributes to ableist narratives of what constitutes ‘normal’ and who can even obtain ‘health’ in the first place. We are afraid to be ugly lest it confirm assumptions already held about fatness *and* feminists—those angry killjoys. Yet it is critical to continue the

legacy of queerly negative approaches to fat (Chalklin, 2016; Cooper, 2014) that embrace a range of affects and emotions, no longer mandated to be ‘positive’.

Part of the map to lead us through this work can be found in the pieces of life writing analyzed in this dissertation. They are types of contemporary memoir, written in formats that vary from straight-forward chapters to essay collections, that can act as an “accessible bridge between personal narrative and expository writings” (Kirby & Kirby, 2010, p. 27). The stories examined in this dissertation provide embodied narratives of fat life that are more connected to the reality of fat being than studies on the ‘obesity epidemic’ or overarching discussions around body image and patriarchal control. Fat life intersects not only with patriarchy, but with the structures of white supremacy and racism that, as feminists, we want to divest from. Fat feminist studies should no longer “remain in the inclusion-optional category” (Kyrölä & Harjunen, 2017, p. 106), and through this dissertation I endeavour to contribute to the *fattening*—thickening—of feminist studies.

Affective experiences, sensations, and encounters are abundant in fat life writing. Orsini (2020) writes about the links between affect and fatness, arguing that feelings and emotions are central to our understanding of bodies and fatness. I follow an interest in “integrating emotions in our respective analytical toolkits” while opposing “an approach that privileges ‘good’ emotions and banishes ‘bad’ ones” (Orsini, 2020, p. 357). I am concerned with exploring the ugly, funny, and complex emotions and affects presented in the fat life writing of Gay, West, and Irby. Jamie Ann Rogers (2019) asks “what is the price of bearing witness to the affect that remains? What is the price of looking away?” (p. 214). In fat studies—and certainly at the meeting point of fat feminist studies—we are paying the price by looking away from ugly and looking toward “desire/ability” (Harrison, 2021). Our liberation cannot be found in becoming ‘desire/able’, or

under the same metrics that oppress us. We cannot look away from the ‘wrong’ fat bodies in favour of the ‘right’ ones, and we cannot turn away from the reality that anti-fatness is a tool of imperialism that structures the parameters of gender, race, and class; it is, and should be, a feminist issue.

This project was motivated by my academic interest in both feminist theory and fat studies and has also been influenced by the eras of fat liberation that have occurred throughout my life and continue to frame the social position of fat. Over twenty years ago, fat studies scholar Kathleen LeBesco (2004) argued that we should consider fat a “political situation” (p. 2). Fat’s current political situation has not only been shaped by early fat activism and fat studies, but by the tension between neoliberal ideologies of individual responsibility, feminist critiques of body image, and the contemporary investment in proving that fat can be ‘healthy’. Commodified and monetized movements like ‘body positivity’ (BP) and Health at Every Size (HAES) have become central to fat assimilationist approaches that seek liberation through participation in the very structures that wish to eradicate fatness (Shackelford, 2021). This has created a ‘good/bad fatty’ dichotomy where ‘good fats’ work towards ‘health’ and are not at fault for their corpulence, whereas ‘bad fats’ are ‘unhealthy’ and complicit in their embodiment (Bias, 2016; Gibson, 2022). Moreover, this political situation of fat has been shaped by the rhetorics of the ‘obesity epidemic’, the Covid-19 pandemic, white supremacist violence, and the rise in fascist ideology.

Despite this, fat studies scholars and fat activists (who often overlap) continue to carve out spaces for fat to flourish, and fat studies as a discipline continues to grow. As a student of feminist theory, I find many convergences between feminist concerns and the motivations of fat liberation, and yet there are strange omissions in the popular version of fat liberation that inhabits

the zeitgeist. For instance, there is a lack of attention to the role of racism and anti-Blackness in the very origins of anti-fatness (Strings, 2019; Harrison, 2021; Farrell, 2020); there is a process of osmosis between feminist thought and neoliberal ideology, where body politics get stuck in the language of choice and responsibility (Harjunen, 2017; 2021); and there is an oversight around disability's relationship with fat (Meleo-Erwin, 2012; Garland-Thomson, 2002; 2005).

Similarly, despite sharing many of the same concerns, feminist theory often lacks a fat subject.

In the past decade there has been an influx of important fat studies texts, including *Fat Activism: A Radical Social Movement* (Cooper, 2016); *Queering Fat Embodiment* (Pausé, Wykes, & Murray, 2014); *Fearing the Black Body: The Racial Origins of Fat Phobia* (Strings, 2019); *Thickening Fat: Fat Bodies, Intersectionality, and Social Justice* (Friedman, Rice, & Rinaldi, 2020); *The Routledge International Handbook of Fat Studies* (Pausé & Taylor, 2021); *Belly of the Beast: The Politics of Anti-Fatness as Anti-Blackness* (Harrison, 2021); *The Contemporary Reader of Gender and Fat Studies* (Farrell, 2023), and *Fat Studies: The Basics* (Friedman, 2025). Alongside these texts there have also been other non-fiction works that stem from personal narrative, such as *Heavy: An American Memoir* (Laymon, 2018); *Bad Fat Black Girl: Notes from a Trap Feminist* (Bowen, 2021); *Fat and Queer: An Anthology of Queer and Trans Bodies and Lives* (Grimm, Morales, & Ferentini, 2021); *Fat Off, Fat On: A Big Bitch Manifesto* (Kent, 2023); as well as the reveal of Aubrey Gordon's identity behind the internet presence "Your Fat Friend" and her subsequent books *What We Don't Talk About When We Talk About Fat* (2020) and *"You Just Need To Lose Weight": And 19 Other Myths About Fat People* (2023), both of which blend personal narrative with empirical data.

The works analyzed in this project emerged in this same decade and although the landscape of fat liberation has shifted throughout the course of writing this dissertation, all of

these works demonstrate an insistence on the recognition of *fat*. It is both an exciting and a difficult time to be a fat person and I am always motivated by the work of other fat scholars, writers, and creatives. This project was also motivated in small part by my personal love of books and my interest in how fatness is depicted in various types of media, including movies, television, fiction and non-fiction. Life writing and novels have been places where I was first able to locate myself as a feminist before I had the language to do so. Linda Åhäll (2018) argues that feminism is an affective project that calls us to ask feminist questions because of something we feel, and I argue we might find ways to name those feelings through the media we engage with most. Books and stories are places where many of us with othered embodiments find kinship, safety, and knowledge about ourselves and the world. In other words, “in order to know differently, we have to feel differently” (Hemmings, 2012, p. 150) and part of naming those feelings is finding them in the first place. I am interested in where *fat* fits not only in the academy, but specifically within feminist studies.

Being a student of feminist theory and feminist epistemology allows me to ask questions about the subject position of fatness and its construction within the same modes of theorizing so integral to feminist theory. The research questions that guide this dissertation are: 1) How is affect presented and felt in contemporary memoir? 2) What can life writing teach us about fat embodiments? 3) How do fat, queer, and racialized authors engaged in life writing challenge who gets to be a knower? Does their embodied knowledge resist the hierarchical ways in which knowledge is ordered?

When I began this project, I expected to find similarities around which affects were expressed in the texts and had initially planned to organize the chapters by affect. While there are affective similarities, they were not as overarching as I anticipated, and they varied in their

expression. For example, I expected some of the yearning (the hunger) in Gay's (2017) text to be present in both West's (2016) and Irby's (2013; 2017; 2020; 2023) works, and though there might be an undercurrent of longing that could be extracted from both of the latter, it was not 'felt' as clearly as it is in Gay's (2017) work. Similarly, I anticipated that feelings of anger would be easy to find across all texts, but they were expressed very differently by each author.

Regarding humour, I knew that both West (2016) and Irby (2013; 2017; 2020; 2023) would elicit interesting conversations around humour and affect, but they employ comedy in different ways, and even the lack of overt humour in Gay's (2017) text became of interest for this thesis.

The title of this dissertation gestures to "fat feminist *futures*" and I hoped to demonstrate what these texts offer to those futures. I found that each author, in their own way, actually addresses or plays with temporality within their text. For example, Gay's *Hunger* (2017) toys with past, present, and liminality; West (2016) evokes a "fat presence" (Crawford, 2017); and Irby (2013; 2017; 2020; 2023) moves through time while advocating for us to "stay fat". While I expected to point toward the future with this analysis, I found that time was already present in the text themselves and allowed me to plum their temporal suggestions. Additionally, what stood out to me was how non-human objects—our encounters with the everyday objects of chair, doorway, and table—factor into fat life writing, whether anecdotally or as the subject of a chapter. This dissertation then took the form of chapters by author, with each dedicated to the affects, encounters, and dynamics of fat life expressed by Gay (2017), West (2016), and Irby (2013; 2017; 2020; 2023) in their own ways. This allowed me to highlight how each author offers a queerly negative fat politic that moves us toward being "misfits" (Garland-Thomson, 2011), while also demonstrating the epistemological potential of fat life writing for theories of affect, embodiment, and temporality.

I argue that the works presented in this dissertation do a kind of *affective misfitting* within fat studies and certainly fat feminist studies. Even if it means we become “affectively alien” (Ahmed, 2010) within our feminist community, we should lean into our *misfit* (Garland-Thomson, 2011) and purposefully refuse to get along. Gay (2017), West (2016), and Irby (2012; 2017; 2020; 2023) challenge us to move away from what ‘feels good’ and run towards the complex reality of fat embodiment. Finally, although I wanted to engage with the book as a ‘thing’ itself, I did not anticipate how much the tactile sensations of reading would factor into the final product of this thesis. The discussion chapter led me to discover more about the physical, aural, and embodied elements to reading, as well as the stylistic elements of the book as a commercial item.

This dissertation has five chapters: Theory and Methodology; Disorientation(s), Time, and Misfitting in Roxane Gay’s *Hunger*; Fattening the Killjoy: Being *Shrill* with Lindy West; Ugly Laughing: Samantha Irby Essays; and Discussion: In Fat Company. Chapter One outlines the theoretical framework and methodology that ground this project. Beginning with the convergences and divergences between fat studies and feminist studies, including an overview of some key texts and thinkers in the disciplines. Chapter One takes a tour of affect theory, queer theory, disability studies, and epistemology, before concluding with a discussion of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), life writing and personal narrative, as well as my own positionality.

Chapter Two examines Roxane Gay’s (2017) *Hunger: A Memoir of (My) Body*, highlighting the rich examples of disorientation and “misfitting” (Garland-Thomson, 2011) that are so commonplace in fat life, as well as the fat temporalities presented by Gay’s work, and hunger as affect. The work of Garland-Thomson (2011), Hil Malatino (2022), and Sianne Ngai

(2005) are used to analyze the “ugly feelings” that Gay presents, including rage and envy. Additionally, I examine disorientation through Malatino (2022) and Sara Ahmed (2006).

Chapter Three presents Lindy West’s (2016) *Shrill: Notes from a Loud Woman* as a site of feminist killjoy production, with particular attention to the power dynamics of laughter, the importance of a “fat presence” (Crawford, 2017), the queering of fat ‘coming out’, and the fat bodymind. Works by Sara Ahmed (2017; 2023), Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick (1993; 1994), Da’Shaun Harrison (2021), and Margaret Price (2015) are used to illuminate the fat killjoy, alongside theories of comedy from Helen Davies and Sarah Illott (2018) as well as Maggie Hennefeld (2021).

Likewise, Chapter Four addresses the role of irreverent, sarcastic humour in fat liberation through Samantha Irby’s essay collections: *Meaty* (2013), *We Are Never Meeting in Real Life* (2017), *Wow, No Thank You* (2020), and *Quietly Hostile* (2023). I also discuss the role of messy materiality, the intersections between fatness and disability, and the place of ‘ugly’/ugly. In particular, I mobilize theories by Robyn Longhurst (2001; 2014), Gale Adams-Hutcheson and Paula Smith (2020), and Mia Mingus (2011) on the fluids of human embodiment, as well as Cara E. Jones (2016) and Alyson Patsavas (2014) on endometriosis and disability.

Finally, Chapter Five brings each of these chapters together in discussion, with specific attention to themes of encounters with objects, humour, temporality, and incoherence. As mentioned above, I also examine the texture of reading, including the tactile and aural sensations of books, as well as the style of book covers and what they signal to readers. The concluding chapter ends with a discussion of this project’s objectives and contributions, its limitations, and what might come next.

Chapter 1

Theoretical Framework & Methodology

*My body was made this particular way
Recurrent desire never totally tamed
Oh honey, I've tried and tried to explain it away
But my body was made
- Ezra Furman, "Body Was Made"*

*when we all move together we shake so big and loud and fat
clearly cast
you will have to see us
and you will have to hear us
and you will be moved
- Leah Pesa Kushner, "Sanctuary"*

This project emerges at the junction of feminist studies and fat studies. Interdisciplinary in nature, fat studies “explores fat bodies as they live in, are shaped by, and remake the world; and creates paradigms for the development of fat acceptance or celebration in mass culture” (Pausé & Taylor, 2021, p.1). With this thesis, I aim to contribute to the field of fat studies and its interest in cultural depictions of fatness, particularly the ways in which fat bodies are shaped by and shape the world. Moreover, I hope to contribute to the growing area of fat epistemology, primarily through “embracing affect and emotion as devices for knowledge creation” (Kotow, 2024, p. 41). To do so, this dissertation employs a range of theoretical concepts from affect theory, queer theory, disability studies, feminist theory as well as to feminist epistemology. Together, this cross-disciplinary approach takes a tour of theories which both benefit fat studies and benefit *from* a fattened lens.

This chapter will begin with a discussion of “fattening” feminist studies and both the convergences and divergences between fat studies approaches to feminism and feminist approaches to issues of fat and the body. This leads to a critique of significant movements within body politics, such as ‘body positivity’ (BP) and Health at Every Size (HAES), which I argue form a complicated and somewhat contradictory framework that does not do the politically

incendiary work that many suggest it does. I also highlight the significance of anti-Blackness and racism to the flourishing of anti-fatness, and how some of these ‘liberal’ approaches continue to uphold white supremacist beliefs. It is paramount to situate anti-fatness within the racist ideology from which it emerged and continues to thrive. I argue that a BP/HAES approach is positioned as a sort of Goo Gone™ to what affects and ideologies ‘stick’ (Ahmed, 2010) to fatness yet ultimately relies on the ‘right’ fat subject (Murray, 2008) that finds liberation in assimilation or what Crystal M. Kotow (2020) calls “oppressive liberation” (p. 151). Kotow (2020) uses this term to describe spaces where fat liberation may be a shared goal, but a degree of hierarchy of bodies based on the ‘right’ type of fat persists. Though she writes from her experiences at “BBW¹ parties”, her analysis translates to the larger ‘spaces’ of fat politics, both activist and academic, where participation in ‘desire’ is sought through respectability, politeness, and assimilationist processes of proving fat’s ‘health’ status. Affect theory works alongside this idea and I engage theories of negative affects, such as Sianne Ngai’s (2005) approach to “ugly feelings”, Hil Malatino’s (2022) “side affects”, and Sara Ahmed’s (2010) “affect alien”, among others, to elucidate and challenge these inherently anti-fat preconceptions. Anti-fatness requires specific performances of fat contrition which demand that fat people be miserable when it comes to their bodies, yet the “fat assimilationist” (LeBesco, 2004, p. 42) approaches that I discuss require fat subjects be ‘positive’ and palatable. This collision results in a nearly impossible paradigm that keeps fat liberation stuck in an aesthetic loop instead of following the path toward mess.

From queer theory, I highlight ideas of queer negativity, specifically UK-based fat activist and scholar Vikki Chalklin’s (2016) discussion of “obstinance”; the way that gender is

¹ A commonly used acronym meaning “big, beautiful women”.

predicated on a slim body, and how embodiments deemed ‘other’ are *queered*. Lee Edelman’s (2004) approach to negativity is unpacked alongside other queer theories, including work from Samantha Murray (2005), Francis Ray White (2016), and Allison Taylor (2021). As this thesis analyzes works by queer authors (across an LGBTQIA+ spectrum), queer theory helps to ground these works in a theoretical framework that does not take for granted a heteronormative experience of fatness. Moreover, disability studies illuminates the connections between fatness and disability under a social model, and disability theory provides a lens through which to challenge feminist theory in many ways. Drawing from Rosemarie Garland-Thomson’s (2011) “misfitting”, Zoë Meleo-Erwin’s (2012) interdisciplinary “disrupting normal”, and Mia Mingus’s (2018) “magnificence”, I challenge a fat feminist and fat assimilationist reliance on being as close to normativity as possible regardless of one’s fat embodiment. Finally, this project is interested in the epistemological use of fat life writing for discussing affect and embodiment, and is rooted in my allegiance to feminist epistemologies and other epistemologies of resistance that are present in the background of works that emerge from “the location of the body and all that that may mean” (Sharpe, 2018, p. 173-4). Ultimately, this dissertation engages with the complicated encounters (with bodies, objects, and others) that make up fat life.

As a nascent field, fat studies has several compilation texts that address a range of issues in the discipline, including *Bodies out of Bounds* (LeBesco & Braziel, 2001), *The Fat Studies Reader* (Rothblum & Solovay, 2009), *Queering Fat Embodiment* (Pausé, Wykes, & Murray, 2014); and more recently, *Thickening Fat: Fat Bodies, Intersectionality, and Social Justice* (Friedman, Rice, & Rinaldi, 2020), *The Routledge International Handbook of Fat Studies* (Pausé & Taylor, 2021), *Fat Studies in Canada: (Re)Mapping the Field* (Taylor, Ioannoni, Bahra, Evans, Scriver, & Friedman, 2023), *The Contemporary Reader of Gender and Fat Studies*

(Farrell, 2023), and *Fat Studies: The Basics* (Friedman, 2025). From their Introduction, Pausé and Taylor (2021) offer a succinct description of the tenets of Fat Studies, explaining that it “uses body size as the starting point for a wide-ranging theorization and explication of how societies and cultures, past and present, have conceptualized all bodies and the political/cultural meanings ascribed to every body”, and “insists on the recognition that fat identity can be as fundamental and world-shaping as other identity constructs analyzed within the academy and represented in media” (p. 1, emphasis mine). This dissertation strives to contribute to *fattening* feminist studies, which takes seriously fat identities in the ways that Pausé and Taylor (2021) suggest. Following Mollow and McRuer (2015), “fattening a concept means examining it through the lenses of fat studies and the fat justice movement” (p. 35). To encourage a fattening of feminism “means those who study different forms of contentious politics, including feminist and other forms of progressive activism, need to think about the ‘fleshy materiality’ of fatness” (Orsini, 2020, p. 361). This “fleshy materiality” is often absent from affect theory, particularly as certain social science disciplines advocate an ‘affective turn’, despite the presence of affect theory in fiction and non-fiction works by iconic writers and theorists such as Audre Lorde (who also wrote about fatness), Toni Morrison, bell hooks, Gloria Anzaldúa, and Dian Million, to name a few. Lorde’s use of “erotic” (2007, p. 53) helps to situate this thesis in the existing legacy of works that draw from the social and the personal, thereby breaking down the walls between what is considered the ‘right’ space for theory and knowledge production. As Lorde writes, “the dichotomy between the spiritual and the political is also false, resulting from an incomplete attention to our erotic knowledge” (2007, p. 56). Indeed, whose knowledge makes up the canon of any field is worth troubling, but I am particularly interested in the continual growth of fat studies from a perspective that takes seriously embodied knowledge, acknowledging “the

strength of the erotic into a true knowledge” (Lorde, 2007, p. 56). This grounds my interest in fat epistemology, which “recognizes that fat people know the most about being fat” (Pausé & Taylor, 2021, p. 11). The force of anti-fatness in ‘obesity epidemic’ discourse positions fat people as illegitimate knowers not just regarding themselves but also more broadly as incapable of intelligence and knowledge production (Evans & Friedman, 2022; Kyrölä & Harjunen, 2017; Stoll & Thoune, 2020).

Despite feminist theory’s interest in subjugated knowledges, it often only flirts with fatness (or issues that are linked with fatness) and rarely addresses them with fat studies, or even fat people, in mind. Much like Garland-Thomson (2002) argues regarding feminist theory and disability, many feminist scholars are unfamiliar with fat. Most of the work that emerges in a feminist fat studies space is concerned with white, cisgender fat women and the importance of ‘self-love’ (Farrell, 2020; Zerafa, 2022). Take, for example, the enduring legacy of Marilyn Wann’s oft-cited *Fat!So? Because You Don’t Have to Apologize for Your Size!* (1998). While this book remains an important archive of fat politics, it is ultimately closer to a how-to guide that teaches readers “how-to” not hate their fat rather than a broad political critique. Fat studies scholar Samantha Murray critiques Wann’s approach in her book *The ‘Fat’ Female Body* (2008). She writes, “according to Wann, it is up to ‘fat’ women to decide for *ourselves* that negative readings of ‘fatness’ can be discarded in our project of self-empowerment” (Murray, 2008, p. 106, emphasis in original). This ‘empowering’ approach looms large in contemporary healthist logics, including BP/HAES, yet it relies both on a separation of the mind and the body as well as an untenable insistence on ignoring the discursive powers that shape our lives (Murray, 2008). Although body politics have long been an issue of feminist concern, feminist approaches to *fat* body politics remain fraught, which I return to below. Additionally, Kata Kyrölä and Hannele

Harjunen (2017) write that “with the relatively recent upsurge of interest in issues of gender, fat and ‘obesity’, feminist scholars can be roughly divided into two broad groups” (p. 105). The first group can be “located in the field of fat studies and emphasises the cultural meanings of fatness as well as its materiality” (p. 105), which includes authors such as Kathleen LeBesco (2004; 2001), Charlotte Cooper (1997; 2012; 2016), and Samantha Murray (2005; 2008) (Kyrölä & Harjunen, 2017). The second group “seems oblivious to the field of feminist fat studies and feminist critiques of medical knowledge production—when it comes to weight and health” (Kyrölä & Harjunen, 2017, p. 105). This group includes Susie Orbach, whose book *Fat Is a Feminist Issue* (1978) is often referenced without the latter half of the title: *The Anti-Diet Guide to Permanent Weight Loss*.² Like Wann’s (1998) *Fat!So?*, Orbach’s text endures within feminist studies, where both works serve as reminders of the early days of feminist approaches to fat when thinking and theorizing was not sufficiently intersectional.

These texts are also reminders that fat studies (like feminist studies) tells an origin story that is “mired in whiteness” (Zerafa, 2022, p. 425). As Farrell (2020) suggests, “[the] dominant origin story of Fat Studies, as an academic field, is that of US fat feminism” (p. 30), which is steeped in white feminist work. Farrell (2020) draws attention to important histories such as welfare rights organizer Johnnie Tillmon, who in the first issue of *Ms. Magazine*, described herself as a fat, Black, poor, woman on welfare, and in doing so “put her finger on the ways that these cultural stigmas and oppressions interlock” (p. 31). Farrell (2020) also mentions Guyanese-British poet Grace Nichols, whose work is used as an epigraph in this dissertation, as well as artist Kerry James Marshall who examines the racist elements in paintings that are so often

² It was also published under the title *Fat is a Feminist Issue: A Self-Help Guide for Compulsive Eaters*.

referred to as ‘proof’ that fat was at one time ‘desirable’.³ Of course, this is not a complete list of all the work that was, and is, done outside of the story of whiteness that the academic field of fat studies tells about itself. As Friedman, Rice, and Rinaldi (2020) put it: “[N]ormative expectations have a habit of creeping into critical studies” (p. 4). The line between fat activism and the fat academy ebbs and flows with normative expectations of ‘good’ and ‘bad’ fat(s). I want to note, however, that the two groups that Kyrölä and Harjunen describe are not the only areas of fat studies. There is important work being done by scholars like Deborah McPhail on the discourse of ‘obesity’ in Canada (2016; 2017); Jen Rinaldi’s work on fatness, citizenship, and social justice (2017; 2020); and May Friedman’s work mapping the field of fat studies and its many intersections (2020; 2021; 2023; 2025), to name a few.

My criticism of canonized fat studies history is not to discredit the important work of early fat activism or fat academic work. Efforts like *The Fat Underground*, “a collective drawn from radical therapy and radical feminist circles” (Simic, 2016, p. 4); or the work of *Shadow on a Tightrope* (1983); and the FaT GiRL zine, archived online to preserve the legacy of the publication run “for fat dykes and the women who want them” (fatgirlarchive, n.d.), are important parts of fat liberation’s institutional memory. In some ways, many of these earlier iterations of fat activism were more rigorous than many contemporary ones that are perhaps too reliant upon capitalism and consumption-based wins (Murray, 2008; Friedman, Rinaldi, & Rice, 2020). Both *The Fat Underground* and the scholars and activists behind *Shadow on a Tightrope* (1983) were committed to the links between fatphobia, classism, racism, imperialism, and sexism (p. 52). In “The Fat Liberation Manifesto” (1983, p. 52), Judy Freespirit and Aldebaran mobilize Marxist language to proclaim: “FAT PEOPLE OF THE WORLD, UNITE! YOU HAVE

³ This is also taken up by Sabrina Strings (2019), who weaves art history into her work on the racist origins of anti-fatness.

NOTHING TO LOSE...” (1983, p. 53, emphasis in original). The final demand on the manifesto reads “WE [sic] refuse to be subjugated to the interests of our enemies. We fully intend to reclaim power over our bodies and our lives. We commit ourselves to pursue these goals together” (Freespirit & Aldebaran, 1983, p. 53). Yet much of the contemporary approach to body politics finds a middle ground with the enemy. Fatness can be okay, only under the terms of ‘health’ set forward by the very systems and corporations that oppress us. Indeed, the ‘diet industry’ remains a lucrative one, including so-called non-diet-diets like HAES. Importantly, I take heed of bell hooks (1994), who reminds us that just because something is imperfect does not mean that we should discard it or what it can give us. She writes, “to have work that promotes one’s liberation is such a powerful gift that it does not matter so much if the gift is flawed. Think of the work as water that contains some dirt. Because you are thirsty you are not too proud to extract the dirt and be nourished by the water” (hooks, 1994, p. 50). I do not wish to forget the origins of fat liberation and the work that has made my own possible, nor do I want to let fatphobes off the hook. Rather, I want to speak to fat studies and fat liberationists who insist on performing fatness the ‘right’ way. This project endeavours to highlight the knowledge generated in fat life writing that can help us embrace our complex and contradictory embodiments without a reliance on becoming ‘desirable’.

Fattening Feminist Studies

Fat might be a feminist issue, but a continued study of fatness and feminism that does not attend to the racist origins of anti-fatness, and the connections of those origins to feminist studies writ large, results in a thin analysis that leaves fat studies under-satiated. Contemporarily, this can be found in the work of noted feminist scholars such as Elspeth Probyn (2008) and Lauren Berlant (2007). Both Probyn (2008) and Berlant (2007) may well be concerned with gender, race, and

class oppression “but they also maintain an implicit or explicit rejection of fat which they see as a structurally induced health problem” (Kyrölä & Harjunen, 2017, p. 106). In “Slow Death (Sovereignty, Obesity, Lateral Agency)”, Berlant (2007) uses ‘obesity’ to talk about biopolitics and the forces of capitalism. They⁴ write, “[t]he obesity epidemic is also a way of talking about the destruction of life, of bodies, imaginaries, and environments by and under contemporary regimes of capital” (Berlant, 2007, p. 764). Berlant begins with the phrase ‘slow death’, which they describe as “the physical wearing out of a population and the deterioration of people in that population that is very nearly a defining condition of their experience” (2007. p. 754). Others have rightly pointed out the ‘obesogenic’ nature of Berlant’s piece (Orsini, 2020), and the racial implications therein. Anna E. Ward (2013) situates Berlant’s ‘slow death’ in the context of Ngai’s (2005) discussion of “animatedness” (p. 89) and racism, writing on the many ways that the fat Black body is made carnivalesque. Ward (2013) argues that within Berlant’s text “fat becomes a mechanism of race, ethnicity, and class formation [...]. Consumption is a means by which marginalized people are absorbed by their environments, taken in, and consumed” (p. 3). Indeed, Berlant attempts to polarize the ‘underfed’ and ‘overfed’ as if the latter is the cause of the former. As Ward (2013) demonstrates, Berlant is surely aware of the ways that “paternalistic politics at curbing consumption always [have] an eye toward poor communities and communities of colour” (p. 3). Yet Berlant refuses to really *go* there and instead attempts a class analysis devoid of race. They write, “these inversions are more than an irony or paradox. Each is distinguished by its own trajectory of slow death” (Berlant, 2007, p. 767). However, Berlant argues, the slow death of the latter is not their ‘fault’ while the ‘slow death’ of the ‘obese’ *is*. They posit that were the poor to seize the means of production, they would feed themselves,

⁴ Berlant used both she/her and they/them pronouns throughout their career with they/them being the primary pronouns at the end of their life.

whereas if the ‘obese’ were to seize those same means, it “might well produce more overfeeding, more exercise of agency towards death and not health, and certainly not against power” (Berlant, 2007, p. 767). In the most basic terms, Berlant’s piece argues that the ‘obese’ would seize the means and maybe sit on them, while those who are not ‘obese’ would do something ‘productive’. Fatness, for Berlant, is the opposite of progress: “[D]uring this phase of capital, there is less of a future when one eats without an orientation toward it” (2008, p. 780). Here, eating, which is necessary to sustain life, is tied to a ‘slow death’ when taken ‘too far’. Though Berlant is rightly critical of capitalism, they use adiposity as an outlet for their critique as if fat bodies are to blame for a system of greed. Their stance highlights the ways in which a feminist critique can be concerned with capitalism, class, and race, yet fail to make the connections between these things and the anti-fatness that they endorse.

Despite her work on affect, some of which can be used in an analysis of the fat experience (such as her work on shame), Probyn (2008) takes a very narrow approach to fatness as a feminist issue. She writes, “[f]at is still a feminist issue. However, the ways in which it has been articulated as feminist desperately need to be revisited and profoundly changed” (Probyn, 2008, p. 401). Probyn holds that feminist claims towards fat liberation encourage “poor eating habits” and “obesity”, going so far as to say that “food, eating and fat are very much coded in terms of social class, but increasingly food habits produce class rather than merely reflect it” (2008, p. 402). Probyn seems to suggest that ‘unhealthy’ eating habits = fatness = lower social class. I agree that anti-fatness can keep people out of jobs and employment advancement; however, that is not what she claims in this piece. She is not concerned with the system of anti-fatness (which is to say, the system of white supremacy) but with the so-called ‘obesity epidemic’ (Probyn, 2008). Probyn concludes: “[T]he focus on image and fat acceptance reduces

woman's image to that of 'fat woman'. Whether she is a proud fat woman or not, this is a sad way to understand human subjectivity" (2008, p. 403). Unfortunately, I find Probyn's reading of fatness to be a shallow way of understanding subjectivity. Probyn (2008) claims that feminist discussion of fat reduces fat subjectivity to fatness and the body alone, which she argues is both a theoretical failing to understand power and discourse, and a focus that overlooks what she considers to be the reality of the 'obesity epidemic'. However, our subject positions and our subjectivity are formed by/in relation to our *being in the world* and our encounters with others, and fatness in particular encounters others (both subjects and objects⁵) in specific ways that cannot be ignored.

Kyrölä and Harjunen (2017) write similarly about Berlant as I do Probyn. They argue that Berlant's "unfortunate use of fat as a metaphor for deterioration brings us to a question that can be seen to concern feminist studies much more broadly: What body parts or qualities are seen as inseparable from the whole (or coherent) 'self', the embodied subject, before that self becomes unlivable?" (Kyrölä, 2017, p. 108). Just as Probyn's framing of fatness buys into the 'obesity epidemic' and overlooks the nuances of fat subjectivity, Berlant clearly limits fat subjectivities through their conception of deterioration by consumption. Subjectivity can and has been troubled within fat studies in interesting ways; however, that is not the work being done by Probyn or Berlant. Instead, both authors rely on a view of fat subjectivity which "continues to be formed in and through the discourses underlying the 'obesity epidemic'" (Chalklin, 2016, p. 111). The complexities of fat subjectivity are something that I discuss further later in this chapter, and I will argue that perspectives that separate fat not only from the self but from the constructions of race, gender, and class are precisely why feminist studies needs to be *fattened*. Although "the

⁵ As I discuss later, following Ahmed (2010), 'objects' refers not only to 'things' but to "values, practices, and styles, as well as aspirations" (p. 40).

feminist academic bypassing of the cultural construction of ‘fat’ and feminist fat studies can at times be interpreted as a result of the relative marginality of the field” (Kyrölä & Harjunen, 2017, p. 106), it is important for the continued growth of fat studies that it be taken seriously as a rich, intersectional discipline. Kyrölä and Harjunen (2017) conclude that “[f]at bodies as bases for complex and valuable embodied subjectivities and collectivities, and indeed for feminist agency and activism, remain unthinkable for the authors [in group two]” (p. 107). If fat bodies are not seen as the basis for embodiment, subjectivity, or even an idea of ‘self’, then overlooking the affects, sensations, and encounters of fat life is a logical conclusion. As mentioned above, much of the canon of feminist approaches to fat is often lacking in-depth acknowledgement of the ways that fatness is built up with other normativities, specifically that the patriarchal system that feminism critiques was (and is) created through the colonization of land and bodies and the implementation of white supremacy which determined fatness to be ‘undesirable’ in the first place. Moreover, a narrow approach to fatness that relies on neoliberal feminist conceptions of body politics places responsibility on the individual and finds the ‘solution’ to anti-fatness in self-love and the performance of ‘health’.

Orsini (2020) cautions that it is crucial “to avoid the tendency to employ neoliberalism sloppily as an explanation for everything” (p. 360). It is my intention to avoid this use of neoliberalism, but suggest, as others have, that much feminist thought on the body has been constructed through neoliberal ideology. Finnish scholar Hannele Harjunen, a prominent voice in fat studies, writes extensively on neoliberalism and fatness. She argues that “the neoliberal discourse on the body has appropriated feminist ideas, and feminist ideas have been infiltrated by neoliberal ideas” (Harjunen, 2024, p. 34). Indeed, the modern manifestation of the ‘body positive’ movement and its contemporary iterations like HAES are examples of this neoliberal

infiltration. Despite being marketed as a fat activist text that eschews diet culture, *Health At Every Size* (Bacon, 2008) has morphed into a movement that, as Gemma Gibson (2022) argues, solidified ideas of the ‘good fatty’ into ‘body positivity’. Although ‘body positivity’ has always been part of fat activism (as far back as the 1960s), HAES upholds “the moral duties that fat people are expected to perform to receive ‘acceptance’ in mainstream body positive circles” (2022, p. 23). Put another way by Jessica Wilson (2023), who writes about her work as a Black dietician, although ‘body positivity’ can be a useful movement for some, “for others it feels like a mandate, a societal expectation that we can somehow transcend the lessons we’ve learned from society and put a positive spin on what it’s like to exist under white supremacy” (p. 115). That is, a fat subject can only be a subject if they are, in every other respect but embodiment, as close to ‘thin’ as possible. To be close to ‘thinness’ as a position requires an investment in white supremacist ideals and I find it disturbing to try and put a positive spin on that. Similarly, HAES rebrands ‘body positivity’ into the ‘wellness’ sphere, arguing that fat people can be ‘healthy’ through engagement with ‘wellness’ culture, which requires a great deal of time and money. This rebranding is an attempt to combat fatphobia through what Kathleen LeBesco (2004) calls a “fat assimilationist” (p. 42) stance, or what Farrell (2021) calls “achievement feminism” (p. 50), both of which strive for fatness to participate in the same system of ‘desire/ability’ that eschews it in the first place. These expectations of ‘positivity’, ‘health’, and ‘self-love’ demand affective performances of happiness that are essential to the ‘good fatty/bad fatty’ dichotomy (Chalklin, 2016; Harrison, 2021; Gibson, 2022). The ‘good fatty’ “is a person that society is willing to humanize differently to bad fatties as they are making strides to change the fate of their ‘poor health’ by participating in their moral duties” (Gibson, 2022, p. 27). The “good fatty” eats ‘right’, exercises, is ‘body positive’, and they may just happen to lose weight because of their

‘healthy’ lifestyle choices. Ironically, however, within some fat liberationist spheres, this ‘good fatty’ is *actually* the ‘bad fatty’ because any attempts at intentional weight-loss and ‘proving health’ reinforce the structures of oppression that frame anti-fatness. This paradox is something that will be seen throughout the texts analyzed in this dissertation.

What LeBesco (2004) calls “the will to innocence” (p. 112) is central to the idea of the ‘good fatty’. The fat assimilationist stance that underscores (neo)liberal movements (like BP/HAES) relies on a rhetoric of innocence “which seeks to relieve them of responsibility for their much-maligned condition” (LeBesco, 2004, p. 112). This ‘innocence’ is manifest through the performance of ‘health’ to distance oneself from *other* fat people, as if to say they are not like *those* gluttonous fat folks who are at ‘fault’ for their fatness. I am aligned with trans scholar and Black Fat Studies⁶ expert Da’Shaun L. Harrison, who calls HAES in particular a “reformist project” that still maintains a system that locks certain people out of ‘health’, irrespective of size (She’s All Fat Podcast, 2021). Within this reformist project, the aim is to include fat people in the oppressive systems in question (i.e., ‘health’ and ‘beauty’) instead of shattering (or at least challenging) the foundational systems that uphold and regulate ‘health’, ‘beauty’, and ‘wellness’, and how these systems are entwined with capitalist violence. Indeed, as Harjunen writes (2021), “the effects of the economy on the body are varied and multi-layered. The body is an effect of economic, social, and political power conditions that constitute it. It is at the same time a consequence of the material conditions and resources available to it, as well as a symbol of them” (p. 72). Therefore, the BP/HAES framework is part of a confusingly neoliberal feminism wherein “feminist subjects have adopted neoliberal body discourse and practices as signs of empowerment and subjectivity” (Harjunen, 2023, p. 34). Rarely, if ever, do these practices of

⁶ This is the term Harrison uses to describe their work: <https://dashaunharrison.com/about/>.

‘empowerment’ engage with or acknowledge the origins of anti-fatness or the ways that fat is neither just sad and ‘obese’ or ‘positive’ and ‘curvy’, but as messy and complex as any other subject position.

Before I address subjectivity further, I want to expand on the relationship between anti-fatness and anti-Blackness as it informs the overall understanding of fatness throughout this project, including subjectivity and why fat ‘subjects’ are so absent from theory; the current state of body politics vis-à-vis Covid-19, Ozempic, and the rise of “conservative values”. Many fat studies texts emerged from the context of the early phases of the ‘obesity epidemic’, but Amy Erdman Farrell’s *The Contemporary Reader of Gender and Fat Studies* (2023) emerged from a new context: the Covid-19 Pandemic. Farrell situates this collection within a new—and very real—public health crisis that included lockdowns and long periods indoors. It is within this same period that I began my Ph.D. and this project. Farrell (2023) explains that “amidst all the headlines and dire information, another thread appeared—about the bodies that would be produced during months of inactivity and nervous snacking” (p. 3). Despite the very real threat of respiratory illness, the online discourse was focused on the possibility of exiting lockdown periods having gained weight. Indeed, as Farrell writes, “even in this moment of danger, fat looms big” (2023, p. 3). Similarly, Samantha Irby (whose works are a subject of this dissertation) quips: “[T]he pandemic hit and every news report was like, ‘Bye, fat people!’” (2023, p. 207). Anti-fatness is so pervasive that people were more concerned about gaining weight than potentially contracting an illness with long-term impacts, many of which are still unknown. Moreover, shortly after the pandemic was deemed “over” in service of capitalism, there were air quality warnings due to Canadian wildfires. Yet people were still attending outdoor yoga, going for runs, and making their commutes to the gym (Prater, 2023). As I watched this unfold, I was

reminded of how little ‘health’ and ‘wellness’ are really about health at all, and instead about performing ‘health’ in order to seem virtuous and as close to ‘thinness’ as possible. Although this dissertation is not about Covid-19 and fatness, it is necessary to set the stage upon which this project emerges. The early era of the ongoing pandemic was marked not only by endless memes about possible weight gain (de Lima & da Silva, 2023) but the reality that medicalized fatphobia “put fat people at a higher risk for complications (including death) from Covid” (Otis, 2023, p. 124). Yet, as Otis (2023) points out, fatphobia’s reliance on the eugenicist Body Mass Index (BMI) also meant that (some) fat people were able to access vaccines early, while medicalized fatphobia still assigned “disproportionate responsibility to fat people for the effects of the pandemic” (Otis, 2023, p. 127).

This era of anti-fatness is not only defined by the pandemic but by the racist violence that occurred throughout and continues to thrive. Protests erupted in response to the ongoing and persistent murder of Black folks by police, punctuated by the killing of George Floyd whose final plea “I can’t breathe” echoed the final words of another victim of state sanctioned murder: Eric Garner. Garner was blamed for his murder based on his race, his body size, and his ‘health’ status; things that cannot be separated from one another (Mollow, 2017; Harrison, 2021; Zerafa, 2023). This reminder reverberated throughout the early stages of 2020, making clear the ways that anti-fatness is a racial(ized) project. At the time of my writing, a new and trendy “weight-loss drug”, a semaglutide injection named Ozempic®, has become *de rigueur*. Despite its original and medical use for diabetes, it is becoming easier in Canada to acquire Ozempic® (or its counterparts Wegovy®, Mounjaro®, and Zepbound®) for weight-loss reasons rather than for diabetes treatment, with some doctors championing its coverage by insurance companies solely for weight-loss purposes (Lapierre, 2024). As my Ph.D. has progressed, even ‘liberal’ body

politics have regressed. Plus-size and size-inclusive clothing brands are shutting their doors or removing their plus-size sections (Tovar, 2025), plus-size models are losing work (Saner, 2025) and people who built their platforms on so-called ‘body positivity’ have opted to take GLP-1 injectables to lose weight (McNamara, 2025; Wray, 2024). Alongside this trend, the “tradwife”⁷ aesthetic is on the rise, conservative policies are being passed at alarming rates, and anti-LGBTQIA rhetoric is thriving. As right-wing narratives become increasingly popular, even the smallest and most neoliberal ‘wins’ on the fat liberation front are disappearing. The texts I analyze in this dissertation were written in the last decade, and yet the last year alone has seen a return to regressive ideas that make previously ‘liberal’ wins seem radical. I want to explore the epistemological potential of these works because I believe that it can help us find our way through this exhausting, regressive timeline.

Finding routes to liberation requires an understanding of the origins of anti-fatness in chattel slavery and colonization, and, as I have already discussed in this chapter, knowing that ‘liberal’ movements, which might look like critical scholarship or activism, often seek participation in the very systems they oppose. The world as it exists now is not a natural ontological condition but a purposeful construction to maintain white supremacy and racial capitalism (Harrison, 2021). In her extensive and thoughtful text, *Fearing the Black Body: The Racial Origins of Fat Phobia* (2019), Sabrina Strings provides a detailed account of the roots of fatphobia as a racial project. She writes that during the High Enlightenment and height of chattel slavery, upon seeing Africans⁸, European colonizers realized that their bodies were similarly

⁷ A portmanteau of “traditional” and “wife”, used as a slang term for “a married woman who embraces traditional gender roles and values”. Tradwife is “particularly used for a young woman who chooses to be a homemaker and shares her lifestyle online. It is closely associated with a 2020s social media trend widely views as ultraconservative” (Merriam-Webster, n.d.): <https://www.merriam-webster.com/slang/tradwife>.

⁸ This is the language Strings uses in her book.

shaped, but their skin was different (Strings, 2019). Eugenacists like François Bernier and Georges-Louis Leclerc decided that after skin colour, “the size and shape of the body were the next most important markers of physical distinction between the races” (Strings, 2019, p. 76). Their very belief system included the idea that “the bulk frames of the blacks [sic] were due to the ready availability of food combined with their lack of mental capacity to devote themselves to activities other than eating” (Strings, 2019, p. 81). It is these “scientists” who provided the building blocks for our contemporary medical institutions, through which forced experiments on enslaved women established gynecology, and Eurocentric studies of the so-called *l’homme moyen* became what we now call the Body Mass Index (BMI) (Strings, 2019). The BMI is part of what continues to govern modern anti-fatness. As Aubrey Gordon (2023) writes, “like phrenology and positivist criminology before it the body mass index is a product of its social context, which proudly held up whiteness as an idealized kind of normalcy” (p. 62). Although I do not intend to offer an extensive historical account of the BMI and medical science, I want to be clear about what grounds my perspective within fat studies and my commitments to not treating anti-fatness and racism as disparate entities. The BMI continues to govern who is ‘obese’ and who is not. It remains a profoundly misunderstood part of the cultural zeitgeist that traps fatness in a cage of numbers that allows insurance companies and the narrative of the ‘obesity epidemic’ to thrive. It is important to call it what it is: the manifestation of eugenic ideologies.

Building on the foundations of *Fearing the Black Body* (Strings, 2019), Da’Shaun L. Harrison’s *Belly of The Beast: The Politics of Anti-Fatness as Anti-Blackness* (2021) does indispensable work for the future of fat studies. Weaving together the construction of race, gender, and the roots of fatphobia, they present an image of how anti-fatness is used as part of

racial violence and the surveillance of Black bodies. Harrison shifts the way that fat liberationists, abolitionists, and feminists talk about fatness and anti-fat violence. The thorough historical account presented by Strings (2019) provides necessary groundwork for tracing the roots of anti-fatness as anti-Blackness, and Harrison places those roots into the contemporary context of police violence, ‘body positivity’, and transphobia. They make vital and urgent connections between fat liberation and abolition, while generating a politically salient critique of what they call ‘desire/ability’ as methodology, and the way that ‘desire capital’ produces more than just who is considered attractive and who is not (Harrison, 2021). Moreover, Harrison troubles the idea of ‘insecurity’ and critiques the reliance on ‘self-love’ as a route to liberation. These theoretical contributions made by Harrison not only assist in critiquing the mainstream systems of feminist approaches to fatness, but provide a theoretical grounding to my dissertation, and have played a crucial role in my work as well as my life. Harrison’s conception of ‘desire/ability’ is integral to my thesis. They write:

Desire/ability politics is the methodology through which the sovereignty of those deemed (conventionally) Attractive/Beautiful is determined. Put another way, the politics of Desire labels that which determines who gains and holds both social and structural power through the affairs of sensuality, often predicated on anti-Blackness, anti-fatness, (trans) misogynoir, cissexism, queer antagonism, and all other structural violence. It is intended to name the social, political, and economic capital one obtains/is given access to through their ability to be Desire. By this I mean that Desire is about much more than being desired; it is about one’s ability to always already be positioned as the very embodiment of the thing(s) that make(s) one Desire/able (Harrison, 2021, p. 13).

This dissertation is primarily concerned with “disrupting” (Meleo-Erwin, 2012) what it means to be ‘desirable’, and in troubling the reliance on gaining access to ‘desire/ability’ in fat assimilationism/achievement feminism through an analysis of more complex and ambiguous fat subjectivities. As Stefanie Snider (2018) writes, “fat activism, both radical and assimilationist,

seems to focus primarily on achieving beauty, or perhaps more accurately, ‘expanding’ the definitions of beauty” (p. 337). I argue that this approach demands specific discursive-material performances of fat life that are problematic because they uphold ideas of heteronormativity and racial capitalism through the reliance on ‘desire/ability’.

An important part of Harrison’s own methodology is the use of capitalization. They explain that this practice illustrates how these things are “not only about what you *are*, but also what is assigned to you through the identities you hold” (Harrison, 2021, p. 9, emphasis in original), stating: “When I capitalize the P in Pretty and the B in Beauty, or the U in Ugly it is to name who does and does not have access to ‘desire capital’—that is to say who owns or embodies more or less of the identities that grant one access, power, and resources” (Harrison, 2021, p. 12). I have opted to address certain terms with singular quotation marks, including: ‘desire’, ‘desire capital’, ‘desire/ability’, ‘desirable’, ‘desire/able’; ‘health’, ‘wellness’, ‘beauty’, ‘positive’; as well as ‘good fats’ and ‘bad fats’. Placing these terms in singular quotation marks signifies their reference to structures or theories attributed to specific scholars, and not simply as words of singular meaning. For example, ugly is used by Mia Mingus (2018) differently than ‘ugly’ is used by Harrison (2021); the former being something we should head towards, while the latter refers to a system of oppression thrust upon those who do not meet the normativities of ‘health’ and ‘beauty’. Therefore, ‘desire/ability’ governs more than many of us may want to admit. It is, in many ways, the big bad that lurks in the background, and it is tied to the billion-dollar ‘wellness’, ‘health’, and ‘beauty’ industries. To unpack any standards of ‘beauty’ is to address ‘desire/ability’, and yet I find that the role of ‘desire’ is often overlooked as something interpersonal and not politically charged. The texts this dissertation analyzes demonstrate, in their own ways, the real impact of ‘desire/ability’ on fat life.

Understanding anti-fatness as anti-Blackness distances me from advocating for ‘body positivity’, which Harrison (2021) calls “benevolent anti-fatness” (p. 4). Movements like BP/HAES are individualist projects that do not locate the oppressive systems of anti-fatness within the histories of racial violence that both Strings (2019) and Harrison (2021) discuss. Harrison (2021) makes significant connections between the ways that humanity and access to being ‘human’ (including ‘health’, safety, ‘beauty’, etc.) requires that there be an antithesis, which is “the Slave / the Other / the Black” (2021, p. 8). This means that ‘desire capital’ is uninhabitable for those who are outside of what the ‘world’ deems ‘human’, which Harrison (2021) explains, means the ‘Black fat’ (and the ‘Black fat’ that is trans or gender non-conforming). Fat liberation should never strive to be part of a system that requires the destruction of Blackness to flourish. As Wilson (2023) argues, “in these contexts, liberation is connected to love and beauty, not to safety and survival. Systemic issues are regarded as background noise, and we’re supported if we’re able to tune it out” (p. 44). This further elucidates the importance of why we must run from being ‘desire/able’. Achieving the status of ‘desire/ability’ requires an investment in neoliberal body liberation which is not at all concerned with systemic violence but instead with individual belief in one’s ‘beauty’ and reading the body as ‘positive’.

Kyrölä’s (2014) work, *The Weight of Images*, offers valuable insights for how ‘desire/ability’ and ‘positivity’ have been collapsed together. They argue that this collapsing is “symptomatic” of three things (p. 159). First, given the ways that fat people have been rejected from being seen as ‘desirable’, entry into attractiveness is appealing. Second, being a sexual object has become portrayed as empowering for women, and therefore this “demand for empowerment through sexiness” (Kyrölä, 2014, p. 159) is also applied to fat women. Finally, feminist criticisms of body image standards have become mainstream but within narrow

parameters (Kyrölä, 2014, p. 159). The mainstreaming and commercialization of beauty standard critiques have produced a neoliberal ‘body positive’ project that lacks teeth; it refuses to get to the heart of the issue and address the ways that endorsing an approach which requires ‘positivity’ asks the (fat) subject to separate their body from their mind and view participation in oppressive systems as an achievement. Or, as Wilson (2023) puts it so succinctly:

Distilling messages to positivity and beauty will not change societal narratives. If society is able to expand our beliefs about desirability to include people larger than a size 8, white women will become more desirable and, inherently, safer. When we look at white supremacy and the ways in which it functions, keeping white women desirable and powerful while also preserving the idea of their frailty and vulnerability, at any size, whiteness continues to win (p. 128).

By focusing on achieving ‘desire/ability’ or the participation in ‘desire capital’ as liberation and foregoing any political foundation that understands the structure of racial capitalism, mainstream ‘body positivity’ centres the thoughts, feelings, and experiences of cisgender white women who may only temporarily fall into the category of ‘fat’. This is worth troubling within the context of canonical feminist approaches to fat vis-à-vis body image. Works like Naomi Wolf’s *The Beauty Myth* (1990) and Susan Bordo’s *Unbearable Weight* (1993), both of which highlight the pressures of body norms on women, loom large in feminist body politics. In the seminal *Bodies Out of Bounds* (2001), Cecilia Hartley writes on the legacy of these works around the seemingly endless rise in eating disorders in young women. Bordo (1993) and Wolf (1990) are not advocating for any sort of neutrality or acceptance of fatness, but rather that women in particular are sold an image that their ‘thin’ bodies are not ‘thin’ enough. Hartley (2001) writes, “virtually every woman learns to hate her body, regardless of her size, so she learns to participate in her own oppression” (p. 64). This is part of the legacy that permeates the insistence on ‘positivity’ — on tuning out body image ideals and instead focusing on inner beauty or proving ‘health’

irrespective of fatness. This focus on ‘positivity’ is a shallow understanding of the ways that body norms and anti-fatness are constructed and focuses only on the body itself.

Since this thesis engages affect theory, the idea of ‘positivity’ can also be understood through Clare Hemmings (2005), who writes that “positive affects can maintain dominant social orders” (p. 550-551). The ‘positivity’ in ‘body positivity’ “locates the problem on the individual and confers responsibility to think your way to positivity and happiness” (Wilson, 2023, p. 116). Such ‘happiness’ helps to maintain the dominant social order of anti-fatness, as Sesali Bowen (2021) explains, “[b]eauty is a politicized concept precisely because it maintains what bell hooks calls ‘imperialist, capitalist, white supremacist patriarchy,’ a system of oppression that gives all of us something to aspire to” (p. 25). ‘Body positivity’ requires that one be oriented towards happiness as/and towards ‘health’ and ‘wellness’, both of which require “benevolent anti-fatness” (Harrison, 2021, p. 4) to function. This orientation towards ‘health’ will be presented through affect theory, including Sara Ahmed’s discussion of “happy objects” (2010). Below, when I discuss disability studies, I will also expand on the idea of ‘health’ and what it means for this project. ‘Health’ worships at the altar of ‘thinness’ (and vice versa), yet for some, despite their best efforts to participate in ‘thinness’, ‘health’ can never be reached. Neoliberal ideals of individualism and feminist ideas of body liberation have become strangely symbiotic, where the discourses of one repurpose/are repurposed by the other. This permeates gender and the construction of fat subjectivity on both discursive (in academia, in media, in culture) and material levels, including the works of Berlant (2007) and Probyn (2008) that I discussed earlier in this chapter. Fatphobia flattens fat embodiment into one story, one message; if the fat person is a subject—in the world, not in theory, which as I have explained we know it is not—then it is a one-dimensional subject. Yet the very forces of anti-fatness that distill fatness into one slovenly

image are the same alt-right ideologues who lament that progressive politics are obsessed with identity boxes. Is it any wonder, then, that fat assimilationist approaches endeavour to combat that one image by proving that fatness can fit into the predetermined boxes of ‘desire/ability’ set out by heteronormativity, instead of complicating a singular fat subject? It is not easy to do this in mixed company, but it is certainly important to do in the company of fat feminist studies.

Promoting the idea of a singular fat subjectivity (or any singular subjectivity) is not the goal of this thesis. Rather, I seek to deepen existing theories of subjectivity in fat feminist approaches. Vikki Chalklin (2016) addresses the dominance of HAES over ‘body positive’ rhetoric and fat liberation, which relies on ‘shifting’ the narrative of anti-fatness to show that fat can be ‘healthy’ and thus *that* fat is okay, i.e. the ‘good fatty’. She writes, “in [the] dominant HAES-informed paradigm, fat subjectivity continues to be formed in and through the discourses underlying the ‘obesity epidemic’” (Chalklin, 2016, p. 111). This construction of fat subjectivity is consistent with a fat assimilationist stance (LeBesco, 2004) where participation with—instead of the eradication of—heteronormative systems is the goal. Chalklin (2016) argues:

These subject positions are problematic because of their performance of a valid subject position enacts a repetition of the heteronormative culture which threatens fat subjects to begin with—by positioning some fat bodies as exceptional in their attractiveness, the assumption remains that in general, fatness is antithetical to a set of universal standards of desirability (p. 113).

As I discussed at the start of this chapter, this method of fat liberation is reflective of a neoliberal approach to feminist ‘achievement’ where progress is determined by mainstream acceptance. For example, plus-size models are often gestured to as a point of progress. While it is, in some ways, meaningful for representations of women’s bodies to be larger than a size zero, the existence of plus size models in and of itself is not proof of liberation. As we are seeing now, even this

‘achievement’ is disappearing, perhaps signifying why it was so flimsy in the first place. Fat studies scholar Samantha Murray (2005) unpacks this in her work, writing, “the fat body of fat politics is asking to be seen within frameworks of beauty and desirability that appear to be non-normative and subversive but are in fact *reaffirmations* of normative frameworks” (p. 161, emphasis in original). Put another way by Friedman (2025): “I have yet to learn of a community that doesn’t uphold some metric of desirability, so while many different communities ‘allow’ for a range of embodiments that vary from the blond Barbie version of the norm, they may still have a norm, and may police one another within these normative expectations” (p. 107). This problem is not specific to fat studies/fat liberation, but I want to challenge this impulse because of my investment in fat liberation and in combatting “oppressive liberation” (Kotow, 2020, p. 151). The fat politic that scholars like Chalklin (2016), Murray (2005), and Friedman (2025) critique demonstrates why an approach like Harrison’s (2021) is so important; upholding ‘thinness’ cannot be separated from the ways that ‘thinness’ is tied to whiteness. Part of the logics of fat assimilationism (and the ‘will to innocence’) are ideas of malleability (of both bodies and minds) and that the definition of ‘fat’ is mutable. While this may be true, there is fatness that will never be anything but, and this does not make it less worthy of analysis or consideration. The approach to the fat subject as always thinness-in-progress is problematic for not embracing a nuanced and dynamic experience of fat life (such as those presented in the texts this dissertation analyzes).

The popular text *Health at Every Size* (Bacon, 2008) is a “non-diet”-diet book that teaches the (fat) reader how to engage in ‘health’ the ‘right’ way. This is also found in some of the early fat texts that I already mentioned, like *Fat!So?* (Wann, 1998), where Wann dedicates sections to her personal trainer and includes advice about living “a long and healthy life” (p. 61). She also compares fatness to being left-handed, as if to draw a parallel between something else

‘normal’ that is discouraged from continuing (Wann, 1998). While it is true that handedness is something that was stigmatized, the idea that fatness and handedness can be easily swapped for one another in oppressive discussions is misleading. For one, handedness varies regardless of body size. Second, handedness and insistence on people learning to be right-handed is reflective of the very ableist structures that still requires disabled folks, fat folks, and all overlapping othered embodiments to conform. While this might be Wann’s underlying point, her overall notes are that we should treat both being left-handed and being fat as ‘normal’, and that ‘normalcy’ is proof of legitimacy. Yet it is the endeavour to “prove” normality that continues to trouble progressive politics, including fat liberation. In her critique of Wann, Murray (2008) argues that if ridding ourselves of ‘fat shame’ was as simple as changing our minds, “none of us would feel bad about ourselves: pathologization would be totally ineffective, and practices of normalisation would not exist, nor could they” (p. 108). An insistence on ‘normality’ requires detaching oneself from the body and from its everyday encounters. Moreover, as Murray (2008) argues, “in thinking of one’s self [sic] as being a separate entity that can be *comfortably housed* in a body, while attempting to erase shame, nevertheless reinforces a logic of disconnectedness between the self and the body, despite the inevitable corporeality of our subjectivity” (p. 109, emphasis in original). At the same time, anti-fatness sees no women, no subject, only fat that must be lost. The fat person is not a person, but an abstract gluttonous behemoth who is unable to control themselves and their urges. The only way to become a person is not just to remove one’s mind from the body, but to remove as much of the “fleshy materiality” of the body as possible. Some people will never fit into ‘normal’, no matter how closely they follow the rules and performances of normativity. I return to Kyrölä and Harjunen (2017) who argue:

While it is important to consider corporeality and selfhood as malleable and open to change in order to mobilise oppressive normativities around gendered bodies and

selves [...] more attention should also be paid to the persistence of corporeality and a feeling of a relatively stable self, and the potential for empowerment in not engaging with or idealising continuous transformation and becoming (p. 99).

The pressure for constant transformation also demands a separation of the ‘self’ and the body, edging closer to Berlant’s (2007) perspective that to be a fat woman does not mean being only a ‘fat woman’. Kyrölä and Harjunen (2017) continue, “the splitting of bodies and selves appears to give reassurance (to oneself and others) that one’s body can never fully capture or even begin to reflect the inner world of the person” (p. 108-9). If one’s body can never fully capture oneself, the idea that one can simply change their attitude about their fatness, and therefore change their life, takes root. If the self can so easily be separated from the flesh, there is always a thin person to be excavated, or, as Le’a Kent (2001) writes, “the self is never fat. To put it bluntly there is no such thing as a fat *person*. The before-and-after scenario both consigns the fat body to an eternal past and makes it bear the full horror of embodiment, situating it as that which must be cast aside for the self to truly come into being” (p. 135). Indeed, as I have hinted throughout this chapter, theoretically there is never a fat self.

This is further addressed by Lucas Crawford (2017) through what he calls “the slender-normative subject” (p. 457). In “Slender Trouble”, Crawford (2017) argues that “the literal denial of access to the marketplace of subjectivity cannot help but confirm for the fat subject that he or she or they cannot access cultural fantasies of futurity” (p. 465). If there is never a fat subject, only a fat body with a disparate self, how can there be a fat present or a fat future? If there is no fat subject, there are no fat encounters to produce and shape fat feelings and fat affects. Yet, as the life writing I analyze in this dissertation shows, there are particularly fat encounters with objects and others that shape fat life. To further elucidate these ideas, I turn to affect theory,

specifically the work of José Muñoz (2020), Sara Ahmed (2006; 2010), Hil Malatino (2022), and Sianne Ngai (2005), among others.

Affect Theory

In *The Sense of Brown* (2020), José Esteban Muñoz presents ‘brownness’ as a sort of affect through the idea of the *brown commons*. He writes, “the brown commons is not about the production of an individual but instead about a movement, a flow, and an impulse to move beyond the singular subjectivity and the individualized subjectivities. It is about the swerve of matter, organic and otherwise, about the moment of contact, and the encounter and all that it can generate” (Muñoz, 2020, p. 2). My approach to this dissertation, and the analysis of the fat texts it focusses on, concerns what happens in moments of contact between objects—which can also include values and subjects (Ahmed, 2010)—as they are written by Gay (2017), West (2016), and Irby (2013; 2017; 2020; 2023). I do not wish to reproduce Muñoz’s (2020) framework through fatness, (i.e. a ‘sense of fat’) or sanitize the ways in which a ‘sense of brown’ can very much already be fat (Muñoz himself does touch on ideas of ‘health’ and the Latino/a), but I find his work beneficial for the understanding of affect presented throughout this thesis. Indeed, Muñoz (2020) speaks of “objects, human and otherwise, that are browned by the world” (p. 130), and fat(ness) could be considered one such object. (He also stresses the plurality of a brown commons, meaning brown and fat are not mutually exclusive).⁹ Furthermore, Muñoz (2020) argues for moving beyond an understanding of “ethnicity as fixed (something people are) and instead understanding it as performative (what people do)” (p. 12). This argument is similarly

⁹ An entire project could be written on the idea of fatness as being ‘browned’, particularly when Muñoz is read alongside Sabrina Strings’s work on the origins of anti-fatness in chattel slavery. When white colonizers saw that their bodies were like ‘Africans’ but their skin was not, fat became ‘browned’—not just because of race and ethnicity, but because it was then connected to gluttony, disease, mental disorders, and expressions of being that colonizers found unappealing (i.e., different affects than what they considered ‘normal’).

made in some of the fat studies texts previously discussed, which argue that fat is mutable (which it may be) and that it is not something one *is*. I will return to this idea of performance when I discuss ‘coming out’ as fat later in this chapter. What Muñoz (2020) offers is a recognition of the ways that ‘brownness’ “is not strictly the shared experience of harm between people and things; it is also the potential for the refusal and resistance to that often-systemic harm”, it is “a kind of uncanny persistence in the face of distressed conditions of possibility” (p. 4). I hope to demonstrate the ways that my chosen fat texts offer a similar contribution to affect and to fat feminist studies broadly, and how they yield important knowledge for alternative approaches to fat subjectivity as it is currently constructed. The fat texts in this dissertation not only all share experiences of being harmed by anti-fatness but approaches to discussing and expressing those harms that are needed in a *fattened* feminist studies. Through messy, ugly, angry, and humorous affects, each author draws attention to the ways that fat is made to be outside of what Muñoz (2020) refers to as the affective normality of white supremacy.¹⁰ He writes that “as a concept, as a method even, [brownness] offers us a sense of the world” (Muñoz, 2020, p. 149), and I believe that fatness offers us a similar sense.

This *sense* not only permeates my analysis—as well as the works themselves—but is present in the approach to “affect as method” (Åhäll, 2018). Linda Åhäll (2018) argues that “a feminist analysis is, per definition, already both political and affective. This is because how we feel (consciously or unconsciously) about the world already tells us about how the world works: for feminists, affect, simply, generates feminist questions” (p. 38). Certainly, as outlined in the introduction, I am interested in asking feminist questions about how affect is presented in fat memoir and what life writing can teach us about embodiment. I approach affect in a way that

¹⁰ This idea can also be understood through Ahmed’s work (2004; 2010; 2015), which addresses the affect(s) of nationalism and the racism therein.

does not privilege the idea of an ‘affective turn’ in the social sciences, as affect has always been present in feminist theory and work, though perhaps some of that work has not been championed by the feminist and social sciences of the academy *as affect* until recent years (Garcia-Rojas, 2017). As Åhäll (2018) writes, “any ‘turn to affect’ that privileges affect over emotion as its object for analysis implies that there is something ‘new’ going on [...] the problem is that by prioritizing affect over emotion, a feminized ‘personal’ epistemology is rejected” (p. 39). Many of us are drawn to feminist work because we have a ‘sense’ of something being off. Even if we take, for example, feminist standpoint epistemology, there is something affective occurring, although it is not always named. Standpoint is not merely shared identity, but a shared experience of being-in-the-world and all that entails—encounters with objects and others, moments of disjuncture, a ‘sense’ that something being experienced is not reflected in the construction of knowledge. The texts I have chosen to analyze in this dissertation are not significant solely because they are written by fat *authors*, but that the work itself speaks to a *fat life* and the senses that that can entail.

Following Muñoz (2020) and Åhäll (2018), I do not understand affect and emotion to be disparate entities. I consider them to be much more fluid and the insistence that they are two separate things “follows masculinist traditions, relegating and feminizing emotion to the personal level and favoring affect as a theoretically more advanced concept” (Adams-Hutcheson & Smith, 2020, p. 80-81). To try and separate affect and emotion not only positions emotion as less theoretically rigorous or academically serious, but also champions the idea that affect is somehow “autonomous” (Massumi, 1995). This idea of autonomy requires positioning affect as something that is pre-personal and non-conscious, thus excluding the social (Hemmings, 2005). Both affect and emotion have discursive power and are politically charged; they are not distinct

from one another, but both have the power to shape objects (Ahmed, 2004; 2006; 2010). Moreover, “affect is not something pre-personal that flows between bodies in a generic sense—rather, some bodies generate different affective responses in a particular context than others” (Åhäll, 2018, p. 40). This is not to say that affect resides ‘in’ an object, but that the very shape of objects is produced by orientation, which is affective.

I take my understanding of orientation from Ahmed’s *Queer Phenomenology* (2006) as well as Malatino’s *Side Affects: On Being Trans & Feeling Bad* (2022). I want to begin with Ahmed (2006), who argues, “orientations involve different ways of registering the proximity of objects and others [...]. Orientations shape not only how we inhabit space, but how we apprehend this world of shared inhabitants, as well as ‘who’ or ‘what’ we direct our energy and attention toward” (p. 3). Ahmed (2006) uses phenomenology to build her *queer* phenomenology, which addresses the ways that people (and objects) that are ‘incorrectly’ oriented—meaning oriented away from what is ‘normative’—are *queer*. She addresses not only the idea of ‘sexual orientation’, but the ways that “orientation is about making the strange familiar through the extension of bodies into space” (Ahmed, 2006, p. 11). For Ahmed (2006), phenomenology is a resource for queer studies “as it emphasizes the importance of lived experience” (p. 2). We exist in the world, and the experience of our subjectivity is based not only in our embodiment but how our embodied beings interact with other objects and subjects, and how that encounter shapes the boundaries of selves. The affective normativity that Muñoz (2020) discusses is also present in Ahmed’s work, where she argues that certain subjects, such as the queer, are made to be ‘other’—not *intentionally* outside of affective community like the killjoy (which I will discuss later in this chapter) but imbued with negative value when they are outside of that which is already in place. While Ahmed uses examples of nationalism and migrant ‘arrival’, I am

interested in the ways that fat people are positioned as (dis)oriented. Ahmed (2010) argues that certain objects can become ‘sticky’ with affect—that is, “affect is what sticks, or what sustains or preserves the connection between ideas, values, and objects” (p. 29). Affects like disgust and shame ‘stick’ to fatness. This is not arbitrary but political; fatness falls out of space and time, out of the ‘right’ orientation of life under a normative framework. Meaning, “for a life to count as a good life, it must take on the direction promised as a social good, which means imagining one futurity in terms of reaching certain points along a life course” (Ahmed, 2010, p. 71). The normative social ‘agreement’ about time demands specific performances of bodies. Also referred to as “chrononormativity” (Freeman, 2010; Pyne, 2016), the social expectations of time demand that fatness is ‘solved’ over time. This is why so much of anti-fat rhetoric and theory argues that fatness = death; that it marks a failure, a lack of future. Fatness can only ever be temporary and never permanent. As McFarland, Slothouber, and Taylor (2018) argue “[fat] subjects can only be successful within a framework of ‘straight’ time if they are (working toward becoming) thin” (p. 136).

This question of time is something I will discuss further with regard to queer theory and failure, but it is worth mentioning here to illustrate the ways that fatness falls out of orientation and requires a Queer/ed approach to phenomenology, which “[redirects] our attention toward different objects, those that are ‘less proximate’ or even those that deviate or are deviant” (Ahmed, 2006, p. 3). Fat bodies are read as deviant, as failures of being oriented to the ‘right’ things, in the ‘right’ way—failures to be ‘good’ or develop proximity to that which promises happiness, i.e. ‘thinness’. Fat people are assumed to *be thin people in progress*—their fatness presupposes their identity because there is no way one can be fat and happy: to be fat means to be unhappy. Assimilationist approaches to fatness, which advocate for participation in the same

systems of ‘desire capital’ that lock fatness out, requires that fat people remove themselves from fat. This is not only done literally (through weight loss) but through a separation of the ‘self’ from the ‘body’. I find this separation not only presumptuous but damaging. Following phenomenologist Maurice Merleau-Ponty (2012/1945), “I have no other means of knowing the human body than by living it, that is, by taking up to myself the drama that moves through it and by merging with it” (p. 205). Consequently, a fat reading of queer/ed phenomenology must acknowledge the reality of the body as being-in-the-world, as the very vessel that constructs, and is constructed by, our orientation and subjectivity. The texts analyzed in this dissertation are archives of this living and moving through the world, offering important insights into the formation of fat subjects. As I discussed at the beginning of this chapter, I am critical of the idea of a ‘good fatty’ and approaches to fat liberation that champion a subjectivity formed away from the body. Under assimilationist fat politics, the ‘good fatty’ is attributed as being ‘positive’, an object of happiness which all fat people should strive towards, while the ‘bad fatty’ is positioned as a cause of unhappiness. Again, I do not wish to let fatphobia off the hook for the violence it generates. The BP/HAES framework, for example, is an understandable response to the hostility of anti-fatness, but it is important to sink our teeth into something more substantial. Going along to get along and attempting to ‘prove’ the value of fatness within narrow parameters overlooks the nuances of fat subjectivity and makes fat folks who refuse to conform outsiders.

I am interested in how, as Ahmed (2010) writes, “we become alienated—out of line with affective community—when we do not experience pleasure from proximity to objects that are already attributed as being good” (p. 36). The ‘good fatty’ is one such object/subject. Ahmed continues, “we could say that happiness is promised through proximity to certain objects. Objects would refer not only to physical or material things, but also to anything that we imagine

might lead us to happiness, including objects in the sense of values, practices, and styles, as well as aspirations” (2010, p. 40). Both thinness and ‘health’ are positioned as important aspirations in an anti-fat world *as well as* under the ‘oppressive liberation’ of assimilatory fat politics. The ‘good fatty’ is steeped in moral claims about ‘healthy’ habits and being ‘good’, which is reflective of Ahmed’s claims about “happy objects” (2010); objects which are “already attributed as being tasteful, *as enjoyable to those with good taste*” (Ahmed, 2010, p. 34), such as ‘healthy’ eating, fitness, and weight loss. Contemporary body politics uphold the idea that *even fat people* can be ‘good’ if they are working towards the ‘right’ objects—if they are fat *but* with good taste. Put another way, as Hemmings (2005) writes, “too eager celebration of the inherent positivity and subversiveness of affect may result in ignorance towards ways in which ‘positive’ affects can maintain dominant social orders” (p. 550-551). This celebration is not only central to movements like ‘body positivity’, but a fat assimilationist/achievement feminist approach (Farrell, 2021) wherein the beginnings of ‘liberation’ are found in simply changing one’s own mind about their body. How one feels about their body does not change the affective reality of being in a world or being oriented as an object of disgust.

The foundation of anti-fatness echoes the disturbing force that Ahmed (2006) describes: “the ground into which we sink our feet is not neutral: we fail to sink into the ground, which means that the ‘ground’ itself is disturbed, which also disturbs what gathers ‘on’ the ground” (p. 160). The foundations of anti-fatness are indeed a disturbing force. Or, as Carolyn Pedwell and Anne Whitehead explain, “the work of oppression is often carried out at an affective level” (2012, p. 115). For Ahmed, the figure that addresses this and falls “out of line” is the killjoy (2010). I am sure that many of us who find ourselves drawn to feminist politics know the feeling of being a ‘killjoy’ (Ahmed, 2010; 2017; 2023); of being made the object of ridicule when you

refuse to laugh at an offensive joke or the eyerolls from family members when you challenge their points of view, even the wince when you mention that somebody's favourite actor is a predator, as Ahmed explains, "you become a feminist killjoy when you get in the way of the happiness of others" (Ahmed, 2023, p. 1). In a way, I consider this project to be a 'killjoy' act: I am interested in getting in the way of fat politics which champions 'positivity' and 'health'. I also find that my chosen texts demonstrate a *fat* killjoy positionality. Ahmed (2010) argues that "the feminist killjoy 'spoils' the happiness of others; [they are]¹¹ a spoilsport because [they] refuse to convene, to assemble, or to meet up over happiness" (p. 65). The 'bad fatty', and indeed fat approaches to feminist studies, 'spoils' the idea that happiness can be found in 'health' and proximity to 'thinness'. The killjoy is an "affect alien" (Ahmed, 2010, p. 30), who refuses to find happiness in the objects that others do (that normativity demands). In their own ways, I believe that my chosen authors contribute to this alien-ness by troubling and contradicting the facets of fatness that fat assimilationism paints over with 'positivity'. Gay, West, and Irby all demonstrate the ambiguous and complex subjectivities associated with fat-being-in-the-world.

Our fat-being-in-the-world is full of dynamic, affective encounters, as "the fat body is not just an indifferent vehicle for the self, but a sensual surface with different potentials for different bodies" (Kent, 2001, p. 144). Understood this way, I take affect to be a visceral reaction to different material, discursive, and textual realities (Pedwell & Whitehead, 2015; Åhäll, 2018; Hemmings, 2012). Moreover, Ben Anderson (2009) presents the concept of "affective atmospheres" as a bridge between affect and emotion, a recognition of the ambiguous nature of

¹¹ I went back and forth on whether I wanted to change Ahmed's use of "she" to "they". On the one hand, it brings me joy when feminist theorists refuse the default "he" that is so common in theory. On the other hand, I struggle with the ways that in my experience in the academy, there is an interpretation that feminism = woman. While I appreciate that 'she' is central to feminist theory, I endeavour to connect queerness with the feminist project as that is how I live it and how I know it. This is not to discredit the role that women play, but to acknowledge the role that gender-non-conforming feminists have also played in feminist theory and what they have taught me about feminism and myself. Selfishly, as I relate to the 'killjoy', I wanted to be able to type it/read it without feeling out of place.

affect and the role of subjectivity in both generating, naming, producing affective reactions and atmospheres. At the same time, he argues that affective atmospheres are not static or rigidly defined, but ambiguous and occur “beyond, around, and alongside the formation of subjectivity” (Anderson, 2009, p. 77). One could argue that each life writing text that I examine offers its own affective atmosphere, and this is certainly something I discuss in the final section of Chapter Five. Caleb Luna (2022) further addresses the idea of affective atmosphere in relation to current approaches to combatting anti-fatness. They write, “under an affective atmosphere of fatphobia operating in tandem with the affective atmospheres of white supremacy and heterosexism, an orientation towards thinness is an attempt at an approximation towards reciprocity, towards companionship, towards survival through and with one another” (Luna, 2022, p. 26). In other words, it is understandable to want to decrease or minimize the harm one faces by moving as close as possible to ‘thinness’; to be oriented the ‘right’ way to the right objects. I believe that my chosen texts help us to embrace the ambiguous and complex nature of fat being and fat subjectivities that are not formed around participation in the systems which harm us. Instead, the work of Gay, Irby, and West allow fat feminist approaches to embrace that which is complex, ugly, and out of line with prevailing affective community (Ahmed, 2010). This is aided by using queer theory, as I will discuss below.

Queer Theory

Queer is not only a reference to gender and sexuality, but a recognition of being at odds with the world around you. Queer is mobilized theoretically as “a mode of political and critical inquiry which seeks to expose taken-for-granted assumptions, trouble neat categories, and unfix the supposedly fixed alignment of bodies, gender, desire, and identities” (Wykes, 2014, p. 4). This is important to a fat studies approach as fatness similarly troubles ideas of gender normativity and

sexuality, as well as the significance of what Luna, a “fat queer of color critical theorist, writer, and performer” (2022, p. 63), calls “an anti-racist queer politic” which:

assumes anti-racism as innate to queer political identity; [and understands that] queerness is not about sex practices or gender identity, but a political/intentional choice to actively perform against oppressive norms of race, class, gender, settlement, and empire; assumes an understanding of fatphobia as part of the project of white supremacy in an effort to abjectify [sic] specifically Black and [I]ndigenous bodies; thinks of fat and thin embodiments as markers of proximities to norms and power; and unlearns cleverly hidden racialized norms and understandings of bodies and desire (Luna, 2023).

Consequently, fat studies helps to reveal “the embodied process by which any/all gender is assumed” (White, 2021, p. 85), because fatness challenges heteronormative gender expectations. A fat queer approach, then, attends to the ways that fat liberation cannot be achieved only through appeals to participation in normative structures; through assimilation which inherently cannot be queer(ed). Below I will discuss the theme of ‘coming out’ that runs through queer discourse and fat studies, as well as the possibilities for what happens when we embrace negativity. Specifically, I look at the work of Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick (1993), Vikki Chalklin (2016), Allison Taylor (2021), and Francis Ray White (2016), among others. I also trouble the work of Lee Edelman (2004) around negativity and anti-social queer theory.

A common element of queer narrative and experience is the notion of ‘coming out’, a process that demonstrates how heteronormative assumptions are incorrect. ‘Coming out’ only exists because there is an ‘in’ to begin with, i.e. patriarchy’s system of governance that positions being heterosexual and cisgender as the norm, where anything outside of that must be announced. To ‘come out’ as fat might seem additionally unusual. After all, fat is visible, so how can one ‘come out’ when there is no closet to begin with? Sedgwick and Moon (1990) refer to this as “the closet of size” (p. 26). For Sedgwick (1990), there is “such a process as *coming out*

as a fat woman” (p. 27, emphasis in original). She argues that this process “is a way of staking one’s claim to insist on, and participate actively in, a renegotiation of *the representational contract* between one’s body and one’s world” (Sedgwick & Moon, 1990, p. 27, emphasis in original). Sedgwick’s argument is that when one ‘comes out’ as fat, they are not only able to participate in this renegotiation but are seen in new ways. This idea has been taken up in the fat liberation movement. However, as Murray (2005) argues, ‘coming out as fat’ now means to come out as *proud*. She writes, “in declaring oneself to be ‘fat’, to ‘out’ oneself as a fat girl, one assumes an *unambiguous identity*. One is ‘fat and proud’ with no grey areas, no contradictions, no questions, no ambivalence” (Murray, 2005, p. 160). Contemporarily, this is strengthened through the reliance on a fat assimilationism/achievement feminism and the BP/HAES framework, where not only can fat people ‘come out’ of the “closet of size”—*fat and proud!*—they can walk into the welcoming arms of the ‘good fatty’ and declare “I’m fat and healthy”.

Harrison (2021) further troubles the idea of the closet. They argue that since diet culture stems from ideas of food and morality that were central to eugenics projects, the contemporary “diet culture industrial complex is a prison—the same prison that keeps people caged in the proverbial ‘closet’” (Harrison, 2021, p. 42). This closet is not only where queerness is kept but where fatness is hidden. Importantly, though, the closet is not one-size-fits-all for fatness *or* queerness. Harrison (2021) argues, “just as the closet is a room that many feminine gay men and butch lesbian women can rarely take rest in for safety, it is also a room that many fat people cannot fit in” (p. 43). While some people are able to take ‘refuge’ in the closet, others are already too visible to ever close the door. Or if they do, the closet is made of glass: “[it] doesn’t offer safety to people who exist too far outside of the borders of the identities it’s projected to keep safe” (Harrison, 2021, p. 43). Some more than others can make use of the closet, which means

some more than others can ‘come out’. I am of two minds about the closet. On the one hand, I do believe that it is possible for us to ‘come out’ and that there is potential power in that act. As Harrop and Kattari (2022) argue, this idea of “coming out, and coming into, social identities” (p. 209) has power because it allows some people to find community, to “grow critical consciousness” (p. 213), and to embrace “positive social identities” (p. 214). I can appreciate this, particularly as a white queer/trans fat person who is already more readily accepted than my Black and brown peers. On the other hand, ‘coming out’ as fat/queer does not mean that on your way out of the closet you automatically shed the layers of being-in-the-world that normativity demands. To suddenly embrace a ‘positive social identity’ does not inherently undermine anti-fatness. Or, as Murray (2005) writes, “the question is: how effective is the simple reversal from a negative body to a celebrated one? It would seem to me that the system of judgement that positions the fat body as a negative body *remains intact*” (p. 161-2). Therefore, ‘coming out’ of the closet does not automatically break down the walls that required its composition in the first place, nor does it inherently grant you access to knowledge outside of your experience. It is important for queer theory to continue to trouble ideas about who gets to ‘know’ about queerness, as well as complex privileges of being queerly negative.

The idea of queer negativity is often attributed to an ‘anti-social turn’ and Lee Edelman (2004), whose work *No Future* posits that ‘the queer’ challenges the “reproductive futurism” (p. 2) of heteronormativity. For Edelman, ‘the queer’ is not fighting for the child “where the child signifies life, value, and the future” (White, 2013, p. 23). I appreciate the idea that *queer* threatens heteronormative structures, but struggle with Edelman’s overall approach. Importantly, the choice to challenge heteronormativity’s ‘reproductive futurism’ is something that is primary obtainable by privileged white queers and overlooks the ways that Indigenous peoples have not

only had their own children taken away, but have been prevented from having children (Arvin, Tuck, & Morrill, 2013). What is useful for a fat studies approach is Edelman's desire for queers to accept and even embrace "the ascription of negativity" (2004, p. 4). The argument that queer = no future is reflective of the view of fatness = death. Fat has no future because to be fat is to be close to 'unhealthy' and to die early, or so the 'obesity epidemic' story goes. Yet at the same time, Crawford (2017) writes, "fat people are mandated to live in the future exclusively, all while being denied access to any cultural fantasies of such a future" (p. 448). Fat people are meant to constantly look to the future—striving for weight-loss, for proximity to 'thinness', to unwrap the thin person inside and *only then* can they start living, only then can they really exist (as non-fat). A fat queer approach asks what we can do with negativity without building it around 'no future'. Instead, a fat queer approach can "insist on disturbing, on queering, social organizations" (Edelman, 2004, p. 17) while embracing the messes and contradictions of our being and the role of fatness in our subjectivity and identity.

Following Allison Taylor (2021), anti-social queer theory "offers queer Fat Studies a theoretical framework for re/valuing a variety of fat embodiments without re/producing the dominant structures of power that work to keep fat bodies in subordinated positions" (p. 281). An anti-social queer approach to fat divests from the politics of inclusion and embraces the unruly, the negative, and fat failure (Taylor, 2021), or what Vikki Chalklin (2016) calls "obstinance". In "Obstinate Fatties: Fat Activism, Queer Negativity, and the Celebration of 'Obesity'" (2016), Chalklin analyzes several examples of fat activist performance—*12 Good Fatty Archetypes*, *The Fattylympics*, and *Hamburger Queen*—all of which embrace displays of gluttony, mess, misery, anger, irreverence, as well as joy. Chalklin (2016) determines that "a queerer, messier, more unruly fat activism can work to confront normative assumptions and

value systems that tend to be subsumed within the positive, redemptive models for fat subjectivity” (p. 110). I believe that this is also necessary for feminist approaches to fatness: a fattening of feminism which embraces the ambiguous, anxious, angry, and sometimes ambivalent experience of fat embodiments and affects. There is space for “irreverence, queer sincerity and the potential for negative affects” (Chalklin, 2016, p. 110) in the pieces of fat life writing that I analyze in this dissertation. By not presenting journeys of fat-past to thin-future, or easy engagement with fat assimilationism, the works by Gay, West, and Irby demonstrate that we need to move beyond the idea that participation in oppressive systems will save us. This is something for which feminism is already keenly aware, yet when it comes to fatness, this seems to fall away. Again, I attribute this to deeply entrenched ideas about ‘health’ and a leveraging of choice discourse to justify participation in ‘thinness’ (i.e., “My body my choice...I choose to work-out for my health”, “I choose to lose weight because *I* want to”, etc.). This approach (positivity, ‘health’, the ‘choice’ to lose weight as a feminist act) can be further understood through Harjunen’s (2023) views on fatness and neoliberalism. They argue that the embrace of neoliberal approaches “has made possible the rather odd blend of feminist subjects that have adopted the neoliberal body discourse and practices as signs of empowerment and subjectivity” (p. 34). The ‘positivity’ approach not only demands a separation of the body from the self—you are not your fat—but demands that fatness cannot fail. Fat must be ‘healthy’ in order to be permissible, and even then, it can never be what you ‘are’. In Chalklin’s (2016) poignant words:

[T]hrough the lens of queer theory, we can identify the ways in which some of these ‘positive’ models for fat subjecthood can in fact work to reinforce modes of exclusion and de-legitimation of certain kinds of fat subjects, potentially inviting even more virulent fatphobia towards those who are unwilling or unable to be redeemed as ‘good fatties’ (p. 122).

Indeed, this locates my passionate distrust toward achievement/assimilationist approaches like BP/HAES, as their reformist nature only serves to further stigmatize the ‘wrong’ kind of fat bodies under the guise of ‘liberation’.

Lastly, Halberstam’s conception of queer failure opens possibilities to “live life otherwise” and move beyond the norms that guide behaviour (2011, p. 3). By *failing* heteronormative systems, queerness and fatness guide us to creative new alternatives, such as a future where fat bodies are seen as refusing to shrink, and where fatness as failure signifies endless possibilities. I want to embrace the negativity that can be felt in fat life and turn away from the pressures to be positive—challenging the view that acknowledging the negative, ‘ugly’ feelings means one cannot be happy—and consequently, the pressures to participate in the ‘good fatty’ paradigm, where fat subjectivity is constructed through a separation of who you are from what your body is. Disability justice resists this separation through the use of the term ‘bodymind’, something I mobilize in this dissertation. The connections and overlaps between disability studies and fat studies are legion, and below I turn to some crucial voices such as Charlotte Cooper (1997), Anna Mollow (2015; 2017), Zoë Meleo-Erwin (2012; 2016), and Rosemarie Garland-Thomson (2011; 2022), among others.

Disability Studies

A prominent voice in fat studies, UK-based scholar and activist Charlotte Cooper has been interrogating fatness in culture for decades. In 1997, Cooper asked: “Can a fat woman call herself disabled?”. This remains a prominent question in the overlap between disability studies and fat studies. Cooper’s paper reflecting on fatness and disability was borne from being urged to explore her research in fat politics through the social model of disability as a theoretical framework (1997, p. 31). Reflecting on the ‘social model’ of disability three (now four) decades

after its introduction, Mike Oliver (2013) writes, “[the social model] argued that we were not disabled by our impairments but by the disabling barriers we faced in society” (p. 1024). This model, in Oliver’s estimation, has since taken on “a life of its own” and was never intended to be an “all-encompassing framework” (2013, p. 1024). The ‘social model’ approach to fatness-as-disability continues to elucidate the convergences between fat studies and disability studies. Like much fat studies scholarship, “the social model approach also suggests that the ‘fix’ is in the social realm rather than via people’s bodies” (Herndon, 2021, p. 89). The social model “focuses on barriers created by cultural attitudes and the built environment” (Mollow, 2017, p. 112), which certainly helps locate fatness as disability (Mollow, 2015) as it allows for an analysis of the ways that the material world is not built to accommodate fatness. Ultimately, Cooper (1997) determined that “defining [herself] as disabled, is, for [her], a political naming” (p. 39). Although this is not without complications, or what she calls “the gnawing sensation” that she does not belong to the group ‘disabled’ despite being disabled “by many aspects of the culture in which [she] lives” (Cooper, 1997, p. 40). Part of the gnawing sensation that continues within fat studies is the fear that to call fatness a disability reproduces the negative ideas about fatness that already exist. In other words, “resistance remains to considering fatness a disability [...] with worries ranging from the mutability of fatness to frivolous claims and the fear that fat people will be further stigmatized by claims to disability” (Herndon, 2021, p. 88). While there are differences between disability studies and fat studies (and disability and fatness) it is important to embrace their convergences. Once again, the question of ‘choice’ rears its head. Anna Mollow (2017) addresses the assumptions behind fatness-as-choice versus disability-as-involuntary in “Unvictimizable: Toward a Fat Black Disability Studies”. She writes, “central justification for stigmatizing fat people rests on two unexamined assumptions: that fatness is a choice, and that it

typically leads to disability. Because fatness and disability are inseparably linked in the cultural imagination, it is impossible to adequately theorize anti-fat oppression without simultaneously attending to ableism” (Mollow, 2017, p. 106). Therefore, when talking about disability within this project, I am referring not only to literal disabilities (which Samantha Irby writes about) but also mobilizing a theoretical approach which attends to the way that fat is socially constructed as disabled/disabling (which Roxane Gay and Lindy West discuss), including how this approach challenges the primary subject position that fat assimilationist/achievement approaches champion. Mollow’s (2017) conceptualization makes it impossible to address anti-fatness without also addressing ableism, yet both persist in their respective disciplines. Similarly, reflecting on her experience in fat spaces, Cooper (1997) explains: “In size acceptance communities I sense a palpable fear of disability, and a determination to separate and constrain disabled people as ‘other’” (p. 34). Meanwhile, writing from a disability studies perspective, Mollow (2015) argues “fatness [...] scares us more than disability. But this not quite right, because in the fatphobic cultural imaginary, fatness is inseparable from disability” (p. 199). Despite this, there remains some discord between fatness and disability. Part of this discord is the role of ‘healthism’ in contemporary body politics, as well as the insistence on fatness as ‘normal’.

Though it has regained popularity in the wake of BP/HAES trends, ‘healthism’ is not a new concept. Robert Crawford (1980) first defined healthism as “the preoccupation with personal health as a primary—often *the* primary focus—for the definition and achievement of well-being; a goal which is to be attained primarily through the medication of lifestyles, with or without therapeutic help” (p. 380). This preoccupation is prominent in fat assimilationist politics, not to mention the overarching oppressive forces of neoliberal racial capitalism. The pressure of

individualism within our neoliberal culture places the responsibility on the individual to police and regulate their body and their ‘health’. Regarding ‘progressive’ body politics, Wilson (2023) puts ‘healthism’ into context: “HAES continues the ideology of Healthism, simply including more size diversity and weight inclusivity under the umbrella of Health” (p. 179).¹² She describes this focus as ‘health respectability’, purposefully echoing the language of respectability politics (Wilson, 2023). ‘Health’ or at least the performance of it, is powerful currency in ‘desire capital’, and the question of ‘health’ looms large in fat studies and fat activism. Fat activism which seeks to show that fatness is a natural part of human variation, that fatness can be ‘healthy’, often runs the risk of reproducing a narrative that other non-normative embodiments, such as disability, are *unnatural* and ‘unhealthy’.

I understand where the insistence on ‘health’ comes from; when fatness has been denigrated and vilified not just for its perceived ‘unhealth’ but, through an epidemic discourse that blames health-care collapse on fat bodies, the instinct to insist that fatness can be ‘healthy’ is a logical route to take. Problems arise, however, when fat liberation points to markers of ‘health’ that are not obtainable by all people, fat or otherwise. If you cannot be ‘healthy’ you better perform ‘health’ as much as possible; you have to be the *good* kind of fat. As I touched on in the affect theory portion of this chapter, the move to be oriented toward ‘good’ habits is a central component of the fat assimilationist camp. Unpacking the ‘good fatty’, Gibson (2022) explains that “the good fatty is a person that society is willing to humanize differently to bad fatties as they are making strides to change the fat of their ‘poor health’ by participating in their moral duties” (p. 27). This urge to paint fatness as ‘healthy’ is dependent upon a definition of ‘health’ which is disability-free (Harrison, 2021; Herndon, 2021), and the collision of neoliberalism in fat

¹² Health and Healthism are capitalized in Wilson’s text, so I have chosen to leave them as is in her quotation.

liberation demands the performance of “a certain kind of fatness that has been constructed as politically useful: the good fatty who is healthy, able-bodied, and ‘just like thin people’” (Gibson, 2022, p. 94). It is essential for fat liberation and fat studies to acknowledge the inextricable links between fatness and disability, while also being wary of advocating for liberation that requires the maintenance of oppressive structures. Even in recent work geared towards eradicating fatphobia, ableist language looms. Kate Manne’s (2024) *Unshrinking: How to Face Fatphobia* includes a chapter titled “The Straitjacket of Fatphobia”, a curious reference to institutionalization. While the metaphor is clear—that fatphobia is a trap—the mobilization of this specific disability imagery is questionable because the colloquial use of “straitjacket” depends upon sanism to be legible, meaning it is reliant upon cultural images of ‘insanity’ to be easily understood as a metaphor.¹³ There must be a way to discuss fatness and disability that does not result in metaphors or euphemisms like Manne’s straitjacket or Wann’s handedness, which I discussed earlier. For this, I turn to Rosemarie Garland-Thomson.

Garland-Thomson (2002) advocates for a ‘feminist disability studies’, which takes seriously disability not just as a category that occasionally intersects with feminist concerns, but as a concept that, like gender, “pervades all aspects of culture: its structuring institutions, social identities, cultural practices, political positions, historical communities, and the shared human experience of embodiment” (p. 4). Both fat studies and disability studies challenge the ontology of white supremacist patriarchy, whose logics rests on the idea that normativities (of race, gender, class, embodiment) are normal and natural. The similarities between ableist discourse and anti-fat discourse are many: fatness and disability both disrupt normative accounts of life;

¹³ Examples include *One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest* (1975), *Silence of The Lambs* (1991), *In the Mouth of Madness* (1995), *The Green Mile* (1999), and more recently, an episode of *Community* (2011) and *The Dark Knight Rises* (2012).

both are accused of ‘costing’ health care; fat people and disabled people are encouraged to have ‘normalizing surgeries’; both generate anxiety (and other affects) in the public sphere because they demonstrate that the body is not static (i.e. anybody can become ‘disabled’ and/or ‘fat’), to name a few (Meleo-Erwin, 2012). Cooper (1997) argues that fatness is viewed with scorn, while disability is viewed with pity, which may be true (and is linked to ideas of ‘choice’), but both embodiments are positioned as ‘out of line’ with what is ‘normal’. Accordingly, disability studies critiques the social model for many of the reasons that I and others invested in fat studies critique the assimilationist/BP/HAES model. Both require a body/mind split, are based on the position of a ‘healthy fat’ or ‘healthy disabled’ (Meleo-Erwin, 2012), ignore the material aspects of impairment or anti-fatness, and involve contact with a *misfit* (Garland-Thomson, 2011). In advocating for a relationship between disability studies and fat studies, Mollow (2015) urges us to theorize fat alongside the critiques of the social model in disability studies. Her position on incorporating disability into fat studies is similar to mine on the need for fat studies to be incorporated into feminist theory. She argues, “understanding how disability operates as an identity category and cultural concept will enhance how we understand what it is to be human, our relationships with one another, and the experience of embodiment” (Mollow, 2015, p. 5). This dissertation is invested in an understanding of fat as an identity category and cultural concept, and what that means for subjectivity, embodiment, and affect, among other areas of feminist concern.

Both fat and disability can be understood through what Garland-Thomson (2011) calls “misfitting” (p. 591), which “offers an account of the dynamic encounter between flesh and

world” (p. 592). The *misfit*¹⁴ is that which does not fit in the material world not because of an inherent flaw in the subject, but because of the “discrepancy between body and world, between that which is expected and that which is” (Garland-Thomson, 2011, p. 593). Invested in locating discrimination in the material, Garland-Thomson (2011) argues, “a *misfit* occurs when the world fails flesh in the environment one encounters” (p. 600), such as the *misfit* between fat and the airplane seat or the wheelchair and the doorway. Importantly, however, *misfitting* is deliberate, it can be an act of refusing to assimilate to a world which is not interested in fitting you. Moreover, *misfitting* helps us do the work that Zoë Meleo-Erwin (2012) calls ‘disputing normal’. It is essential that for “those of us who take part in fat politics [to] be careful about how we produce the idea of a ‘normal’ subjectivity” (Meleo-Erwin, 2012, p. 389). If a fat assimilationist/achievement feminism approach seeks to show that fat is ‘healthy’ because it is ‘normal’, the measure of that normality is ‘fitting’, or what Garland-Thomson calls “material anonymity”. The subject of (neo)liberal fat politics aims to fit not just materially (in the chair, in the clothes, in the world) but discursively and affectively: being ‘good’ and positive, championing the ‘right’ ideologies, i.e. ‘health’. This is dangerous for a fat/disabled alliance.

Furthermore, as Garland-Thomson (2011) writes, “when we experience misfitting and recognize the disjuncture for its political potential, we expose the relational component and the fragility of fitting. Any of us can fit here today and *misfit* there tomorrow” (p. 597). By ignoring (or perhaps not even seeing) the ways that disability is possible for any of us, a fat assimilationist focus on ‘health’ reinforces ideas that the *misfit* can be ‘fixed’ through changing oneself to fit the world as it currently is. Yet Garland-Thomson (2011) argues, “the concepts of *misfitting* and

¹⁴ As already shown in this dissertation, Garland-Thomson (2011) stylizes *misfit* with italics to emphasize the moment of not-fitting, whereas her purposeful *misfitting* or *misfit* is all in the same case, emphasizing the deliberate nature of that *misfit* vs. the inaccurate *misfit*.

fitting guarantee that we recognize that bodies are always situated in and dependent upon environments through which they materialize as fitting or *misfitting*” (p. 598, emphasis mine). The fat positive approach assumes a fat present to thin(ner) future where one is never disabled; much as there is no ‘fat self’ there is no ‘disabled self’.

Meleo-Erwin (2012) argues for queering fatness and disability through “purposeful alliance” (p. 393). Instead of asking if fatness belongs under the umbrella of disability, such an alliance would provide “a stronger critique of neoliberal healthism and may allow for fat and disability activists and scholars to make strategic alliances while simultaneously preserving the unique needs and focuses of each individual movement” (Meleo-Erin, 2014, p. 99). It is necessary for such an alliance, and indeed a fattened approach to feminist studies, that fat embodiment not only be ‘positive’ but negative, chronically ill, tired, disabled, etc.; a *misfit* which “challenges mainstream norms of gender, health, and embodiment” (Taylor, 2021, p. 280). Part of this embrace of more nuanced embodiments involves an acceptance of different epistemic locations, especially the subjugated knowledges that emerge from fat embodiments. Below, I engage with approaches to epistemology and intersectionality, theoretical projects which are inherently intertwined. The work of Sirma Bilge (2013), Patricia Hill Collins (2019), Linda Martín Alcoff (2007), and Charles Mills (2007) are mobilized, as well as Samantha R. R. Zerafa’s (2022) work on the history of fat studies, and Cat Pausé’s (2020) writing on fat epistemology, among others.

Intersectionality & Epistemology

Since this project is concerned with affect and embodiment within fat life writing, it is necessarily underpinned by epistemology and theories of knowledge generation. How I approach fatness in this dissertation attends to the ways that anti-fatness is part of the system of oppression

which concerns feminism (i.e., patriarchy, white supremacy, and capitalism) and feminist epistemology accounts for our relational positions—our historical, social, and political context—making it inextricably linked to an intersectional analysis. Sirma Bilge (2013) demonstrates the ways that intersectionality has become entangled with the neoliberal obsession with individuality, something I see reflected in feminist approaches to fatness. The idea of “achievement feminism” (Farrell, 2021, p. 50) and the role it plays in fat liberation spheres is compatible with what Bilge (2013) calls “disciplinary feminism”, feminism which is “more concerned with the institutional success of the knowledge it produces than institutional and social change through counter-hegemonic knowledge production” (p. 409). Disciplinary feminism and fat assimilationism collide in feminist approaches to fatness, ironically reproducing a body/mind split that feminist theorists critiqued in the first place (Farrell, 2021).

Although fat remains “one of the major untouched areas of body meanings by achievement feminists” (Farrell, 2021, p. 50), achievement feminism has infiltrated fat spheres which “seek to gain power and upward mobility explicitly within the systems already in place” (Farrell, 2021, p. 50). The ‘will to innocence’ so central to the “subject of fat politics” (Murray, 2008) is predicated on neoliberal ideas of responsabilization and seeks participation in ‘desire capital’. Similarly, the knowledge of fat in feminist theory and feminist approaches to fatness are more concerned with unpacking beauty standards as harmful than tending to their own epistemic shortcomings. As Wilson (2023) puts it, “having simple, narrow conversations keeps people comfortable, secure even, in being able to talk about bodies in ways that are limited to dieting and not about anti-Blackness, the legacy of enslavement in [North America], and colonialism across the globe” (p. 43). Therefore, a feminist approach to fat must attend to the ways that fat

subjectivities are shaped by/in the same structures of white supremacy, racial capitalism, and patriarchy under which the standpoint of women is constructed.

In her now deactivated blog, the late fat liberation icon and scholar Cat Pausé wrote about her hopes for an epistemology of fatness. As cited by Cooper (2016), Pausé argues “that fat epistemology is granted to obesity experts who are far removed from fat embodiment, whilst fat people’s knowledge-sharing about their own bodies and lives is ignored or ridiculed” (p. 32). Indeed, this absence of fat embodiment contributes to the lack of fat epistemology. Another factor is the history told about fat studies. As Samantha R. R. Zerafa (2022) argues, this history “set[s] the foundation upon which its epistemological viewpoint and corresponding practices rest and shift over time” (p. 424). A feminist approach to fat whose origins tend toward white women’s struggles with body image is always going to fall short when it comes to the embodied experience of fatness, the ways in which anti-fatness is a fundamentally racist project, and the validity of fat subjectivity that does not separate the body from the mind.

The instinct to merely take an ‘intersectional’ approach to any subject (fatness included) is a good one, but an intersectional approach cannot merely be additive, it has to acknowledge how these facets of identity are mutually constituted. As Pausé (2020) writes, embodied accounts, be they autoethnography or otherwise, are “a way to keep ontological hope alive, even in the face of hatred and oppression” (p. 176). While fat people have been “removed from knowledge production around fatness” (Pausé, 2020, p. 177), there is power in “contradicting normative discourses of fatness with their personal stories” (Pausé, 2020, p. 181). Discursive power can be seen in feminist epistemology, where personal experience is a source of knowledge constituted through discourse (Maynes, Pierce, & Laslett, 2008). If “epistemology shapes discourse” (Collins, 2019, p. 123) then it is perhaps unsurprising that the discourse(s) of fat

within feminist approaches are so lacking in the “fleshy materiality” (Orsini, p. 321) of fatness that there is no acceptance of a fat epistemology. A fattening of feminist studies will help shape a future where there is a fat self in theory from which to draw knowledge regarding feminist epistemic questions.

To determine where a fat epistemology can emerge, it is important to look at what feminist epistemology is and does. Patricia Hill Collins (2019) writes, “I see criticism that aims to strengthen feminism itself as healthy and necessary for feminist theory to flourish (p. 101). My critiques of feminist approaches to fatness stem from this aim; from a desire to enrich feminist theory and demonstrate the ways that fat epistemology is intertwined with many of feminism’s objects of study. Here I turn to epistemologies of resistance that have engaged with and critiqued other epistemic approaches. Philosopher Charles W. Mills is not a feminist epistemologist per se, but he presents social epistemology that begins from the understanding that “sexism, racism, patriarchy and white supremacy, have not been the *exception* but the *norm*” (2007, p. 17, emphasis in original). Social epistemology, for Mills (2007), contrasts with traditional epistemology, which he argues is reliant upon a Cartesian approach (that reliable body/mind duality) that champions individual cognition. Instead, Mills (2007) argues, social epistemology is not concerned with the individual knower but how knowledge is produced/disseminated socially both within shared social groups and broader society. Importantly, social epistemology focuses not just on changing individual minds but on broader social structures and how we can reject hegemonic norms *as well as* undermine them.

The connections between social epistemology and the kind of fat politics that I am advocating for are clear; it is not just about changing an individual mind—becoming ‘positive’ about fatness or feeling differently about one’s body—but working to undermine the “broader

cognitive sphere” (Mills, 2007, p. 23) of anti-fatness. Social epistemology, with its emphasis on testimony, the speaking/sharing of knowledge, and listening to one another’s experiences helps to illuminate a fat epistemology that is not focused on changing the mind as though it is separate from the body. Following Kyrölä and Harjunen (2017), “much of [anti-fatness] is only enabled through bypassing and devaluing of experiential knowledge [...] and through a lack of understanding for how embodied subjects do not just internalize or reject cultural discourses but live, feel, and process them in complex ways” (p. 105). The pieces of life writing analyzed in this dissertation contribute important knowledge to the complex ways of living and feeling. They are not just discursive ‘texts’, but relational histories of fat being-in-the-world and the *misfits*, senses, and encounters that fat life entails: “the individual and collective experience of misfitting can produce subjugated knowledges [...] from which one could launch a liberatory identity politics” (Garland-Thomson, 2011, p. 601). Such knowledges need to be better incorporated into feminist approaches to fatness, otherwise, there is a risk of a continued epistemic ignorance of fat subjectivities.

Linda Martín Alcoff (2007) employs the somewhat ironically titled “epistemologies of ignorance” to address conscious (wilful) and unconscious (socially acceptable, normative, structural) ignorance. Although Alcoff’s (2007) focus tends specifically towards racial ignorance, it is possible to also address epistemic ignorance towards fatness that exists even within feminist studies. As I have stressed throughout this chapter, the origins of racism are the origins of anti-fatness, and they cannot be separated from one another. Importantly, Alcoff argues that “the project of critical theory” is to “bring to consciousness the link between the social production of knowledge and the social production of society” (2007, p. 54). Much of the knowledge about fat emerges from, and reproduces social ideas of, anti-fatness. Even in critical

theory—such as feminist theory—fatness is positioned as something to be avoided. This highlights that ignorance within/among dominant groups may not be inherent to their identity but rather part of their epistemic practice (Alcoff, 2007). Feminist approaches to fat may not be *willfully ignorant* but instead unconsciously—or perhaps semi-consciously—ignorant, since feminist theory attends to the ways that women’s bodies are policed and subject to the patriarchal constraints of beauty norms, and yet remains somewhat ignorant towards the more nuanced and uncomfortable experiences of fat embodiment.

Moreover, there are epistemic practices that refuse to embrace these ugly, messy parts of fat-being-in-the world, or what José Medina (2013) describes as “epistemic laziness”. Medina’s choice of terminology is somewhat ironic, as ‘laziness’ is deployed against fat/disabled subjects, yet an approach to social theory that understands identity as a singular, static subjectivity, can be prone to a sort of analytical ‘laziness’. This can be said of fat studies approaches that do not account for the anti-Black and colonial origins of anti-fatness and instead focus on a fat subject that can simply change their mind about their embodiment.¹⁵ Medina (2013) continues by describing both ‘arrogance’ and ‘laziness’ as two “epistemic vices” (Medina, 2013, p. 31), “deep and serious flaws in the epistemic character that limit the subject’s learning capacities and contributions to the pursuit of knowledge, and therefore they also damage the social knowledge available and harm the chances for epistemic improvement” (Medina, 2013, p. 31). Those who occupy more privileged positions *are* sometimes willfully ignorant of the structures that sustain their privilege, leading them to be both incurious and ‘epistemically lazy’ (Medina, 2013). This

¹⁵ It is important, however, not to perpetuate the inherent anti-fatness and ableism in concepts like ‘epistemic laziness,’ which mislabels an analytical failure to employ intersectionality and complex subjectivities in epistemic practices as something pejoratively associated with fat and disabled subjects.

is reflective of the privilege within contemporary discussions of body image, diet culture, and the popularity of HAES practices:

The idea that diet culture in and of itself is oppressive and traumatic invites those with relative privilege to take the opportunity to speak as authorities of body liberation because we're all subject to societal pressures to engage in intentional weight loss. The rallying cry to dismantle diet culture is a simple solution to a collective pursuit to wither our bodies when there are far greater and consequential systems at play [...] When white women's experiences are centered in stories about food and bodies, we see second-wave feminism's continued influence. Everybody's body liberation becomes tied to those with much of the privilege and societal capital (Wilson, 2023, p. 42-43).

Wilson's argument touches on the ways that the episteme of fat assimilationism and achievement feminism is occupied with the same privileged positions that underpinned early body-image-as-a-feminist-issue texts like *The Beauty Myth* (Wolf, 1990), *Unbearable Weight* (Bordo, 1993), and even parts of *Fat?So!* (Wann, 1998) and LeBesco's *Revolting Bodies* (2003). Like the stories of fat studies that fail to address nuances of race, class, and disability, there seems to be a disinterest in other modes of embodiment on the part of those who fit into normative structures. Some of the unwillingness to address these other epistemic locations is a discomfort with affective and emotional experiences that are so different from 'positivity' (or a shared bemoaning about the pressure to become a size 6 when one is a size 8). This can also be understood through what Taylor Rogers (2021) calls "affective numbness" (p. 727), which "refers to the phenomenon whereby one fails to emotionally or 'affectively' engage with nondominant experiences" (p. 727), as well as an investment in dominant (i.e. hegemonic) experiences. It is important to incorporate other affective realities into our epistemic toolboxes, making sure we move beyond the single-subjectivity approach to fat liberation that requires that one emerge victorious (and non-disabled and 'healthy'). The fat texts that I analyze in this thesis

can serve as epistemologically valuable places from which to theorize more complicated, and often ugly, affects.

Often the starting point for feminist epistemology is feminist standpoint theory. Yet complicating standpoint theory is important for challenging epistemic numbness and narrow epistemic practices, particularly as it relates to identity. Gaining popularity in the 1970s and 1980s, feminist standpoint theory was introduced as concerning “relations between the production of knowledge and practices of power” (Harding, 2004, p. 1). Feminist standpoint theory challenged ideas of ‘objectivity’ in the production of scientific knowledge, as it attended to the claim that “knowledge is always socially situated” (Harding, 2004, p.7). Championed by socialist-Marxist feminists Dorothy E. Smith (1987) and Nancy Hartsock (1998; 2004), standpoint theory seeks to challenge the (re)productions of knowledge that are mediated through, and controlled by, oppressive structures. This early manifestation of standpoint theory was predicated on the social position of ‘woman’ as it is constructed and managed under patriarchy. Of course, the identity of ‘woman’ in feminist theory was most often white, middle-class, and cisgender, despite the fact that Black feminists (notably Black lesbian feminists) have been doing important feminist work from the social location of womanhood that is also constructed by race, class, and sexuality. The idea of identity can be troubled in important ways within feminist epistemology. While standpoint theory was meant to uphold marginalized experiences and the “tacit knowledge” (Smith, 1997, p. 395) generated from those relational positions, there are still epistemic shortcomings in feminist theory.

In *Intersectionality as Critical Social Theory*, Patricia Hill Collins (2019) addresses standpoint epistemology, identity politics, and the tensions therein. She writes that standpoint is about claiming one’s own experience but also knowing that it is not a search for ‘capital-T truth’,

rather, a dimension of knowledge production which acknowledges the “significance of power relations in producing knowledge” (Collins, 2019, p. 140). Those who reject standpoint reject the foundations of identity politics as the basis of political thought. Collins quotes the response to intersectional approaches that Black feminists received: “Your self-serving identity politics limit your ability to see beyond your own standpoint. Your testimonial authority that is grounded in experience lacks objectivity. How can you support the greater good of equality and fairness using these strategies? Therefore, because you do not play by our epistemic rules, why should we believe you?” (2019, p. 142). Epistemology is not just about answers but about questions, about who asks and what those questions are. The flippant responses Collins describes happen with fat studies, too. Fat is understood here as an interloper in feminist theory, an additive under a misuse of intersectionality, which is itself *not* merely additive (Pausé & Taylor, 2021; Zerafa, 2022; Simic, 2015). My suspicion is that discourses of ‘health’ make it so that people view fatness as a choice, and therefore not politically salient outside of obesogenic takes (such as those by feminist theorists like Berlant and Probyn). Likewise, I suspect that by focusing on body image as a feminist issue, and not on the history of anti-fatness, feminist approaches to fat are able to skirt any attention to the ways that body image standards themselves are racially constructed (Springs, 2019). Therefore, fat remains something that can be added or removed to/from feminist analysis without addressing the larger social structures that uphold anti-fatness.

I refer to ‘fat’ in this dissertation as both a state of being and a political identity, following the re-claiming of terms like ‘queer’ or ‘crip’ (Orsini, 2021). When taken alongside the descriptions and understandings of fatness proposed by fat activists, ‘fat’ as an identifier is crucial within each piece of life writing I analyze since each author uses fatness as an adjective to describe themselves. However, like ‘woman’, it is not ‘fatness’ alone that generates an

episteme. As Alcoff (2007) argues, “our general situatedness” (p. 42) or shared social location is not enough to consider any specific situation epistemically ignorant or privileged. It depends on the epistemic question at hand; the knowledge being pursued. To answer fat questions—to *ask* fat questions—we need fat knowers. I am often left wondering where the epistemic position of fatness finds itself in relation to feminist inquiry.

Approaching standpoint from the lens of disability studies, Garland-Thomson (2005) advocates for a ‘sitpoint’ method. ‘Sitpoint’ specifies standpoint in the context of disability “by calling attention to the normative assumption that one perceives the world from a standing rather than sitting position” (Garland-Thomson, 2005, p. 1570). This is a small but important shift, as it (re)names the very location from which knowledge emerges, pushing feminist epistemology in a direction that can embrace a ‘sitpoint’ that is not only disabled, but possibly fat, queer, trans, and ‘unhealthy’. Furthermore, as Garland-Thomson (2005) argues: “The stories we collectively know shape the material world, inform human relations, and mold our sense of who we are” (p. 1567). I want us—feminists, academics, fatties, queers—to know a fat(ened) sense. I want us to *get fat*.

Methodology

This dissertation uses Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) to look at how fat affect and embodiment are expressed in pieces of life writings by three popular authors: Roxane Gay, Lindy West, and Samantha Irby. CDA addresses “social wrongs in their discursive aspects and possible ways of mitigating them” (Fairclough, 2010, p. 11) while recognizing that analysis is not confined only to text or discourse. It is a hermeneutic-interpretational process rather than an analytic-deductive one. Additionally, CDA compliments the epistemological nature of this project, as CDA demonstrates that “discourses are diverse representations of social life which are inherently positioned” (Fairclough, 2001, p. 123), which supports feminist epistemology that

takes seriously the ways that “knowledge is always produced from a specific social location and aimed toward a specific audience or audiences” (Maynes, Pierce, & Laslett, 2008, p. 98). This helps to ground life writing as a suitable location for analysis as it involves representations of social life that can be interpreted in different ways. Life writing refers not only to memoirs and autobiographies, but to “a range of writing about lives or parts of lives, or which provide[s] materials out of which lives or parts of lives are composed” (Hayes, 2022, ix). This dissertation is concerned with the knowledges of fat generated by fat subjects for a fat feminist audience. The analysis of personal narrative has a history in social sciences and has “served to introduce marginalized voices” while also “providing counter-narratives that dispute misleading generalizations” (Maynes, Pierce, & Laslett, 2008, p. 1). Below I discuss the theoretical framework grounding CDA in this project, the reasons for text selection, life writing as meaningful spaces for theory and knowledge production, as well as my own positionality.

Earlier in this chapter I discussed Linda Åhäll’s work, “Affect as Methodology: Feminism and the Politics of Emotions” (2018). Åhäll argues that feminist knowledge on affect offers “a way to identify ‘the political’ in the affective-discursive because affect generates questions about how the world works” (2018, p. 38), as well as “a space for thinking, acting, and knowing differently” (2018, p. 38). Given CDA’s insistence on theoretical grounding (as CDA does not have its own pre-determined analytical rules or set way of collecting data) this view of feminist research emphasizes the roots of feminist analysis as “already both political and affective” (Åhäll, 2018, p. 38). Moreover, Åhäll (2010) argues that affect sparks feminist curiosity and how a lack of curiosity can uphold power structures, which I find compelling in the context of this project. There is, indeed, a curiosity about the ‘why’ of fat or ‘what happened’ but not about fat people *as* people, as *subjects* in theory. Life writing, already having a long history

with affect theory in feminist theorizing, is an epistemologically consistent source to turn to. I argue that life writing can do valuable affective work in communicating certain feelings in their various states. Memoirs are, as David Shields (2010) demonstrates, artful forms of embodied knowledge that have important implications for feminist theory and knowledge practice. This dissertation analyses life writing that includes both memoirs and essay collections. Roxane Gay's *Hunger* (2017) is a more straight-forward memoir while Samantha Irby's work is comprised of essays (some of which are more intimately personal than others), and Lindy West's *Shrill* (2016) is somewhere in-between, a sort of memoir via personal essay that, like Irby, tangles with popular culture but follows a more linear structure. The decision for this selection of authors includes: the relevance of fatness to lived experience (a part of their shared epistemological standpoint that cannot be ignored); stylistic choices; the overlaps between authors outside of the texts; and cultural commentary.

First, as Lowe (2009) advocates, we can read life writing “for the ellipses, interruptions, contradictory shifts in voice or tempo” (p. 102). This project endeavours to do just that, as my chosen texts all offer sites of contradiction and interruption both in their writing styles and the interventions they can offer fat feminist studies. Second, Gay, West, and Irby also overlap personally and professionally. Irby wrote for Gay at *The Rumpus*. Irby and West worked together on *Shrill* the television series and are close friends. Gay and West have done interviews together and were part of the same *This American Life* series on fatness. Not unlike the small circle of people who comprise fat studies (Evans & Friedman, 2022), Gay, West, and Irby are part of the circle of fat, feminist cultural critics. Moreover, as Friedman (2025) writes on Gay and West—Irby is often absent from academic discussions which is part of my interest in including her here—their books are “excellent reads that speak back to the usual story of fat” (p. 98). They are

expressions of fat life that encounters objects and others in a myriad of affective, embodied ways. Finally, the pieces of life writing analyzed in this dissertation constitute “culturally informed memoir and commentary” (Lee and McAvan, 2021, p. 191). Each text blends personal experiences with reflections on cultural artifacts such as movies, TV shows, cultural trends, and the like. This is important to capture because CDA is concerned with “the dialectical relationship between semiosis and other elements of social practices” (Fairclough, 2001, p. 123). The analysis of each author is not confined to their own experiences but their encounters in the world and all the social practices and norms that this entails. Their social locations are significant for the knowledge they produce and the context from which their work emerges.

Memoirs and life writing are specifically crafted and chosen disclosures; they are portions of space and time, reflecting what the author wants to share. As Shields (2010) posits in *Reality Hunger*:

What the memoirist owes the reader is the ability to persuade [them] that the narrator is trying, as honestly as possible, to get to the bottom of the experience at hand. A memoir is a tale taken from life—that is, from actual, not imagined, occurrences—related by a first-person narrator who is undeniably the writer. Beyond these bare requirements, it has the same responsibility as the novel or the short story: to shape a piece of experience so that it moves from a tale of private interest to one with meaning for the disinterested reader (p. 39-40).

The texts analyzed in this dissertation are just that: experiences shaped so that they generate meaning for the reader. Kyrölä (2014) writes that “I am not ethically accountable to myself like I would be to other interviewees or respondents” (p. 25), and this is troubled slightly within my project as I am ethically accountable to the text. I am ethically accountable to what is written in the text, not in viewing each piece of life writing as a ‘capital-T truth’, but insofar as I am not purposefully misrepresenting what each author has written. The authors themselves are required only to stay true to themselves and their understandings of events; they are personal accounts

which may not gel with every reader, but for which I am interested in analyzing through my chosen theoretical framework.

I also heed Ann Cvetkovich's (2012) warning that "to dismiss or champion memoir in some monolithic way seems misguided given its multiple possibility and especially its ability to stage interventions within particular public discourses" (p. 74). Indeed, far from unmediated raw data, memoirs are part of what Andrea Long Chu (2017) describes as "overwhelmingly underwhelming ordinariness" (p. 142). Reviewing Juliet Jacques's (2015) book *Trans: A Memoir*, Chu argues that Jacques writes "a phenomenology of real-life experience" (p. 142). In her own words, Jacques (2017) describes works like hers as part of the resistance to "sensationalistic mass media coverage" around trans, but also as pushing away from "the idea that memoir was for cisgender outsiders whilst theory was for trans people" (p. 367). By mobilizing theory, personal experience, and even fictional components, Jacques made what is sensationalized incredibly *ordinary*. This work is similarly done by the authors I have chosen to examine. In their own ways, Roxane Gay, Lindy West, and Samantha Irby combat the sensationalism around fatness and the 'obesity epidemic' with the profoundly normal and usual experiences of fat life. Importantly, however, like Chu (2017) writes of Jacques, they each succeed in being "brisk, cutting, unpretentious, sometimes graphically vulnerable" (p. 142). It is their commitment to uncomfortable truths, contradictions, and the messy encounters of fat life that makes them so meaningful for the future of fat studies.

There is also something compelling about fatness, memoir, and citizenship. Rinaldi, Rice, LaMarre, McPhail, and Harrison (2017) demonstrate that under a neoliberal framework, fatness fails citizenship, insofar as it excludes certain people from participation in political assemblage. This is not dissimilar from the ways that fat knowledges are kept out of participation with theory

production. At the same time, Julie Rak (2013) argues that memoir can be understood as ‘citizenship technology’. Rak’s presentation of ‘citizenship technology’ echoes Lisa Lowe’s “Autobiography out of Empire” (2017) where she argues that much of the value assigned to life writing lies in ideas of emancipation narratives. This legacy of citizenship construction carries on, and if fatness fails citizenship, then what of fat memoirs? Perhaps the space of life writing is one where fat citizenship can be constructed, as the text grants the author room to do so, meaning even within a publisher’s page constraints, there is more space for fatness on the page than in material encounters. This is an important point, and as Tressie McMillan-Cottom (2019) has shown, the personal essay can be limiting. Why is the personal the only way that those most directly harmed by white supremacist patriarchy can participate? Why do they have to tell stories of overcoming (something which is also mobilized in ableist narratives) in order to be seen as legitimate knowers? Yet it is also true that life writing has a legacy of resistance, wherein those who have been continually othered by the white supremacist patriarchal project are able to participate in the debates that impact their very existence. Many of the authors to whom feminist studies owes a great deal—Lorde, Anzaldúa, the Combahee River Collective, hooks, to name a few—“[were] not intertwining theory with experience so much as alchemizing experience into new theories, those necessary to understand and represent their own experience” (Samuels, 2023, p. 205).

This is also a significant part of what differentiates an epistemological standpoint versus the immediate acceptance of any experience as knowledge. In an interview with Lindy West, Roxane Gay remarks that “people focus on the personal, and they completely ignore the professional. Like...that it’s a book. That you used craft to write the book, that it’s not a therapy session, or a diary entry” (West, 2017, para 5). In response to a question West asks Gay about

people not taking her work seriously, Gay mentions a review that said she “came to fame as a diarist”, which, as she laments, “is just not true”. She continues, “but even if it were true, there’s this smug sense that it’s just: ‘Oh I’m sitting in my bed and I opened up my heart-locket diary and I’m just jotting down some thoughts!’ and it’s just all emotion and that none of it is intellectual” (West, 2017, para 11). None of the texts analyzed in this dissertation are purely raw, unmediated thoughts without intellectual foundation. I understand the experiences shared in these works as part of the “process by which, for all social beings, subjectivity is constructed” (de Lauretis, 1984, page). Life writing is packaged, bought, and sold like any other book genre. I am interested in what is included precisely because they are artistic ruminations on lives lived. Moreover, as I have already discussed here, personal narrative is part of our origin story as feminists and certainly in fat studies where first-person accounts remain one of the most accessible ways for fat activists and academics to engage in both scholarly and creative work (Friedman, 2025).

On A Personal Note: Positionality

CDA requires that the researchers be explicit about their own positionality and their political and theoretical commitments. In “The Epistemic Status of Cultural Identity: On *Beloved* and the Postcolonial Condition”, Satya P. Mohanty (1993) argues:

Our identities are ways of making sense of our experiences [...] Identities are theoretical constructions that enable us to read the world in specific ways. It is in this sense that they are valuable, and suggests why we need to take their epistemic status very seriously. For it is in them, and through them, that we learn to define and shape our values and our commitments (p. 55).

This view is essential to understanding the content this dissertation analyses as epistemologically significant, as well as the very genesis of this project. My social location and identities not only grant me specific epistemic privileges—meaning I possess an understanding of fat life that a

non-fat researcher does not—but allows me to ask specific questions such as those that guide this research. It is also these identities and experiences that need to be appropriately mediated throughout my analysis. The “strategic ‘I’” is “a resource for grounding [my] analysis at the intersection of cultural and the personal” (Kyrölä, 2024, p. 5). Where ‘I’ am mentioned, it is only to add to my argument and not to rely on my point of view.

Following Christina Sharpe (2018), “[...] whether one admits it or not, one is oriented to one’s work from the location of the body” (p. 173-4). I come to this project as a fat person, though I have not been fat my whole life. There is a gender component here, too. I am fat, I am tall, and I am transgender, non-binary, and queer. I am fat and I will stay fat. When I say that I am queer, I refer not only to my sexuality as well as my gender, but to my political commitments. I come to this work as somebody who is invested in the destruction of the white supremacist machine, which includes borders, prisons, policing, gender norms, and racial capitalism. Fat liberation must be an abolitionist project (Harrison, 2021). I am also cautious of the ways that non-fat scholars engage with fat studies as well as the prevalence of white voices in fat studies—including my own—even when they are fat. I come to this project as a white person, a settler born and raised in ‘Canada’. Regardless of any feelings I might have about the way that I am incorrectly perceived regarding my gender, I understand that my whiteness is part of this perception and affords me a great deal of safety. I want to be mindful of the power and privilege that I yield, but I know that I am not always successful.

Being that this project also addresses disability, I would be remiss if I did not discuss the role that disability plays in my life. I do not have any physical disabilities, and I have never been physically impaired—although I do experience migraines which can impair my ability to work, though I am unsure where this fits. My partner deals with chronic pain from Ehlers-Danlos

syndrome and has auditory disabilities. During the process of this Ph.D., I was diagnosed with several (long suspected, already medicated) disorders: Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) – Level 1, Generalized Anxiety Disorder, Obsessive Compulsive Disorder (OCD), and Complex Developmental Trauma (or Complex PTSD). I understand that ASD is a prominent part of disability studies, and yet I continue to find it difficult to say that I am ‘disabled’. Not because I feel that it is a bad word, but because I feel guilty taking up space. It is also true, however, that my OCD impacts me every day, that I carry deep trauma, and sometimes I am unable to participate in daily life in the ways I would like. I have done my best to show up to this project as myself while maintaining the reflexivity that a feminist approach demands. I do not claim an authoritative position because of my lived experiences, but I do bring them with me. This matters because I am writing about fat life not as an outsider but as somebody who can grab it by the handful.

Chapter 2

Disorientation(s), Time, and Misfitting in Roxane Gay's *Hunger*

If I puked up some sonnets, would you call me a miracle?

- Neko Case, "Night Still Comes"

I took the years like a pill so

I'm supposed to be cured

Lost weight and smiled for the camera

What a happy girl

- Jensen McRae, "Happy Girl"

A fork shines on the cover of *Hunger* (2017). At first glance you might think it's a book of recipes, a diet guide, or maybe a self-help book. Instead, it's a memoir by professor, writer, and cultural critic Roxane Gay. This fork says more than four prongs usually do: it's a utensil for eating; it's a tool for nourishment; it could be a weapon if you needed it to be. It can be the unbearable weight of the implement in your hand when all you want is to resist. *Hunger's* fork also casts a shadow. In many ways, the text can be read as what happens in the shadow of a traumatic event, and at the same time, Gay's body as the shadow of coping; of picking up the fork. In the simplest terms: a fork is on the cover of a fat memoir. That image will not please everybody. In "Queering Body Size and Shape", Robyn Longhurst (2014) argues that "sharing stories of fatness [and weight loss] can open up emotional and affectual territory that sometimes prompts empathy and a shared understanding, but other times not" (p. 18). It can be difficult to share this territory in what Hil Malatino (2022) calls "mixed company" (p. 94). For instance, sharing your complicated trans feelings and "side affects" (Malatino, 2022) with cisgender people; your "ugly feelings" (Ngai, 2005) about fatness with thin people; your disabled laments with the non-disabled, and the like. Roxane Gay's *Hunger* (2017) opens important "emotional and affectual territory" around the *sometimes-ugly* feelings of being fat. I am interested in what can be elucidated from Gay's work regarding an *affective* "misfitting" (Garland-Thomson, 2011)

in fat politics, what map(s) it provides for finding our way toward the ‘ugly’ and toward ‘insecurity’ (Harrison, 2021; Mingus, 2011), and what it might mean to embrace our own fat timing. This chapter will focus on the ways that *Hunger* reflects “side affects” (Malatino, 2022) and “ugly feelings” (Ngai, 2005) and what that means for the meeting point of affect and embodiment, an intersection that is undertheorized in fat feminist studies. I am particularly interested in rage and envy, moments of disorientation, and the *misfits* of fat life, as well as challenging chrononormativity and the expressions of hunger as both literal and affective.

An accomplished academic and writer, Gay is a famous feminist and a famous *fat*. Addressing *Hunger* (2017) in their contribution to *Thickening Fat* (Friedman, Rice, & Rinaldi Eds., 2020), Heather Brown and April Herndon argue that Fat Studies can learn from Gay’s work, “yet her narrative and her understanding of her own life risk being rejected because they reflect the messiness of human existence rather than an approved political positionality” (Brown & Herndon, 2020, p. 141). The ‘approved political positionality’ of fat liberation has, as Murray (2008) argues, become one subject invested in the very structures of ‘desire/ability’ (Harrison, 2021) that sustain anti-fatness. The interest in becoming ‘desire/able’ has resulted in a dichotomy of ‘good fats’ and ‘bad fats’, something which has taken root alongside the flourishing of ‘healthism’ and movements like ‘body positivity’ (BP) and Health at Every Size (HAES). Stacy Bias tackles the ‘good/bad fats’ in her comic “Good Fatty Examined” (2014; 2016). She argues that the good fatty “is a fatty who is trying or at least **believes** [sic] they should be trying to **no longer** be a fatty” (p. 1, emphasis in original). This is fundamentally linked to the neoliberal ideology of individual responsibility, including “a mandate for self-sacrifice and for caring for our bodies in a way that maintains their production and reproductive potential” (Bias, 2016, p. 2). What Bias (2016) gestures towards is the investment in “chrononormativity” (Freeman, 2010;

Tidgwell, et al., 2018) and the timeline of fat to thin, which by extension, is coded as unhappy to happy, leaving very little room for more complex, ambiguous embodiments and accounts of fat life.

One such account can be found in Gay's *Hunger* (2017). I begin this chapter with a discussion of the disorienting encounters in fat life that Gay details, including the material 'misfits' (Garland-Thomson, 2011) between fat and objects. Next, I discuss affective *misfits* such as rage and envy, both of which are addressed within *Hunger* in ways that contradict the origins of anger or jealousy expected from fat subjects, meaning they stem from continued moments of material *misfit* and not a longing to be thin. From there, I turn to insecurity, temporality, and the affective dimensions of hunger. Gay's memoir does not follow a linear path to some great 'cure', instead it is a complicated rumination on almost mundane encounters of fat life. Through her use of sparse prose, back and forth timelines, and other (dis)embodied encounters, Gay (2017) employs a "fat time" (Tidgwell, et al., 2018) which challenges the path to happiness promised by weight loss. In her own words: "This is not a story of triumph, but this is a story that demands to be told and deserves to be heard" (Gay, 2017, p. 5). I am interested in what *Hunger* has to offer the messy middle, the ugly, uncomfortable parts of being fat in the world and what that means for challenging the 'good fatty', running away from 'desire/ability' (Harrison, 2021) and ultimately thickening discussions of embodiment and affective encounters in fat feminist studies.

Disorienting Encounters

Moving through the world can be disorienting, particularly when your embodiment is positioned as a problem. Orientations shape affects and affects shape orientations, pushing and pulling us toward and away from certain people, places, and things. Kathleen Stewart (2007) includes "disorientation" in *Ordinary Affects*, writing, "the ordinary can happen before the mind can

think. Little experiences of shock, recognition, confusion, and déjà vu pepper the most ordinary practices and moves” (p. 63). *Hunger* certainly chronicles the ordinary disorienting encounters in fat life, so common as to always feel like déjà vu, time after time and time before time. Malatino (2022) argues that disorientation(s) is/are part of trans life—the inevitability of being misgendered and thrown from the moment at hand—and I am interested in reading fat texts, such as Gay’s, through the theoretical frameworks of disorientation in material encounters. By ‘fat texts’ I mean texts that are fat front and centre (such as those by Gay, West, and Irby). They are important contributions to a fat epistemology that draws from varied expressions of fat life, including academic work, activism, and popular culture. In this section, I explore some of the moments of disorientation that Gay demonstrates in *Hunger* (2017).

These moments are also read through Rosemarie Garland-Thomson’s framework of “misfitting” (2011), which addresses the material encounter that I argue results in disorientation. In contrast to ‘fit’ a “misfit [...] indicates a jarring juxtaposition, an ‘inaccurate fit’; (hence) unsuitability, disparity, inconsistency” (Garland-Thomson, 2011, p. 593). The *misfit* is a material encounter between what is expected and what *is* (Garland-Thomson, 2011). Both Ahmed (2006) and Malatino (2022) posit disorientation as part of the queer experience and as something that disrupts normative structures of the world. Rosemarie Garland-Thomson’s “misfitting” (2011) offers a “grammatical flexibility” to this disruption by “describing both the person who does not fit and the act of not fitting” (p. 595). *Misfitting* certainly involves disorientation(s), and both are described as having embodied reactions. Moments of disorientation involve, as Malatino (2022) writes, “dizziness”, “nausea”, and “the wooziness of being repeatedly unmoored and tossed” (p. 55). This same language is used by Gay (2017), who describes *herself* as “unmoored” (p. 48; 94); unmoored from the world, unmoored from herself, unmoored from her family, and under

anti-fatness, unmoored from being human. Gay's experience of fatness is not just a *misfit* but demonstrates the connections between disorientations and *misfits*, where the world is oriented so far away from you, as she writes: "I see how physical spaces punish me for my unruly body" (Gay, 2017, p. 202). Gay uses 'unruly', 'unmoored', and 'undisciplined' on several occasions (2017, p. 26; 94; 119; 128; 139; 143; 145; 165; 215), speaking to the way that she and her body are disoriented from the world around her. There is something visceral here, conjuring the language of dizziness, nausea, and other bodily affects that result from disorientation. Disorientations "can be a bodily feeling of losing one's place, and an effect of the loss of a place: it can be a violent feeling, and a feeling that is affected by violence, or shaped by violence directed toward the body" (Ahmed, 2004, p. 160). This violence has a layered meaning within *Hunger* (2017). As a girl, Gay experienced a violence that, for her, continues to border on unspeakable.¹⁶ Her body, her accretion, was—and is—her attempt to cope with this violence. In a sense, her fatness could be read as her attempt at *reorientation*. The hand reached out and found nobody, but it found food. As Gay writes: "Food offered comfort when I needed to be comforted and did not know how to ask for what I needed from those who loved me. Food tasted good and made me feel better. Food was the one thing within my reach" (2017, p. 53). Food was, and is, a tool to find solid ground when you have been thrown from the moment at hand. The rhetorics of anti-fatness and the 'obesity epidemic' position fatness as the result of gluttonous, indulgent eating; eating that lacks willpower. But by addressing the presence of food in her fatness, Gay not only refuses to hide the fact that she eats—something fat people should *never* do in public—

¹⁶ "They did things I've never been able to talk about, and will never be able to talk about. I don't know how. I don't want to find those words. I have a history of violence, but the public record of it will always be incomplete" (Gay, 2017, p. 44).

but presents a complicated relationship between eating and emotions. Although food was a stabilizing force, the affects of disorientation stick to each bite.

In *Hunger* (2017), Gay exposes the ordinariness, the every-day-ness, of disorientation(s) in fat life, including the common example of the chair. She writes, “[a]nytime I enter a room where I might be expected to sit, I am overcome by anxiety. What kind of chairs will I find? Will they have arms? Will they be sturdy?” (Gay, 2017, p. 202). Here, Gay demonstrates how “disorientation is an ordinary feeling [...] a feeling that comes and goes as we move around during the day” (Ahmed, 2006, p. 157). Ahmed writes repeatedly about the table and its orientation; but perhaps for fat people it is not only a table, but a chair. And that chair never fits. Not only is there a *misfit* between flesh and chair, but there is also the disorientation of trying to find solid ground in a space which does not want to hold you. Fat studies scholar Samantha Murray (2008) similarly reflects on the fear of the chair that Gay expresses, writing, “I feel myself ooze over the sides of the chair, my flesh dripping down the chair legs, pooling oleaginous on the floor before them” (p. 11). However, these everyday moments of disorientation do not end when the chair is gone. Gay writes, “[w]hen I stand, I am dizzy and nauseated and aching” (2017, p. 205), conjuring the same language of disorientation that Malatino (2022) uses: dizziness, nausea, wooziness. This dizzying encounter leaves an impression (something I will discuss later in this chapter), but what Gay is gesturing towards here is the truly disorienting impact of a *misfit*. To become reoriented might occur “if the hand that reaches out finds something to steady an action” (Ahmed, 2006, p. 157), but sometimes when the hand reaches out—to become reoriented or to find a space—nothing is waiting (Ahmed, 2006). There is nowhere to sit. But there is also, often, nowhere to move. This is what it means to be in a world that is not oriented towards (or away or beside or below) your body. Gay

writes, “[w]hen walking through a door, I eye the dimensions and unconsciously turn sideways whether I need to or not” (2017, p. 206). There could be a *misfit* before you even enter the space where the objects may not fit; the doorway is the first obstacle, never mind that once you get inside the chairs may be too small. There is a disorientation that pre-empts the possible *misfit*.

Ahmed (2006) uses the example of sitting at your desk, where the paper (or screen or book or painting) that you are engrossed in becomes your world, and when you are interrupted you become dislodged—your eyes might even struggle to adjust as you turn around to see what has dislodged you or “what ‘it’ is that makes [you] lose what is before [you]” (p. 157). What if you cannot sit at the desk to begin with? Gay remarks, “As an undergraduate, I dreaded classrooms where I would have to wedge myself into one of those seats with the desk attached. I dreaded the humiliation of sitting, or half sitting, in such a chair, my fat spilling everywhere, one or both of my legs going numb, hardly able to breathe as the desk dug into my stomach” (2017, p. 203). It is perhaps easier to determine what has dislodged you when you cannot even access the space you may sit to *be* interrupted the way Ahmed’s (2006) subject is. Gay demonstrates that to move through the world as fat means that your points of disorientation occur in the moments when others may be blissfully unaware. To be fat means to encounter affective obstacles in moments big and small, excluded from merely passing through a doorway without a second thought.

The physical encounter between flesh (fat) and world (doorway) is never a guaranteed fit when it is built with normativity in mind. Fat bodies cannot, as Gay writes, “move freely” (2017, p. 155); they do not fit every space they may want to. Fatness impacts orientation in the world, including how others respond, the affective reactions (shame, disgust, fear) and how fat people get to live. Addressing how this orientation impacts her movements, Gay notes, “I walk at the

edge of sidewalks. In buildings I hug the walls. I try to walk as quickly as I can when I feel someone behind me so I don't get in their way, as if I have less of a right to be in the world than anyone else" (2017, p. 172). This is what anti-fatness does: it says that fat does not 'fit' in this world; that you should do everything in your power to make yourself smaller; and that you should be in the world in the 'right' way or not at all. In other words, "[...] we learn that disorientation is unevenly distributed: some bodies more than others have their involvement in the world called into crisis" (Ahmed, 2006, p. 159). Part of that involves how affects "stick". Ahmed (2010) explains the "stickiness" of affect is what sustains or preserves the connection between ideas, values, and objects" (p. 29). This is certainly true of fatness, positioned through the crisis of the 'obesity epidemic', 'stuck' with affects like shame and disgust. Ahmed (2006) continues:

This shows us how the world itself is more 'involved' in some bodies than in others, as it takes such bodies as the contours of ordinary experience. It is not just that bodies are directed in specific ways, but that the world is shaped by the directions taken by some bodies more than others. It is thus possible to talk about the white world, the straight world, as a world that takes the shape of the motility of certain skins (p. 159-60).

The world is involved in Gay's fat body, from her own encounters to the responses to her book. The 'motility of certain skins' can be further understood through Garland-Thomson's (2011) idea of "material anonymity" (p. 595). Material anonymity "comes from *fitting* which produces a phenomenology that is privileged in social/political spaces" (Garland-Thomson, 2011, p. 595)—i.e. not a queer or fat or Black phenomenology. Instead, you are 'properly' oriented toward the 'right' things and the 'right' time and place. Only certain bodies can be 'materially anonymous'. The bodies that can 'fit', that move through the world without a legion of negative affects 'sticking' to them, the 'thin' body that can fit in the chair. The fat body, however, evokes fear,

“because no one wants to be infected by obesity, largely because people know how they see and treat and think about fat people and don’t want such a fate to befall them” (Gay, 2017, p. 123). Consequently, fatness becomes public record; it takes up space that others deem theirs to occupy, so they become involved in the policing of fat. There is nothing anonymous about fat life. *Hunger* is very much an archive of this lack of anonymity. While it is not a memoir solely concerned with weight, it is a memoir of the body and all that entails. Garland-Thomson (2011) argues that “our bodies are also the agents of our lived experience and subjectivity. An embodied engagement with the world is in fact life itself” (p. 600). *Hunger*, then, is a record of life itself. But it is not the story of fat life that most people want to hear. It refuses a tidy ending; it is itself a *misfit* with what people expect a memoir to be.

Moments of disorientation involve the confrontation of being a *misfit*; the remedy to disorientation that Malatino (2022) proposes is very much an echo of the purposeful nature of *misfitting* that Garland-Thomson (2011) advocates. Specifically, Malatino (2022) advocates not only engaging with our rage (as I discuss later) but also refusing to end things there. Not only do we need to make space for our anger, but we need to address the structural and material ways that affects are produced and build coalition among minoritized subjects instead of relying on self-help. Likewise, Garland-Thomson (2011) argues that *misfitting* is playful. Not just a play on words, but a deliberate orientation away from changing the subject (the fat or disabled subject) and towards changing the object (the chair, the doorway). Together, these approaches reflect the importance of addressing the material encounters in fat life and not relying on narratives of personal growth and ‘health’ to change our world. There is knowledge to be gained in these disorienting moments, “in other words, how we cultivate a tolerance for such repetitive and insistent moments of disorientation: how adept we are forced to become at world-travelling”

(Malatino, 2022, p. 55). (Irony, of course, because the vessels for literal world-travelling—airplanes—are decidedly non-fat spaces, which I discuss in a moment). What Malatino (2022) is gesturing towards is the ways that a life filled with disorienting encounters—fat life, trans life, fat trans life—is a life full of temporal shifts and travelling between realities. In other words, the ways that when we cannot find our footing we are not ‘here’ or ‘there’, even when we are physically ‘here’ or ‘there’.

The disorienting encounters in daily fat life are not limited to ordinary environments but also occur when the fat subject wants to experience other parts of the world. Most often, fat people (who cannot afford first class) must purchase two airplane seats to travel comfortably. If their bodies—that which is—transcend the boundaries of a single seat—made for that which is expected—they are forced to expand that boundary at great cost. Yet even then, their space is denied. Gay (2017) shares that her body is stared at and shamed on airplanes, and even when she purchases a second seat, her seatmate will use the space under that seat for their own luggage. An irony that while they do not want fatness near them, they treat any extra ‘fat space’ as up for grabs. Gay writes, “I get very salty about that, and the older I get, the more I tell people that they don’t get to have it both ways—complaining if any part of my body dared to touch theirs if I bought one seat, but placing their belongings in the empty space of the empty seat I bought for my comfort and sanity” (2017, p. 211). Fatness is not *allowed* to transgress the boundaries of the seat—if fat folds over and touches another person, that person recoils in disgust. So much so that, as Gay (2017) tells us, she has gone to great lengths to fold herself up against the window, causing herself physical pain: “I will spend five-hour flights tucked against the window, my arm tucked into the seat belt, as if trying to create absence where there is excessive presence” (p. 171). This is one of the biggest *misfits* in fat life. Airplanes are a tool to move through the world,

yet they are not made for *misfits*. They are part of a world in which the ‘right’ people can move from one place to another with relative ease, while the ‘wrong’ people are meant to stay where they are. You cannot leave the spaces where fatness ‘belongs’. As Gay explains: “This is the reality of living in my body: I am trapped in a cage. The frustrating thing about cages is that you’re trapped but you can see exactly what you want. You can reach out from the cage, but only so far” (2017, p. 17). It is not just that the fat hand, when disoriented, reaches out to find *nothing*. It reaches out to find that there are other hands, they just refuse to reach back: “I am terrified of other people. I am terrified of the way they are likely to look at me, stare, talk about me or say cruel things to me” (Gay, 2017, p. 173).

Throughout *Hunger*, Gay refers to the ways that her body is both highly visible (tall, Black, fat, woman) yet invisible (tall, Black, fat, woman). She can never attain the “material anonymity” (Garland-Thomson, 2011, p. 595) that can only occur through becoming ‘thin’ or closing the proximity between the fat self and ‘thinness’. Closing this proximity, for Gay, produces a type of fear. How angry making that the ‘thing’ you are told will make you happy—weight loss—instead fills you with dread. Despite this fear, Gay reveals that she must try to engage in behaviour that makes amends for her ‘unruly’ and ‘undisciplined’ body, to be a ‘good fat’. It is exhausting to try and move through this world which so profoundly hates fatness. Or, as Gay puts it, “[t]he list of bullshit I deal with, by virtue of my body, is long and boring, and I am, frankly, bored with it. This is the world we live in” (2017, p. 173). The use of “boring” and “bored” evokes some of the playfulness of *misfitting* central to Garland-Thomson’s (2011) framework and the idea that our *misfit* can free us to play with our embodiments and our affective, emotional expressions. By presenting her assessment of the world in such a blasé fashion, Gay is refusing to engage with the expected emotional and affective responses of shame

and self-loathing. Even though those feelings *are* present in *Hunger*, Gay's use of "bored" and her disinterest in her own experiences demonstrates a purposeful *affective misfit*, refusing to keep apologizing for how she moves through the world.

In their review of *Hunger*, Freda Flair (2018) argues that "the unruly body perhaps then is not the exception, but rather the condition of life in neoliberal cultures of consumption to which we are subject even as we resist" (p. 120). This reflects the ways that the "oppressive liberation" (Kotow, 2019) of contemporary body politics permeates fat texts, for better or worse. By putting herself out there as a 'bad fatty', by 'admitting' to the discomfort of these moments, Gay is refusing to adhere to what affective and emotional reactions are expected of her as a fat person both from assimilationists and fatphobes. Indeed, Gay writes:

I don't want to change who I am. I want to change how I look. On my better days, when I feel up to the fight, I want to change how this world responds to how I look because intellectually I know my body is not the real problem. On the bad days, though, I forget how to separate my personality, the heart of how I am, from my body. I forget how to shield myself to the cruelties of the world (2017, p. 149).

How many disorienting encounters can one have before they become passé? The very ordinariness of these encounters means that to recount them all would not only become boring but unearth a swell of frustration, it would break down that shield.

Misfit Rage / Envy Misfits

If one is consistently disoriented—is unable to find solid ground—then it is certainly understandable to feel anger, rage, and even envy. Indeed, as I mention in the previous section, embracing these rageful feelings is part of what Malatino (2022) argues can move us forward. In a 2016 Op-Ed for the *New York Times*, Gay writes: "I keep most of my anger to myself, swallowing it as deep as I can, understanding that someday, I won't be able to swallow it

anymore. It will erupt and then there will be fallout” (para 6). I read *Hunger* (2017) as part of that fallout; loaded with the contradictions, ambiguities, and frustrations that come with being fat in a world which is oriented so far away from you. The discussion of rage and envy in this section concerns the emotional/affective response to being fat in a world that is oriented toward ‘thinness’; the social, material elements of fat life (as I discussed above) are the result of the very shape of the world and the social structures molded by orientation toward the ‘right’ (normative) subjects and objects. Throughout *Hunger* (2017) the rage is palpable, at times brimming under the surface and in other moments clearly articulated. In an interview following the memoir’s publication, Gay says “the word ‘rage’ comes up because I think when you live in a world with a body that the world does not accommodate, you accumulate quite a lot of rage” (von Klemperer, 2017). I believe that this rage is politically useful and offers something meaty for fat feminist studies to chew on.

Important for this discussion of rage is the distinction between hatred and anger provided by Audre Lorde, who writes: “Hatred is the fury of those who do not share our goals, and its object is death and destruction. Anger is a grief of distortions between peers, and its object is change” (2007, p. 129). The anger expressed in *Hunger* reflects the grief of the distortions between those who fit and those who do not. This complements Ngai’s (2005) approach to envy, which she describes as “an affective *response* to a perceived inequality” (p. 126, emphasis in original); since we know that inequalities are not just perceived but material. This inequality, or what Lorde (2007) calls “distortion”, is an affective reality of fat embodiment in an anti-fat world. Anger and envy are not unusual bedfellows. Malatino (2022) examines envy in *Side Affects: On Being Trans and Feeling Bad*, where he writes that “envy might be a name for an awareness of what we had withheld from us, what seems to come so easily, and be so taken-for-

granted, by others” (p. 84). When we lack, not because of personal failing but because of societal structure—because of the systems of orientation that determine who is normative and who is ‘other’— we might be envious and/or we might be angry (Malatino, 2022). Under fatphobia, the rage articulated from and through envy is often used as proof that fat people want to be ‘thin’: “Look at them, those angry fat people! They are so jealous of thin bodies!” This completely disregards the very real and present ‘lack’; of what is withheld from fatness.

Anger and envy are not always comfortable and are coded as negative affects that we should avoid, yet they are very present and shape our worlds as much as any other affects. Indeed, this is the crux of Ngai’s (2005) text: that our “ugly feelings” are politically charged and materially relevant as objects which tailor our world. Those with non-normative embodiments are not meant to express these “ugly feelings”, but if we turn away from them “we turn from insight” (Lorde, 2020, p. 61). The oppressive forces of neoliberal body liberation want to remedy anti-fatness with an approach that turns anger into productivity, one that removes the very real affective experiences of oppression and replaces them with the idea that our individual choices are what determines our oppression. To be oriented towards ‘thin’ means to disregard your own anger and instead turn it into something ‘positive’, which assumes both that anger can only be negative (and therefore not insightful), and that anger and ‘positivity’ cannot co-exist.

I am not interested in ignoring the insights of fat life or rebranding them in the name of ‘positivity’. Instead, I follow Gay’s insistence on the accumulation of rage and its inevitability in fat life. *Hunger* and its mixed reception reflect why and how this rage accumulates as well as the reaction to its expression. Some fat activists, as Brown and Herndon (2020) argue, found Gay’s memoir to be an act of selling-out and upholding stereotypes that people *already have* about fat subjects. Gay herself illuminates the tension that “the fat activist does not want to appear to be a

‘traitor to the cause’, or a ‘sell-out’, and yet, these admissions reveal the irrevocable ambiguity a fat girl experiences: we embody the very discourses and bodily knowledges that are the cause for our anger” (Murray, 2005, p. 160). Gay writes:

I hate my body. I hate my weakness at being unable to control my body. I hate how I feel in my body. I hate how people see my body. I hate how people stare at my body, treat my body, comment on my body. I hate equating self-worth with the state of my body and how difficult it is to overcome this equation. I hate how hard it is to accept my human frailties. I hate that I am letting down so many women when I cannot embrace my body at any size (2017, p. 148).

She continues, “to be clear, the fat acceptance movement is important, affirming, and profoundly necessary, but I also believe that part of fat acceptance is accepting that some of us struggle with body image and haven’t reached a place of peace and unconditional self-acceptance” (Gay, 2017, p. 153). Gay exposes the messy middle, a place where ‘insecurity’ is taken seriously as a political location where we may not yet have all the answers but be called to ask questions. The expectations that fatness be ‘secure’ otherwise it is full of self-loathing and wants for its own eradication is both politically and theoretically shallow. Despite what we are sold by neoliberal feminist movements like BP/HAES, ‘positivity’ is not a guaranteed path towards progress. It is a liberal assimilationist approach that coddles the very systems of oppression while encouraging respectability and does not aim to “dismantle systems of violence that tell us we need to be closer to thinness and whiteness to be worthy” (Shackelford, 2021, p. 256). A refusal of “ugly feelings” like rage is central to the maintenance of the structures of anti-fatness and offers nothing sturdy for fat liberation to hold on to.

Malatino defines rage as “an energy that propels us toward more possible futures” (2022, p. 106). The ‘energy’ of rage throughout *Hunger* reverberates in Gay’s discussions of envy. When writing about the encounter of her body in too-small-spaces (while other people never

have to consider whether they will fit), Gay says: “I rage that they don’t have to second-guess themselves or give a moment’s notice to the space they fill” (2017, p. 172). There is anger—rage—at the moment of disorientation and *misfitting*, while that moment itself arouses an envy. Meaning, Gay’s fat body does not ‘fit’ so she must always be cautious, while ‘thin’ bodies fit and never consider that they might not. Throughout *Hunger* there are encounters between flesh and world that never fit, and at times, rupture. As I discuss earlier in this chapter, the literal instance of *misfitting* is not the end of being a *misfit*. *Misfitting* is a deliberate act (Garland-Thomson, 2011). By naming these moments for what they are, and by articulating her rage at the same time, Gay refuses to hold her emotions in the way she must hold her body to fit into the confined space of an airplane—she names the *misfit* for what it is: enraging. Whether it is an enclosed physical space or the ‘open’ space of being outdoors with friends, Gay (2017) makes clear her frustrations: “I am hyperconscious of how I take up space and I resent having to be this way, so when people around me aren’t mindful of how they take up space, I feel pure rage. I am seething with jealousy. I hate that they don’t have to consider how they take up space” (p. 172). The jealousy stemming from a perceived lack combined with the affective experience of that lack—or difference—is felt. There are discrepancies between fat life and ‘thin’ life because the feelings of the latter are taken seriously while the feelings of the former are considered the fault of the fat subject in the first place. When a fat person says that they are envious, the assumption is that they are jealous of the ‘thin’ *body*. But here we see the object is the ‘thin’ orientation, the way ‘thin’ can move through the world without the same moments of *disorientation*.

What makes *Hunger* challenging for the ‘bad fats’ who do not wish to be ‘good’ is that Gay tells her story in “mixed company” (Malatino, 2022, p. 94); there are no guarantees about who will pick it up and rifle through the pages. This is challenging because Gay ‘admits’ to

things like longing to be anorexic; so sick that she is nothing but flesh and bone: “And then I hate myself for wanting something so terrible and I rage at the world that hates me for my body and how it is so markedly visible” (2017, p. 191). It is painful to want something so horrible, to want something that hurts. Indeed, rage and envy “can be described as dysphoric or experientially negative, in the sense that they evoke pain or displeasure” (Ngai, 2005, p. 11). As Gay admits, “I am full of longing and I am full of envy and so much of my envy is terrible” (2017, p. 190). This terrible feeling demonstrates how fatness relates to space/object/subjects—the *misfit* creates an affective response: envy. This response itself is another *misfit*, wherein fat people are supposed to apologize for their fatness, not to feel anger about the ways in which the world rejects that fatness (after all, they should just work harder to not be fat). Put another way: “My rage is often silent because no one wants to hear fat-girl stories of taking up too much space and still finding nowhere to fit” (Gay, 2017, p. 191). Gay is not only gesturing towards anti-fatness but towards the ways that, as I argue, even within spaces where testimonial knowledge is considered legitimate, fat stories fall through the cracks (or are purposefully ignored) because of their corpulence.

Consequently, the fat subject is nowhere to be found, despite the richness that fat texts contribute to theory production (Brown & Herndon, 2020). Texts like Gays can be understood as “testimonial writing” that acknowledges some bodies as pathologized and abject (Brophy, 2014). As I discuss in Chapter Four, there is an unflinching approach to fat life in each author’s text, “crossing certain boundaries that [have] kept individual accounts sanitary” (Million, 2009, p. 59). Gay does not sanitize her discussions of food, her body, her pain, her envy, or her anger. The silent rage (or *silencing of rage*) that Gay describes is an understandable reaction when you constantly come up against the material world, bumping and squeezing your way through. What

Gay hints at is the way that envy's "integration into *ressentiment*" once it "enters a public domain of signification" means that "a person's envy will always seem unjustified, frustrated, and effete—regardless of whether the relation it points to is imaginary or not" (Ngai, 2005, p. 128). Once her text entered the public domain, Gay's anger and envy were open to interpretation, perceived as not as having the material world as their object (the ill-fitting chair, the uncertain doorway), but as resentful toward 'thinness' as well as her own fatness. Even on a user-based platform like Goodreads, you can see comments from other fat people about how she is 'whining'. Many lament that Gay 'complains' too much, is 'too hateful', and that she leaves the reader without a happy ending. One review compared her book to Lindy West's *Shrill* (2016), disappointed that *Hunger* was not, in their view, a 'feminist manifesto' about self-love (Holly on Goodreads, July 2017).¹⁷ One particular two-star review stood out to me: "I follow Gay on Twitter, and I have also read *Bad Feminist*. She's so seemingly serious about everything. There is no levity. There is no joy. And while being fat is hard, it is not the end of the world. I assure you it is not" (Sandra on Goodreads, October 2017). The mention of Twitter in this context gave me pause because Gay was, famously, quite funny on Twitter, and she made a name for herself as the ultimate Twitter 'clap-backer'.¹⁸ She even had a mysterious nemesis that many followers loved to speculate over. Gay has even written about the joy of responding to absurd or hateful tweets in "The Pleasure of Clapping Back" (2019). The contradictions and nuances within *Hunger* became 'complaints' and nothing more, partly because of the cultural view of 'ugly feelings', like envy, particularly when they come from fat people. Ngai (2005) captures this cultural response to envy that I see projected towards Gay and *Hunger* as follows:

Unlike anger, another affective support of oppositional consciousness with the capacity to become 'a legitimate weapon in social reform', envy lacks the cultural

¹⁷ I would argue this is a misreading of West's text, but more on that in Chapter Three.

¹⁸ This was particularly evident during the time before Twitter became X.

recognition as a valid mode of publicly recognizing or responding to social disparities, even though it remains the only antagonistic emotion defined as having a perceived inequality as its object (p. 128).

Of course, in Ngai's text (2005) the subject is not fat, and a fat subject changes the perceived inequality in question. However, I follow Ngai's (2005) reasoning that the ways in which envy is positioned as petty is tied to the structures of patriarchal gender roles. When it comes to fatness, envy is not just positioned as petty, but it is positioned as *only having the thin body* as its object. While one may not always feel rage from envy, the continued moments of disorientation and *misfitting* that result from inequalities (which Gay expresses envy towards) can build rage, as Gay makes clear, writing, "[...] if I allowed myself to lose control, I would let loose so much rage" (2017, p. 165). This language of control is deployed throughout *Hunger* to describe the lack of discipline Gay has around her embodiment, yet it used here in a different way. For example, she writes "I don't know how things got so out of control, or I do. Losing control of my body was a matter of accretion" (Gay, 2017, p. 13). There is a reservation around letting loose and expressing the full range of her anger, perhaps because the structures of anti-fatness do not "make allowances for pain, ambivalence, uneasiness, disruption, and anger" (Cooper, 2016. p. 37), nor does the language of 'positivity' leave room for fatness that loses control. *Hunger*, however, does make allowances for pain and the many ways it can be expressed.

Throughout her memoir, Gay is painfully¹⁹ honest about her commitment to making her body something other than it was; an effort to make herself move through the world differently not because of an inherent insecurity but because of the ways that her experiences made her feel insecure and unsafe. Gay does not, as Samantha Irby (2013) puts it, "pretend not to know" (p.

¹⁹ I mean this not just as emphasis on 'honest', but that the text itself can be painful to read, and as she makes clear throughout, painful to write. The act of reading and writing generates ugly feelings in a text that is full of them.

165) why she is fat. Gay suggests that becoming fat was (almost) entirely in her control, a conscious choice to make herself bigger and therefore safer. She says, “[...] I ate because I understood that I could take up more space. I could become more solid, stronger, safer. I understood, from the way that I saw people stare at fat people, from the way I stared at fat people, that too much weight was undesirable. If I was undesirable, I could keep more hurt away” (Gay, 2017, p. 15). What makes this sentiment difficult to sit with throughout the text is that we know fat women—fat people—are assaulted. Fatness is not a get-out-of-sexual-violence card. It is *not* a route to safety, and *Hunger* does not present it as such. Instead, Gay is putting her ‘ugly feelings’ on the table: “I was hollowed out. I was determined to fill the void, and food was what I used to build a shield around what little was left of me” (2017, p. 21). This very admission of eating, of choosing to eat to make her body different, to try and orient herself towards what she thought and felt was safety, challenges the path to happiness promised by weight-loss. One of the early voices in fat studies, Kathleen LeBesco (2004), describes an assimilationist stance as upholding a “will to innocence” (p. 112). The ‘will to innocence’ is intended to explain what Gay calls the ‘why’ of the body *away* from the fat person. Meaning: “It is not my ‘fault’ that I am fat”. This upholds ideas about which fat bodies are ‘good’ or ‘bad’ because the ‘good fatty’ is innocent; they played no part in their corpulence and are not like *those* fat people: they exercise, they ‘eat well’, they are ‘healthy’. Those who do not participate—or cannot participate—in fat assimilationism cannot explain the “why” in a way that absolves them of responsibility for their bodies. Importantly, however, *Hunger* is not necessarily an attempt at absolution as much as it is a reckoning with many faults and insecurities.

In Lindo Bacon’s famous *Health at Every Size: The Surprising Truth About Your Weight* (2010), they advocate for resetting your body’s “weight regulation” system and learning your

“setpoint” weight (p. 12) to better “combat” weight gain. Bacon (2010) writes, “[u]nfortunately, for too many of us this potent weight regulation system has gone awry. Food still tempts us long after our caloric need is satisfied. And extra calories result in packing on extra pounds” (p. 12). The book urges the reader to understand that “change has got to come from inside you” (Bacon, 2010, p. 263), a refrain which underscores the ‘good fatty’ and is part of fat assimilationism. This use of ‘setpoint’ only serves to keep fatness insecure, destabilizing a fat subject by creating a boundary around what constitutes the ‘right’ kind of fat and what moves into ‘extra pounds’.

Anna Mollow (2015) uses ‘setpoint’ in a very different way, advocating for a “setpoint epistemology” (p. 199), which combines Rosemarie Garland-Thomson’s (2011) crip spin on standpoint theory—“sitpoint”—and the very ‘setpoint’ that *HAES* advocates. She argues that disability studies and fat studies need to speak to one another, taking seriously “embodied perspectives” and “personal knowledge” (Mollow, 2015, p. 200). Moreover, Mollow’s (2011) “setpoint epistemology might subvert fat pity” by establishing a model of fat as a “benign difference that’s stigmatized through staring, cures, and overcoming narratives” (2011, p. 202).

While Gay certainly demonstrates how her fatness is stigmatized through staring and the role that the ‘obesity epidemic’ plays in the pressure to ‘fix’ her “unruly” body, *Hunger* rejects a narrative of overcoming.

Insecurity, Fat Time, and Hunger

Often, when a fat person says they are fat, they are met with the refrain: “No, you are beautiful!”, as if being fat and beautiful are mutually exclusive. Anti-fatness assumes that fatness is insecure not because of how the world is shaped, but because of the shape of each fat roll; it assumes that the use of ‘fat’ is a signifier of insecurity or self-deprecation. Fatness is insecure—materially, socially, temporally—not because fat people are inherently insecure but because the structures of

anti-fatness are invested in its disappearance. Da'Shaun L. Harrison (2021) theorizes 'insecurity' not as the opposite of confidence, but as a "political tool" that can aid those deemed 'insecure' in "developing their understanding of and relationship to oppressive power structures" (Harrison, 2021, p. 16). They argue: "Insecurities are not a personal indictment; they are an indictment of the World. Being that this is the case, people deemed Ugly should run toward Insecurity" (Harrison, 2021, p. 15).²⁰ Following this, subjectivity, affect, and agency can still emerge within 'insecurity', and *Hunger* demonstrates 'insecurity' as a response to objects, sensations, and the contact of the body and the world.

Indeed, "we are pushed to confront, over and over again, how the world in which we find ourselves is constructed in ways that refuse, exclude, elide, or overwrite our existence" (Malatino, 2022, p. 54). A vital part of that construction concerns who is able to be secure (materially, emotionally, discursively) and who is not. Which is to say, who the world is shaped for and who it is not, a model of orientation where certain people are made (and kept) 'insecure' as they are kept out of 'desire capital'. As Harrison (2021) argues:

The only logical step following the acceptance of Ugly as political is that Insecurity, too, must be political. If the politicization of Ugly leads to the social, political, economic, and physical death of a person, they are bound to feel unprotected, uncared for, and unconfident. To that point, Insecurities are valid. It is okay for us to be insecure in bodies that are constantly beat on and berated. Those Insecurities don't change the reality of what anti-fatness, or overall Ugliness, is and what it does. In fact, those Insecurities better contextualize it (p. 15).

Hunger brims with these various insecurities, demonstrating how "to be insecure is not necessarily to construe oneself as bad, defective, or otherwise unworthy" (Wonderly, 2019, p.173). Gay's words echo both Harrison and Wonderly, when she writes: "I don't think I am

²⁰ I've opted to keep Harrison's original capitalization in their direct quotes.

ugly. I don't hate myself in the way society would have me hate myself, but I do live in the world. I live in this body in this world, and I hate how the world all too often responds to this body" (2017, p. 22). In this section, I discuss these conceptions of insecurity and their role in "fat time" (Tidgwell, et al., 2018) through the affective loop of weight loss, the impressions left by *misfits* as lingering time, and hunger as a marker of time. Moreover, I focus on what Gay's non-triumph narrative means for an incorporation of 'fat time' and refusing a fat-free future.

The structures of normativity are so insidious that they expect lives to follow a specific timeline. Referred to as "chrononormativity" by Elizabeth Freeman (2010), this structure of time binds flesh "into socially meaningful embodiment through temporal regulation [...] to organize individual human bodies toward maximum productivity" (p. 3). The idea of chrononormativity has been approached by disability studies, fat studies, and queer studies. Through a discussion of autism, transness, and those who are autistic and trans, Jake Pyne (2016) plots the ways that gender and neuro-divergent experiences are thrust into chrononormativity. Pyne (2016) challenges us to consider how neoliberalism impacts constructions of both life and time, meaning how we are constructed and move through the world is predicated on participation with labor and the generation of capital. Chrononormativity demands a journey from childhood to adulthood that follows cishetero capitalist plans: birth, life, marriage, the nuclear family, death. Moreover, this temporality expects (and demands) the eradication of fat—and disability, and queerness, and any embodiment that threatens normative order—signaled through the rhetorics of the 'obesity epidemic'.

Gay (2017) highlights the impacts of chrononormativity when writing on the term 'morbidly obese': "The modifier 'morbidly' makes the fat body a death sentence when such is not the case. The term 'morbid obesity' frames fat people like we are the walking dead, and the

medical establishment treats us accordingly” (p. 12). When fat people are blamed for the cost of said medical establishment, somehow their adiposity is the real threat to the ‘health’ of other people (and not, say, the demands of capitalist life), as well as the reason for collapsing health care systems (and not, say, capitalism). Moreover, the “idea that shape carries story suggests, then, that material bodies are not only in the spaces of the world but are entwined with temporality as well” (Garland-Thomson, 2011, p. 595). Throughout *Hunger*, Gay carries the weight of story; there is the weight of fat and the weight of what she calls her fat “why”; the weight of disappointments and hopes, the weight of contradictions. There is also the weight of memory, of a different time that stays with her. All of this shapes her encounters with the world and her body in its many stages.

In the wake of assault, Gay builds a new body, one that moves her further away from ‘thinness’ and therefore ‘desire/ability’ (Harrison, 2021). The promise of ‘thinness’ does not offer Gay what the mythologies of ‘health’ and ‘desire capital’ say it should: happiness, currency in the heterosexual market, comfort, access, and safety. Indeed, “the fat body is summed up to be a site of insufficiency and a state of unhappiness in need of rescue” (Bahra, 2018, p. 197), where ‘thinness’ is the life raft to relief. Yet for Gay, to be ‘desirable’, is to be unsafe. What makes this sentiment uncomfortable (the orientation of fatness and intentionality of weight gain throughout *Hunger*) is that it troubles ideas about how fat bodies come into being and makes the very goal of ‘thinness’ insecure. Despite the fear of unsafety²¹, there are moments where Gay ‘admits’ to the pleasure that comes from going down a size or two: “[...] the vanity nestled in the cave of my chest swells” (2017, p. 187). This contradiction is part of what positions *Hunger* as elucidating various moments of *affective misfitting*, which brings together Ahmed’s (2010) ‘affect alien’ and

²¹ Ironically, however, to be fat and Black is to always be unhealthy because it is to always be unsafe (Harrison, 2021). There is no ‘health’ without safety, and there is no safety for Blackness under white supremacy.

Garland-Thomson's (2011) *misfitting*. Ahmed (2010) argues that "we become alienated—out of line with affective community—when we do not experience pleasure from proximity to objects that are already attributed as being good" (p. 36); we become 'affect aliens'. 'Thinness' is an object already attributed as being aesthetically, morally, socially, and temporally *good*. The 'affective community' of assimilative fat politics upholds 'health' and 'wellness' as good objects to strive towards. Simultaneously, however, such a fat politic also advocates for fat acceptance through the lens of 'normality', thereby reproducing ableist ideas of what constitutes 'normal' embodiment. If your fat politic falls outside of this model, you are out of line with the affective community, and when you do so intentionally, you are *misfitting* (Garland-Thomson, 2011); refusing to remold yourself to fit what is expected of you.

Although Gay admits moments of pleasure from the feeling of smaller clothes, this pleasure is immediately followed by fear, an affective loop of disorientation that rejects the chrononormative path of fat to thin. A complex, rich fat politic needs to take seriously 'ugliness' and not endeavour to produce a 'desire/able' fat subject (Brown & Herndon, 2020; Shackelford, 2021; Snider, 2018). We should opt to follow Mia Mingus's (2011) insistence on moving "beyond a politic of desirability to loving the ugly. Respecting ugly for how it has shaped us and been exiled" (p. 140). Gay writes repeatedly about the fragility of being closer to 'thinness' and of the lack of safety in weight loss. Reflecting on her trips home from boarding school during breaks, she explains: "That was the first time I realized that weight loss, thinness really, was social currency. Amidst this attention, I was losing my newfound invisibility, and it terrified me" (p. 66). Losing weight meant moving closer to being 'good' and 'healthy', but for Gay this also meant being oriented away from safety. Through expressing this contradiction, Gay exposes the (il)logic behind the systems that make some 'insecure'. She writes:

That is how pervasive damaging cultural messages about unruly bodies are—that even as we age, no matter what material successes we achieve, we cannot be satisfied or happy unless we are also thin. And then I think about how fucked up it is to promote this idea that our truest selves are thin women hiding in our fat bodies like pests, usurpers, illegitimates (Gay, 2017, p. 139).

Gay continues, “[...] I was ashamed for buying into these terrible narratives we fit ourselves into and I was ashamed at how I am so terrible about disciplining my body, and I was ashamed by how I deny myself so much and it is still not enough” (2017, p. 147). This highlights the fact that, despite what she might believe intellectually (in equality and in the importance of challenging rigid body image standards) Gay exists in a world that is not shaped for fatness; she blames herself while reckoning with the knowledge of cultural systems at the same time.

Accepting ‘insecurity’ for what it is helps to put it into context: “It is intended to name a state of being, a response to a possibility of danger [...] ‘Insecurity’ seeks to name the *response* to having no protection, the *response* to being harmed” (Harrison, 2021, p. 14, emphasis in original). Gay’s fatness is at once a manifestation of ‘insecurity’ (fear, unsafety, the possibility of danger) and a state of being. Security, too, can be understood as affect (Wonderly, 2019), for “unless one feels sufficiently secure, one’s emotional health and one’s ability to effectively exercise one’s agency become compromised” (p. 166). However, ‘insecurity’ is not just the absence of security, just as security is not just the absence of anxiety. As Wonderly writes, “[t]he person who feels secure is without (significant) worry, fear, or anxiety. But so, too, are the comatose, the dead, the grapefruit, and the lamppost, and *they* do not feel secure. A feeling cannot be understood as merely the absence of some other feeling or condition” (2019, p. 167). The subject of fat assimilation is predicated on an *absence* of bad or ugly feelings and requires that this absence translate into ‘positivity’. Yet the so-called ‘absence’ of ‘ugly feelings’ is not enough to generate ‘good’ feelings. By writing about all the contradictory and messy feelings of

being fat and fat being, Gay illustrates the messiness of ‘secure’ and ‘insecure’ affects of fat embodiment.

To abstain from “ugly feelings”, or at the very least to abstain from expressing them, requires the very discipline that courses through anti-fat ideologies of ‘healthism’ and diet culture. It continues to deprive you of something and remain disciplined enough to ‘stay positive’. Discipline certainly plays a role in the structure of chrononormativity. Neoliberal subjects are meant to be disciplined enough to meet each milestone at the ‘right’ time and in the ‘right’ way. Fatness is not meant to be part of the future, but something lost in the past, an ‘after’ photo or an obituary. This neoliberal tendency is addressed by Ramanpreet Annie Bahra (2018) who argues that “social discourses divide the ‘good’ and the ‘bad’ versions of bodies through and within social structures and interactions that work to establish who can claim humanity” (p. 193). Of course, who counts as human is predicated on the systems of white supremacy which produce anti-fatness in the first place. Fatness and Blackness are kept out of humanity (Bahra, 2018; Wilson, 2023; Harrison, 2021), yet Gay describes her fat body as being punished for being “*too human*” (2017, p. 124, emphasis mine). In *Hunger*, Gay (2017) connects this utter humanness to being weak and fallible; she is *too human* to be disciplined, she gives in to her human instincts, and she is undisciplined. At the same time, being ‘too’ human still marks her as outside the “dominant ideologies that the future of humanity rests on the very eradication of [fat] bodies (Chalklin, 2016, p. 119). It still places her in the language of excess, of being ‘too much’.

By being *undisciplined*, Gay counters the neoliberal temporality that relies on individual discipline and responsibility. Throughout her memoir, disorientation occurs not only in the material *misfit*, but through time, particularly when there is a constant shift through weight-loss and weight-gain and therefore orientation towards and away from safety. When discussing the

rape itself, Gay describes the feeling of being made to be afraid: “While they talked around me, I felt smaller and smaller. I was scared even if I couldn’t recognize the strange energy running through me” (2017, p. 42). Here, ‘smaller’ is connected to ‘fear’. The ‘energy’ running through her is tied to being made small as part of being made unsafe and afraid. This is echoed in changes to her body weight. On beginning to lose weight, she writes: “I get terrified. I start to worry about my body becoming more vulnerable as it grows smaller” (Gay, 2017, p. 157). Gay tells us about her moving toward and away from ‘thinness’ because of her own affective reactions: fear, anxiety, stress. She writes: “My clothes fall over my body the way they should and then they start to get baggy. I get terrified [...] I start to imagine all the ways I could be hurt. I start to remember all the ways I have been hurt” (Gay, 2017, p. 157). Indeed, “we move toward and away from objects through how we are affected by them” (Ahmed, 2010, p. 32). Weight loss, here, signifies proximity to harm; it echoes a different time/place and conjures images of the past to the present. This challenges the view of weight-loss-as-future that is so central to anti-fatness (Crawford, 2017; White, 2013; Bahra, 2018). Not only does the memoir itself challenge a linear path of hurt to healed, the push and pull between embodiments reflects what Kyrölä and Harjunen (2017) call ‘liminal fat’. Instead of upholding the idea of a truly malleable “corporeality and selfhood” (Kyrölä & Harjunen, 2017, p. 99), Kyrölä and Harjunen (2017) argue for a reading of fat as a stable corporeality and subject position, while simultaneously addressing the ways that fat both disappears *and* exists. In other words, they present liminality in a fat context, “to capture the experience of bodily transformation, but also how this temporariness paradoxically becomes a long-term and fixed position and can continue even if the body changes” (Kyrölä & Harjunen, 2017, p. 103). Despite the shifting weight of Gay’s body, her fatness is stable and remains part of her social experience and her corporeality. The

fluctuation between weight loss and gain, between feeling safe and feeling vulnerable, becomes its own positionality, temporally secure even as it is temporally shifting.

Not only does Gay's discussion of weight loss/gain echo a non-normative timeline, but her descriptions of material *misfits* also leave marks of those very moments of *misfitting* and subsequent disorientation. Fatness can hold an impression, and it is often a reminder of another time and place. Writing on the perpetual *misfit* of the chair, Gay (2017) states: "Chairs with arms are generally unbearable. So many chairs have arms. The bruises tend to linger. They remain tender to the touch hours and days after" (p. 202). Even when the encounter between fat and chair is over, the impression is left in the form of bruises and lingering pain. The discomfort of that *misfit* is not tethered solely to the moment of the encounter but transcends that time and space through marks on the body. Gay continues, "[s]ometimes, I'll roll over in bed and wince and then remember, yes, I sat in a chair with arms" (2017, p. 202). The impression left on fat means the *misfit* encounter is not past, but very much present on the body until the bruises heal and the marks fade.

Gay also describes her experiences of *intentionally* marking her body through tattoos, something that is not uncommon among survivors of trauma (Maxwell, Thomas, & Thomas, 2019; Maxwell, et al., 2023). Unlike the forced markings of the ill-fitting chair, she writes, "with my tattoos, I get to say, these are the choices I make for my body, with full-throated consent. This is how I mark myself. This is how I take my body back" (Gay, 2017, p. 184). There is an extra layer to the act of marking your body when your embodiment already draws attention, which Gay herself acknowledges, writing: "I recognize the inherent tension in my getting tattoos while also wanting to be invisible. People notice tattoos" (2017, p. 184). Not only are they markers that you choose for yourself—unlike the impressions left from a day of *misfit*

encounters—but they can be understood through notions of time. Tattoos are permanent markers that can or may slightly change over time as your body changes. They can also memorialize other moments in time; markers of nostalgia, grief, growth, or love.

We might also read the act of being tattooed through Allyson Mitchell's (2018) notion of fat queer craft. Playing on anti-fat rhetorics of fatness as "sedentary", Mitchell argues for thinking about fat and craft alongside one another "and therefore antithetical to the fast-paced demands of neoliberal capitalist productivity models" (2018, p. 149). When getting a tattoo, you are not the one actively drawing or creating the work, but you are still forced to be sedentary, taking up the time and space that the art you have chosen requires. It is a creative practice that requires set-up, supplies, and take-down, not unlike an afternoon spent crafting. Gay (2017) remarks on this process as part of her enjoyment: "I love the act of getting a tattoo. It's not so much about the design as it is the experience of being marked. I love watching the artist set up the workspace, ink, needles, razor" (p. 184). These tools are not so different from the materials that Mitchell presents—ink, paper, pens, painting, even thread and yarn. The act of being tattooed requires the same "sitting, making" as craft, thus can also "be seen as resistance against exercise culture, health culture, and body norms" (Mitchell, 2018, p. 149). Through purposeful markings that can take hours to complete, Gay presents a 'sedentary' temporal mode that reclaims markings on the fat body and refuses the insistence that bodies must always be productive, engaging in movement that tends toward weight loss, and certainly not making fat more visible through artistic markings.

The role of markings and impressions can also be understood through what Gay calls the 'why' of her body. The 'why' is, in many ways, the impetus of her text: people want answers for 'why' a person is fat. Gay, too, is looking for answers: "They want to understand how I could

have let this happen, let my body become so big, so out of control. We have that in common” (2017, p. 117). Both the marks of fatness and the marks of tattoos are temporal encounters between Gay’s body and her ‘why’. In her own words, “[t]he why is complicated and slippery. I want to be able to hold the why in my hands, to dissect it or tear it apart or burn it and read the ashes even though I am afraid of what I will do with what I see there” (2017, p. 33). I cannot hold the why in my hands any more than she can, but I can hold *Hunger* in my hands and try to make sense of what I find in her complicated, slippery ‘why’. This ‘why’ is complicated by the moments of disorientation and *misfitting* that I have already discussed, but also because of the shifting temporality of Gay’s fat time and both the deprivation and presence of desire *as* hunger; the “wanting very much to be seen and understood” (Gay 2017, p. 5), the *yearning* of hunger, and the constant push and pull between past and present. Gay writes, “I know what it means to hunger without being hungry [...] I know that hunger is in the mind and the body and the heart and the soul” (2017, p. 193). This hunger cannot be recognized by a grumble in your stomach. It is a deep hunger that comes from desires that must be ignored in order to become ‘desire/able’.

Gay explains:

Part of disciplining the body is denial. We want but we dare not have. We deny ourselves certain foods. We deny ourselves rest by working out. We deny ourselves peace of mind by remaining ever vigilant over our bodies. We withhold from ourselves until we achieved a goal and then we withhold from ourselves to maintain that goal (2017, p. 145).

Gay illustrates how becoming ‘desire/able’ requires that we ignore our hunger; it requires deprivation. It is no wonder, then, that ‘desire’ is deeply embedded in liberal approaches like fat assimilationism. We can also understand hunger through a temporal lens. To feel hungry is to signal to your body that it is time to eat something, yet when those cues are ignored through

deprivation, they can become scrambled. Suddenly you are lost in time, and these cues can no longer be markers of lunch or dinner or snack time. HAES in particular advocates for eating only when hungry or until full and moving the body not with the *goal* of weight loss but that this will be a side ‘benefit’ (Bacon, 2010; Gibson, 2022). Of course, fatphobia would have fatness never eat at all. It would prefer fat people participate in circuses of depravation like *The Biggest Loser*, a cultural artifact that Gay also gestures towards, where fat people are berated and demeaned; ‘encouraged’ to exercise without fueling their bodies (Babin & Orsini, 2025). Gay says of this torturous program:

This is a show about unruly bodies that must be disciplined by any means necessary, so that through that discipline, the obese²² might become more acceptable members of society. They might find happiness, which can, according to the show, according to cultural norms, only be found through thinness (2017, p. 128).

Hunger is an archive of fat being which includes the cultural messages about fat that one encounters. The *misfit* not only happens in a chair, but when we turn on the TV and find that the only places we ‘fit’ are designed to humiliate us and are based on our lack of fit in the first place. Is it any wonder, then, that Gay has anger and envy to express? Food is not the only thing we hunger for.

In the penultimate section of *Hunger*, Gay writes: “I did not deserve to be desired. I did not deserve to be loved” (2017, p. 241). Fat is marked as ‘undesirable’ both in the larger political sense as well as in an interpersonal sense. This is the problem with the ‘good fatty’ paradigm which seeks to be closer to ‘desire’ (Bias, 2016). It is understandable to want love—to want to be loved—but ‘desire/ability’ is not about love, it is about how much you are willing to hurt yourself to become ‘good’ (Harrison, 2021; Jones, 2014). *Hunger* is full of the results of such

²² Although I do not use the term ‘obese’ in my own life, I have opted to leave Gay’s word choice.

hurting, such deprivation—hunger, wanting, rage, jealousy, envy, sweat, exhaustion, pain—all of which must be tucked away in the name of ‘getting along’ (Ahmed, 2010). Or, as Gay writes, “[m]y body is wildly undisciplined, and yet I deny myself nearly everything I desire” (2017, p. 145). It is never enough, no matter how much you deny. I return to Audre Lorde, who asks: “What are the tyrannies you swallow day by day and attempt to make your own, until you will sicken and die of them, still in silence?” (2007, p. 41). *Hunger* speaks to what happens to all these swallowed tyrannies and where they go. Gay *literally* swallows her ‘tyrannies’ as food, stating:

I was swallowing my secrets and making my body expand and explode. I found ways to hide in plain sight, to keep feeding a hunger that could never be satisfied—the hunger to stop hurting. I made myself bigger. I made myself safer. I created a distinct boundary between myself and anyone who dared to approach me (2017, p. 61).

It is these acts of ‘swallowing’ that keep Gay from being ‘innocent’, in fat assimilationist terms. She swallows the truth—the ‘why’—explaining, “[w]e swallow it, and more often than not, that truth turns rancid. It spreads through the body like an infection. It becomes depression or addiction or obsession or some other physical manifestation of the silence of what [I] would have said, needed to say, couldn’t say” (Gay, 2017, p. 45). Part of that physical manifestation was bulimia. Gay illustrates, “I did try to become that girl I envy, the one with the discipline to disorder her eating” (2017, p. 194). Upon making this decision (so to speak), Gay explains that she took to the Internet to learn what to do: “I learned that my fingers might get cut from my teeth and that the stomach acid would burn my knuckles” (2017, p. 195). These things became true. *The truth turns rancid*. Each expulsion a return to another time, another place, while jolting back to the present. Rancid; empty of food but full of rage.

Malatino (2022) describes the temporality of rage as “that of a time out of time” (Malatino, 2022, p. 170), and positions rage as a break, “both a caesura and a kind of possession, an affective swell that overwhelms, capable of drowning out the present—or, put alternately, capable of absorbing the entirety of the present” (p. 170). Swallowing desire, swallowing rage, swallowing so much ‘why’, causes it comes back up, through force or through rage or through envy; it drowns out the present. Gay is left with chronic heartburn—returning time and time again, to and from those moments of emesis—another temporality of past to present. She writes: “The word ‘heartburn’ is rather misleading. It has nothing to do with the heart. Or it has everything to do with the heart, only not the way you might think” (Gay, 2017, p. 200). Both the burn of stomach acid and the burn of the heart conjure a different time and place. A starving heart wants so much; it is a hunger that feels impossible to satiate. Friedman (2021) similarly addresses the heart, writing, “living in a larger body is hard on one’s heart, though not in the ways we are often told. Rather than suggesting that our cardiovascular health is irreparably compromised, I would argue instead that being fat often hurts our feelings, exposes our vulnerabilities, leaves us reeling from insults to our souls” (p. 150). It is not corpulence that hurts the heart but the burn of anti-fatness, of swallowing hatred daily, of being reminded time and time again of all the things that we might hunger for.

Gay illustrates her attempts to satiate these other hungers through her relationship to queerness. Prior to understanding that her attraction to other people could include various genders, Gay ‘came out’ as gay. She writes: “[...] I told myself I could be gay and I wouldn’t be hurt ever again. I needed to never be hurt again” (Gay, 2017, p. 237). The unrelenting hunger for safety meant that she denied her other wants and needs in order to try and survive. She continues: “I performed my queerness so I could believe this half-truth I had told everyone, that I had told

myself” (Gay, 2017, p. 239). Gay connects this to gendered expectations and her forced performance of ‘butchness’, something she thought she *had* to be to feel safe, and because she felt unable to participate in femininity due to her fatness. She says, “I inhabited a butch identity because it felt safe. It afforded me a semblance of control over my body and how my body was perceived” (Gay, 2017, p. 257). This was made easier by the ways that fatness is already perceived; fatness obscures/upholds/manipulates/validates gender, but this is further complicated by race.

As Harrison (2021) argues, “[g]ender works in relationship to health and Desire as a means to further ostracize the Black fat” (p. 104). Blackness is always outside, “never meant to fit comfortably inside of gender” (Harrison, 2024, p. 62). Gay writes:

My fat body empowers people to erase my gender. I am a woman, but they do not see me as a woman. I am often mistaken for a man. I am called ‘Sir’, because people look at the bulk of me and ignore my face, my styled hair, my very ample breasts and other curves. It bothers me to have my gender erased, to be unseen in plain sight [...] Race plays a part in this too. Black women are rarely allowed their femininity (2017, p. 256).

This moment of misrecognition demonstrates the relationship between fat, gender, and race. Gay is misgendered although she is cisgender because “gender normativity is predicated on the possession of a slender body” (White, 2021, p. 79). She continues: “Today, the people who misgender me aren’t doing so because they perceive a queer aesthetic. They’re doing so because they don’t see me, my body, as something that should be treated or considered with care” (Gay, 2017, p. 257). By lacking a slender body, Gay lacks her gender and is not read as a woman, and in those moments, she experiences the very disorientation that Malatino (2022) describes as central to trans life: being misgendered. In an interview for *This American Life*, host Ira Glass asks Gay about this gender/race/body connection. Gay responds:

Oh, I'm mistaken for a man all the time. Literally all the time. And I'm sorry, but I have huge breasts. There's just no way that you're mistaking me for a man. It's because they see me, and they see my skin. And think, well, no, she can't possibly be a woman. And so that's the number one thing that happens, and it's actually extremely annoying (Glass, 2016).

After a follow-up question as to whether it is only white people who do this or Black people as well, Gay answers: "Oh, no, it's white people. Black people know what I am" (Glass, 2016).

Interestingly, Gay not only addresses the question of her gender presentation in the passages above, but in another collision between past and present. Early in *Hunger*, Gay remarks on looking at pictures of her younger self who was happy and 'girly', wearing dresses with her hair done. She says, "[t]hey are evidence that, once, I was pretty and sometimes sweet. Beneath what you see now, there is still a pretty girl who loves pretty-girl things" (Gay, 2017, p. 36). It is not just the act of looking at the past that conjures time, but the way it reminds Gay that her story about herself as not being 'girly' is perhaps untrue, a story created to make it easier to cope. She continues: "Sometimes we try to convince ourselves of things that are not true, reframing the past to better explain the present. When I look at these pictures, it is quite clear that while I enjoyed roughhousing and playing in the dirt with my brothers and such, I wasn't entirely a tomboy, not really" (Gay, 2017, p. 36). Rearticulating these memories in her memoir, Gay demonstrates the ways that one might be hungry for past and future at the same time. The half-truth of being 'girly' created the foundation for Gay to inhabit a butch identity that felt, to her, like safety. Yet her desire for what she really feels, what she really wants, is another hunger that cannot be ignored.

If only it were simple enough to solve the wanting—the deep wanting when you lack—by poking something juicy with a utensil and filling the gap like a reverse game of Operation. Perhaps this is why the fork on the cover of *Hunger* makes me laugh. I think of how fat people

are often associated with food, with eating, and here is this fork. In Chapter Three, I discuss the possibility of humour as a method of “flat affect” (Malatino, 2022, p. 57), which occurs when we need to put a distance between ourselves and an encounter that hurts us. Maybe this fork is my hurt, and my laughter is the cushion. Laughter might read as an odd reaction given the content of the story; yet I laugh because there are things to yearn for, things that would satiate you, that you cannot fit on the end of a fork. But as we move through the world we keep reaching, hoping to grasp something that will fill the seemingly endless void. Up close, you see the wear, a fork that has been used repeatedly. It carries weight. It carries memory. It casts a shadow. It says more than one might think. This echoes the affective work being done in *Hunger*, where the hunger in question is not just a desire for digestive satiation but a yearning for something that perhaps eludes being named. There are many ways to hunger, yet one is easier to address than the other.

Conclusion

Lucas Crawford argues: “People tend to receive fat bodies in public as ones that cannot help but give up the truth of their habits and morals...” (Crawford 2017, p. 466). This so-called ‘truth’ or ‘why’ is central to Roxane Gay’s *Hunger* (2017). She writes, “[w]hen you’re overweight, your body becomes a matter of public record in many respects. Your body is constantly and prominently on display. People project assumed narratives onto your body and are not at all interested in the truth of your body, whatever the truth might be” (Gay, 2017, p. 120). Gay presents *her* truths in ways that are crucial for challenging a fat assimilationist politic that champions participation in ‘desire capital’ instead of advocating for its destruction; a neoliberal body politic that places the responsibility on fat to make itself palatable. *Hunger*, however, is not easy on the palate. What Gay tells the reader is both that she puts herself through the pain and deprivation of dieting, *and* that she ate and she ate and she kept eating. She is not ‘innocent’ in

the creation of her fat body; “This is the body I made” (Gay, 2017, p. 16). There is also a double meaning to ‘innocence’ in her story. While she writes about her accretion, she also writes about feeling shame and guilt for her gang rape, and how it marked her as dirty; as no longer a good, dutiful Haitian daughter, a “good girl” (Gay, 2017, p. 55). Gay argues that people assume they know the ‘why’ of her body by looking at her—a subtext of gluttony, of eating and laziness, of an inability to control oneself and be a responsible neoliberal subject (Pausé & Taylor, 2021). Instead, the ‘why’ of her body is that she sought safety and thought, at a young age, that to make herself ‘undesirable’ would protect her.

A key part of *Hunger* is seeking to understand and be understood, unlearning this shame and the shame of fatness, while navigating the everyday disorientations and *misfits* of being fat in an anti-fat world. Early on she tells the reader: “I did this to myself. This is my fault and my responsibility. This is what I tell myself, though I should not bear the responsibility for this body alone” (Gay, 2017, p. 16). This is a difficult contradiction throughout *Hunger*. Gay oscillates between the fact of her own participation in her fat and that it should not matter either way, *and* writing a book that, in essence, explains the ‘why’ of her body—a why which should not need to be explained at all.

Hunger is a rejection of the triumph narrative. It is not a miracle to have survived; it is fraught and hungry and overcome with rage and sometimes burns your knuckles and the enamel of your teeth. Anger can be productive, “it can transform selves and situations in ways that are not exclusively negative” (Malatino, 2022, p. 114) and *Hunger* is one such transformation. Yet, importantly, it is not a story *of* transformation. It does not conclude with a happy, healed ending and it is not a story of fat to ‘thin’. Instead, it is both an archive of moments of disorientation and

misfits that are so ordinary for fat life, as well as an expression of the affective richness of rage and envy from a fat perspective.

This chapter has argued that ugly fat feelings are worth examining because they can help to direct us away from striving to bend ourselves to a world never oriented with the persistence of the fat body in mind. Through discussions of the disorientation(s) and misfitting so common to fat life, I have demonstrated how embodied fat knowledge can be made richer through the incorporation of disability studies methods like “misfitting” (Garland-Thomson, 2011). Moreover, this chapter has shown how Gay’s complex and contradictory approach to fat subjectivity help us to embrace our ‘insecurities’ and all of our ugliness, and what being an *affective misfit* can do for theorizing our fat affects and embodiments. Finally, this chapter has unpacked the temporality of *Hunger* and affective dimension of hunger, and what fat studies can take from a simultaneously liminal and fluid temporal mode.

Hunger presents a contradictory and ambiguous fat embodiment that is affectively charged, phenomenologically complex, and rich with insights that fat studies scholars should take seriously. Despite what critics might say, it is not *just* a story of weight, it is a *weighty story*. By writing her way through/with/alongside the many contradictions of fat subjectivity, Gay demonstrates the complicated elements of fat life. We might know something but cannot escape the reality of moving through the world—and all its discursive elements—without being subject to what constitutes us *as* subjects. Put another way, as Murray argues (2005), “even the subject of fat politics experiences a disconnection from one’s body, a need to be apart from the source of one’s angst: one’s fat flesh. What emerges from these small snippets, these quiet admissions, is that the unified self that fat politics seems to expect, and draws its strength from, suddenly becomes an ambiguous subject” (p. 159-60). *Hunger* helps us revel in that ambiguity. Gay

concludes: “Here I am showing you the ferocity of my hunger. Here I am, finally freeing myself to be vulnerably and terribly human. Here I am, reveling in that freedom. Here. See what I hunger for and what my truth has allowed me to create” (2017, p. 305). *Hunger* not only helps to “create a better world” (Parker, 2022, p. 33) but contributes to a messy middle for fat studies to feast on, brimming with the phenomenological brilliance of fat life.

Chapter 3

Fattening the Killjoy: Being *Shrill* with Lindy West

*And I know their worst fear is to look like me
And that fact makes me want to kill somebody
I'm eating at the counter and you're talking about your weight
I usually don't hate you, but today I'm enraged
- Brye, "Diet Culture"*

*I know I've ruined a night or two
I couldn't hold back my views
Family dinner turned off the news
Stuck in a silent room
And I'd rather die by the truth
And hide away feeling shades of blue
I've ruined a night or two
- August Ponthier, "Hardcore"*

Sara Ahmed (2023) writes that “the feminist killjoy begins her political life as a stereotype of feminists” (p. 2); the feminist is angry, “humorless”, and unhappy (Ahmed, 2017). Or, as Lindy West describes herself: *Shrill*. The title of West’s 2016 essay collection is a tongue-in-cheek reference to a word often thrown at outspoken, seemingly unaccommodating women—women who may fit into Ahmed’s (2010) notion of the “killjoy”. *Shrill: Notes from a Loud Woman* (West, 2016) can be read as an example of the killjoy maxims and commitments that Ahmed (2023) outlines in *The Feminist Killjoy Handbook*, including a promise to cause unhappiness and to refuse to participate in what brings us pain; to refuse to laugh when something is not funny. I am interested in how West fattens the killjoy through her explicit discussion of some killjoy activities as well as the underlying aims of fat liberation, which are, in their own ways, representative of a killjoy approach. This is not to say that Ahmed’s killjoy is inherently thin, but that, as Ahmed (2017) herself explains, there are many different killjoy positionalities. I begin this chapter with a discussion of desire, sexlessness, and bitterness. This sets up some of the affects expected from fat subjects as well as the ways that West presents, understands, and even rejects them. From there, I unpack the implications of fat bravery and the complications of

‘coming out’, alongside what Crawford (2017) calls a “fat presents/presence”. Lastly, I touch on the role of laughter for the (fat) killjoy.

The killjoy “creates an opportunity” to explore the nuances of fat activism and the prevailing ethos of “self-acceptance and healthy living” (Cooper, 2016, p. 37). As I outline in Chapter One, feminist approaches to fatness have tended toward an outlook that requires ‘positivity’ and ‘health’, where fatness is not miserable and one can be fat *and* ‘healthy’, or happy. Fatness, like feminism, should never dip its rolls into the pool of its own desires (to snack, to not laugh, to be angry, to take up space), lest it confirm the gluttonous, miserable stereotypes. Being small and demure is central to ‘desire capital’ (Harrison, 2021) and has its roots in the innocent white woman that Strings (2019) discusses in her analysis of anti-fatness and slavery, one who was not only complicit in racist structures but actively participated in upholding them. Body politics have always been inextricably linked to racist ideas of “morality” and “godliness”, and as Strings (2019) argues, it has always been paramount to these systems to protect the innocence of white women—including their bodies—in service of the nation and “the virility of the race” (p. 194). These ideas have never left, but alongside the current rise in anti-fatness, Ozempic®, and regression of even a mainstream ‘body positivity’, is a rise in conservatism and “tradwife” aesthetics. Crucial elements of this rise in conservatism are not just related to aesthetics such as thinness, “traditionally feminine” clothing, and subdued manicures (Shearing, 2025; Atlanta, 2025; Grose, 2025), but an insistence on a gender binary where women are quiet, demure, and anything but strident. As I mention in Chapter One, even liberal achievements such as increased availability of plus-size clothing and the inclusion of plus-size models, are being undone. In contrast to such regression, even an assimilationist fat politic could be deemed radical. Yet I am interested in continuing to run further away from

‘desire/ability’ (Harrison, 2021) and toward the killing of joy. Lindy West’s *Shrill* (2016) fattens the killjoy through the refusal of laughter, complicating bravery and ‘coming out’, and rebukes the body/mind split that a fat assimilationist approach champions, instead demonstrating an example of what disability scholars call the *bodymind* (Price, 2015). Importantly, *Shrill* (2016) is not a perfect, unfiltered expression of fat life, but a complicated archive of fat feelings. Although *Shrill* (2016) is often on ‘body positive’ reading lists, it is worthwhile to unpack what this book contributes to a fat epistemology that takes seriously a queer negativity and the *affective misfitting* that each text in this dissertation presents. As any progress made in the fat liberation space seems to be disappearing in real time, it is significant to look at the works that once seemed radical in the hopes that they may offer some guidance, knowledge, and perhaps some solace; a place for the fat killjoy to blossom.

West’s book demonstrates the complicated journey to, and aftermath of, ‘coming out’ as fat (Murray, 2005; Sedgwick, 1993) and refuses a tidy temporal journey of fat life. *Shrill* (2016) can be read as embracing what Lucas Crawford (2017) calls “a queer theory of fat presents/presence” (p. 466). Similar to Gay’s (2017) approach to the ‘timeline’ of her fatness, West writes on the process of becoming less shy and embracing her fatness, while also hating it and wanting to shrink herself into what Garland-Thomson (2011) calls “material anonymity” (p. 597). She refuses to advocate for a future where she becomes ‘thin’ and all her problems are solved. Instead, she stresses the tumultuous journey toward realizing that is not, in fact, the case. Moreover, West (2016) locates her fat hatred as something given to her by the world, an ‘ugliness’ that is done *to* her and is not *of* her. *Shrill* (2016) has messy, joyful, angry fatness; it does not tell a linear story of fat to thin, shy to outgoing, broken to healed, but instead presents

the complex temporality of fat life that refuses the normative journey from one embodiment (fat) to another (thin).

Bitterness, Bones, and Being Undesirable

In a review of *Shrill* (2016), Sarai Walker writes that a strength lies in “how adept West is at describing the exclusion that fat girls experience during their formative years and how this shapes their subjectivities” (2016, p. 232). Like Roxane Gay (Chapter Two) and Samantha Irby (Chapter Four), West captures these experiences with a blend of the personal and popular culture. *Shrill* (2016) opens with a chapter titled “Lady Kluck”, where West breaks down a list of fat women characters who were available for young girls to look up to during her adolescence. This list includes Lady Kluck from the *Robin Hood* cartoon (1973), Marla Hooch from *A League of Their Own* (1992), Miss Piggy, Ursula from *The Little Mermaid* (1989), Mrs. Potts from *Beauty and the Beast* (1991), and The Trunchbull from *Matilda* (1996), among others. West ends this chapter with a simple line: “Mother or monster. Okay, little girl—choose” (2016, p. 11). This theme permeates *Shrill* (2016), with both options, mother or monster, marking the fat woman as ‘undesirable’.²³ West writes, “A fat man can be Tony Soprano” or “John Candy, funny without being a human sight gag—but fat women were sexless mothers, pathetic punch lines, or gruesome villains” (2016, p. 3). Similarly, the “killjoy” (Ahmed, 2010) is projected as inherently “snappy” (Ahmed, 2017, p. 190), humourless, and unhappy. While the question of humour is addressed later in this chapter, this section touches on unhappiness, ‘desire/ability’ (Harrison, 2021), and the currency of bones.

²³ As I discuss in Chapter Four, these options are complicated by race. Black women are faced with the profoundly racist controlling images of The Mammy, The Jezebel, and The Sapphire.

By beginning with a discussion of popular culture, West orients herself in relation to hegemonic cultural messaging. As Walker (2016) remarks, “[o]ne of the things West wants to do is remedy the lack of female representation in our culture” (p. 233), situating West’s work as an important site of its own cultural messaging. *Shrill*, I argue, endeavours to orient fatness away from the question of “mother or monster”. One of the ways that West does this is through her embrace of bitterness. She writes, “the world is not kind to big, ugly women. Sometimes bitterness is the only defence” (West, 2016, p. 10). Bitterness is contrary to an approach that asks for ‘positivity’ and a performance of contrition for one’s fat body. Such bitterness does not emerge in a vacuum: bitterness becomes bitterness when an expression of anger (or what was once anger) is met with dismissal or a total refusal to listen (Boler & Davis, 2018). The accusation of bitterness is most often levied against those “that already have the least support and validation” (Campbell, 1994, p. 52) and whose bitterness now blocks “the goodwill that would be exercised toward them if they were not bitter” (Campbell, 1994, p. 53). Campbell (1994) uses examples of Black women and women of colour who are labelled as angry and thus not deserving of being heard. The “angry Black woman” persists as a violent accusation and stereotype, and both Gay (2017) and Irby (2013; 2017; 2020; 2023) discuss these experiences in their respective texts. West’s position as a white woman demonstrates why the racial origins of anti-fatness must not be overlooked, because for fatness to be painted ‘bitter’ is not without baggage, and the very fatphobic rhetorics and structures that make fat social life so difficult are bound to white supremacy.

Moreover, under a patriarchal framework, to be ‘desire/able’ (Harrison, 2021) is to be granted safety, comfort, access, and to be valuable in the eyes of cisgender, heterosexual men. Being ‘desired’ by these men means that you are deemed attractive and have currency in the

(hetero)sexual marketplace. West (2016) argues that “[d]enying people access to value is an incredibly insidious form of emotional violence, one that our culture wields aggressively and liberally to keep marginalized groups small and quiet” (p. 76). This is one example of how she integrates broader cultural commentary into her life writing. Fatness in and of itself does not “lead to an unacceptable subjectivity” but is shaped by the other “layers of identity projected onto fat bodies” (Hutter, 2023, p. 262). West’s text is an archive of her own experiences, reflecting the ordinary affective encounters in her fat life, which are mediated by whiteness but fall out of line with the image that white supremacy demands. A crucial part of that image is what Daniel Coleman (2006) calls “white civility”. Writing in a Canadian context, Coleman (2006) argues that the idea of civility in Canadian culture is “the formulation and elaboration of a specific form of whiteness based on a British model of civility. By means of this conflation of whiteness with civility, whiteness has been naturalized as the norm” (p. 5). Indeed, Canada’s international public image rests on ideas of politeness, yet the very idea of “politeness” is predicated on whiteness as racially superior (Coleman, 2006) and this extends beyond the border. Lind (2020) puts this idea of white civility into a queer fat studies context, arguing that because both fatness and queerness are already outside of the norm—and fatness itself is queered by virtue of its unruly embodiment—they also reject the notion of white civility. Of course, this does not mean that “white subjects become racialized in the context of fatphobia” (Lind, 2020, p. 190) but that “fat white subjects perform white civility poorly, because they are read as failing at thin aspiration” (Lind, 2020, p. 190). Through a commitment to being loud, shrill, and fat, West demonstrates what a rejection of white civility looks like and what it can do for the future of fat liberation.

West's comment about bitterness as "the only defence" (2016, p. 10) is reflected throughout her book where she writes about anger, jealousy, and broadly speaking, the sarcastic tone of her work. Sarcasm and bitterness may not be synonymous, but the accusation of "negativity" imposed upon sarcastic women is part and parcel of being the "unhappy feminist". As Hil Malatino (2021) argues, anger can be transformative, and West (2016) echoes this transformation in her discussion of becoming "the Ethel Merman of online fat disclosure" (p. 35). In "How to Stop Being Shy in Eighteen Easy Steps", West (2016) plays with the idea of time and transformation. Even the title of this chapter itself is a riff on the seemingly endless "How-To" guides geared towards fat people. West opens this essay with a warning: "Don't trust anyone who promises you a new life. Pick-up artists, lifestyle gurus, pyramid-scheme face cream evangelists, Weight Watchers coaches [...]" (2016, p. 34). She moves onto a discussion of the ways that, sure, you could follow some generic "miracle cure" advice, and maybe you really would "drop five pounds by eating Greek yogurt under the nurturing wing of a woman named Tanya" (West, 2016, p. 34); however, there are "no magic bullets" (West, 2016, p. 35). Despite this, West attempts to make a list of moments that helped change her from "a terror-stricken mouse-person to an unflappable human vuvuzela" (2016, p. 35), while warning that "lives don't have coherent, linear story arcs" (2016, p. 35). By mobilizing the "How-To", West plays with a familiar cultural artifact while sharing moments that are uncomfortable, complex, and funny. Her steps include: "Shoplift One Bean" (West, 2016, p. 37), "Accidentally Make Fun Of Your Mom's Friend's Barren Womb" (West, 2016, p. 39), "Do A Mediocre Oral Presentation On Thelonious Monk" (West, 2016, p. 39), "Join a Choir with Uniforms that Look Like Menopausal Genie Costumes" (West, 2016, p. 42), "Break A Heel On The Stairs In Your College's Humanities Building And Fall Down So Everyone Sees Your Underpants" (West, 2016, p. 43),

and “Break A Chair While Sitting on the Stage at a Comedy Show” (West, 2016, p. 49). While hilarious, many of the descriptions on this list contain instances where most anybody would be embarrassed, but especially if that somebody is fat. Fat people, as West herself notes, are not meant to take up space or draw attention to themselves (further attention than the stares of fatphobia already generate, that is). Perhaps the most significant item in West’s list is: “Tip Over a Picnic Table While Eating a Domino’s Pan Pizza in the Press Area of a Music Festival” (2016, p. 45). She writes:

A music festival is a kind of collective hangover in which people who are cooler than you compete to win a special kind of lanyard so they can get into a special tent [...]. The only food available to the non-lanyarded hoi polloi is the expensive garbage dispensed resentfully from a shack, which is how I found myself, in 2010, sitting alone at a picnic table in the press area of the Sasquatch! Music Festival, sweatily consuming a \$45 Domino’s pepperoni personal pan pizza and a Diet Pepsi and hoping nobody noticed me (West, 2016, p. 45).

Setting the stage for what happens next, West conjures a very specific image of a fat person, “sweatily” eating pizza in public. It is a common staple of anti-fat rhetoric to use images of real fat people, in public, living their lives, to create fearmongering around the ‘obesity epidemic’; headless torsos and blurred faces commonly show up in news features. There is no winning when you are a fat person eating in public. If you are eating something deemed ‘unhealthy’ you are ‘proving’ why you are fat. If you are eating something coded as ‘healthy’, you are either kidding yourself or you receive unsolicited praise about doing the right thing. Yet here is West, writing explicitly not only about being sweaty and eating pizza, but about tipping over an entire picnic table. She continues:

A little gust of wind picked up and blew my Domino’s napkin off the picnic table and onto the ground. No big deal. I leaned over, nonchalantly, to pick it

up. Gotta have a napkin! Can't be a fat lady eating pizza with red pig-grease all over my face! Unfortunately, due to my intense preoccupation with not drawing attention to myself while eating a Domino's personal pepperoni pan pizza in public at a music festival while fat, I misjudged the flimsy plastic picnic table's center of gravity. When I leaned over to grab the napkin, the table leaned over too. I fell in the dirt. The pizza fell on top of me. The Diet Pepsi tipped over and glugged all over my dress. The table fell on top of the Pepsi on top of the pizza on top of me. The napkin fluttered away. EVERYONE LOOKED AT ME (West, 2016, p. 46).

Two important things occur in this retelling. First, there is the way that West mobilizes humour.

Comedy is present throughout West's work, from the title of this book to the content itself.

Davies and Illott (2018) write that it is possible "to read comedy as a diagnosis of a particular society, revealing the boundaries, rules, and taboos that must be already in existence for the humour to work" (p. 10). To tell this story of a particularly fat embarrassment is to conjure the knowledge of anti-fat stereotypes into the space: the boundaries that a fat body ruptures, the taboo of fat eating, and the rules of normativity. West (2016) also addresses the tension of fat respectability. Since she "shouldn't" be eating pizza in public, the next step is to ensure that she is as neat, tidy, and in some ways, as invisible as possible. If you are going to be audacious enough to be fat and eat "pig-grease" in public, the least you can do is have a napkin close by.

The fat woman (at a music festival or otherwise) is aware that "to be visible or seen is a form of acknowledgement—that one exists or matters—but at other times it means one is different and is subject to inspection or scrutiny" (Gailey, 2014, p. 10). West (2016) refers to this very experience in both passages above with phrases like "hoping nobody would notice me" (p. 45), "can't be a fat lady eating pizza" (p. 46), "my intense preoccupation with not drawing attention to myself" (p. 46), and even the use of 'unfortunately' to qualify that intense preoccupation. As Gailey (2014) argues, those who are made hyper (in)visible "often notice disapproving stares and experience an intense 'onstage' feeling as if judged and ridiculed with every move" (p. 10). West

attempts, as much as possible, to avoid extra stares. She feels perceived, clocking the potential disasters that could arise and knowing what to avoid (grease stains, eating, mess). West (2016) brushes off the embarrassment by telling the witnesses to her topple that she was drunk. She writes, “[...] which wasn’t even true, but apparently it’s better to be drunk at ten in the morning than it is to be a human being who weighs something?” (West, 2016, p. 46). The space of the festival was never meant for a fat, “pig-grease” eating attendee—it was designed for the cool lanyards, drinking locally made IPAs before breakfast. This brings me to the second element in this passage. There are echoes of what Ahmed (2023) calls a “killjoy truth” and a “killjoy maxim” (p. 3). First, the “killjoy truth: you notice worlds when they are not built for you” (Ahmed, 2023, p. 144). Ahmed (2023) discusses this truth through the work of Garland-Thomson’s misfit (2011), which I also mobilize in this dissertation. This world, which is not built for the fat person, is felt not only through the toppling of the picnic table, but the ways that West describes the festival experience in the first place. There is a space where the ‘cool’ people belong, and the other space with the rest of the *hoi polloi*, where she is. Before the pizza disaster, West writes, she noticed somebody in a band that she went to college with: “[...] even before experimental pop fame, she’d been an untouchably cool and talented human lanyard who was also beautiful and nice. I chewed my oily pork puck” (2016, p. 45). The reference to the lanyard evokes the idea that some people (i.e. those with the right bodies) are implicitly welcomed into spaces that those without the lanyard are not. West is not a human lanyard; she is chewing on the oily pork puck. As Ahmed (2023) argues, “[w]e might become more conscious of our bodies when we try to fit ourselves into a space that is not built for us” (p. 144). West tells the story of a music festival fiasco, but it is also a story of being fat in a world oriented so far away from you.

To constantly have to be on guard, and to be hyperaware of how you might be perceived—no wonder bitterness is the only defence.

Second, the “killjoy maxim” that West (2016) evokes is “stay unhappy with this world” (Ahmed, 2023, p. 208). Ahmed (2023) writes, “when negativity is style, it is also substance. We express ourselves the way we do because of what we want for ourselves and others” (p. 209), which includes an interest in how we do *not* want to be included, referred to, or how we may *not* behave (i.e. withholding laughter, refusing to smile). West’s persistent sarcasm combined with her outright frustration is an expression of an earned unhappiness with the world. It also speaks to a disinterest in being palatable or made palatable by virtue of euphemism, politeness, or making oneself smaller. It is a refusal to separate herself from her fat body and her fat experiences. West (2016) concludes the pizza story: “All that anxiety about trying not to be a gross, gluttonous fat lady eating a ‘bad’ food in public, and I wound up being the fat lady who was so excited about pizza that she threw herself on the ground and rolled around in it like a dog with a raccoon carcass. Nailed it” (p. 46). This is not the turning point in a diet narrative or positioned as any sort of rock-bottom. Instead, West ends this chapter brushing off the humiliation she has faced. Her advice for coping with these situations is: “you go live” (2016, p. 50). To live a fat life means you may encounter more humiliation by virtue of the *misfit* (Garland-Thomson, 2011) of your being; but you should still eat the personal pepperoni pizza. At the same time, *Shrill* (2016) holds space for the contradictions of subjectivity. Beyond the gift of hindsight, there is no straightforward path to framing your tumultuous experiences as something to laugh at. By addressing the range of her emotional relationship to her fatness, West (2016) opens a landscape for the complicated shame of being hyper-visible and confined by the stereotypes thrown at fatness.

The “shy” in “How to Stop Being Shy...” is also linked to West’s being fat/fat being. This is not to say that all fat people are shy, but that when the world is oriented away from you, even at a young age you become cautious. In “Are You There, Margaret? It’s Me, A Person Who Is Not a Complete Freak”²⁴, West (2016) writes about the ways that her adolescence, including the onset of menstruation, was shaped by the reactions to her body. She discusses that the anxiety already instilled in her exacerbated her fear around the woes of having her period, writing: “Part of that anxiety came from the fact that, as a fat kid, I was already on high alert for humiliation at all times. When your body is treated like one big meat-blooper, you don’t open yourself up to unnecessary embarrassment. I was a careful, exacting child. I hoarded my dignity” (West, 2016, p. 30). This caution continues to permeate the everyday encounters of fat life, as West writes: “Even now, I watch where I step. I double-check before I publish. I avoid canoes” (2016, p. 30). While the latter might be a clever quip, it still points to the ways that fatness never fits—of course the canoe tipped over, fat was in it. LeBesco (2001) argues that “[s]ubjects are constituted by the process of excluding and abjecting [sic], so it is necessary to reflect on how these processes shape fat identity” (p. 78). West’s early understanding of her fat identity, as she explains, was shaped not only by cultural messaging but personal encounters, writing: “I got good at being small early on—socially, if not physically” (2016, p. 13). Being careful, exacting, nervous, and refusing to be loud or take up physical space are hallmarks of the impact of anti-fatness. When one’s body already spills over normative expectations and ideals, then at least you can attempt to make yourself smaller in other ways. You can try to orient yourself in the right ways, and if not performing the ‘good fatty’, then at least you could be quiet. In other words, “[...] the demands on the body become so ingrained in the socialization process that women

²⁴ A reference to the iconic book by Judy Blume.

become, to themselves, their own jailers” (Giovanelli & Ostertag, 2009, p. 290). And they are, indeed, *demands*. As West writes, “Over time, the knowledge that I was too big made my life smaller and smaller” (2016, p. 16). From cancelling plans to avoid the possibility of a too-small restaurant chair to being denied the present-tense of her own body, West (2016) makes plain the way that the world is oriented away from her, not that she is purposefully away from the world.

Part of the disorientation between fatness and the world happens through the very technologies that allow one to see more of the world. In addition to her picnic table fiasco, West shares a moment all too common to fat life (and fat life writing): the ill-fitting airplane seat. In “The Day I Didn’t Fit” (2016, p. 134), West describes the moment she no longer ‘fit’ or at least could no longer pretend to fit: “I was still the kind of fat person who could move through the straight-sized world without causing too many ripples. Until I couldn’t” (2016, p. 136). As if air travel is not daunting enough (if it weren’t, the richest among us would not fly first class or private), it is further complicated when the seat is not designed with you in mind. West (2016) addresses this through her experience upgrading to first class, as well as the moment she did not fit. She writes, “[o]ne time, I flew first class on an airplane, because when I checked in they offered me a fifty-dollar upgrade, and when you are a fat person with fifty dollars and somebody offers you a 21-inch recliner instead of a 17-inch trash compacter [sic], you say YES” (West, 2016, p. 134). Airplanes seats have become smaller and smaller by design in order to increase airline profits (Gordon, 2020) and, as I mentioned in Chapter Two, to deter the ‘wrong’ people from travelling. West (2016) continues, shattering the myth of first class while pointing out the absurd nature of its existence in the first place, writing,

[...] it was simply an average-sized chair with a human amount of leg room (as opposed to coach seats, which are novelty-sized file drawers with an elfin

amount of leg room). It wasn't unbearable. The highest praise I can give it is that it was adequate. It had succeeded at being a chair instead of a flying social experiment about the limits of human endurance. The rich aren't paying for luxury—they're paying for basic humanity (p. 135).

Fat people on planes are met with stares, worried looks that they will be seated next to you, glares and complaints, and sometimes outright violence.

West details not only a negative encounter on an airplane, but her experience sharing this story online and the response to it. After arriving at her row, she pointed to the middle seat and said "Hey, sorry, I'm over there" (West, 2016, p. 139). In response, she writes, her seat mate "didn't respond or make eye contact, just glared blankly at my hips" (West, 2016, p. 139). Upon moving to put her bag in the overhead bin, this stranger muttered something about saying "excuse me". West continues, "I froze. Was someone being a dick to me? In person? At seven a.m.? In an enclosed space?" (2016, p. 139). Eventually, West responds and asks this stranger what he said, and after he tries to brush it off, she finally gets her answer, of sorts: "'I said,' he snapped, 'that if you want someone to move, it helps to say 'excuse me' and then get out of the way. You told me to move and then you just—' He gestured with a large circle motion at my body" (2016, p. 139). After the plane finished loading and nobody else joined their row, West told him "Looks like there's no one in the middle seat, so you won't actually have to sit next to me. Since I apparently bother you so much" (2016, p. 140). Later, she writes, she "passive-aggressively" (West, 2016, p. 140) nudged his foot with her backpack but was sure to say "excuse me". However, this encounter does not end at the airplane doors. After sharing the experience in a piece for *Jezebel*, West (2016) writes that "[e]ven less popular than being fat on a plane, I soon discovered, was talking about being fat on a plane with anything but groveling, poo-eating penitence" (p. 143). The issue of fitting is not confined to space, but hangs in the air,

slick with the insidiousness of fatphobia. West writes, “one particularly putrid community of misogynists threatened to ‘report me to the FBI’ for ‘assault and battery in a federal airspace’” (2016, p. 146). West then shares a large excerpt from one of these misogynists in “The Day I Didn’t Fit” that included: “Society must realize there are consequences to fat feminist beliefs. They range from the concrete (not fitting on airplanes) to creating a class of perennial female victims-seekers [sic] who have no notion of personality [sic] responsibility” (2016, p. 146). The oppressive force of anti-fatness is inherently misogynistic and racist. It seeks to destroy any person outside ‘desire capital’ (Harrison, 2021) and quash a fat feminism that is loudly opposed to that very system. Even something as small as West demanding that her seat mate speak directly to her (instead of mumbling about her to himself) is seen as an act of unacceptable revolt. With her signature sarcasm, West (2016) summarizes the joy of fat air travel:

If you’ve never tried cramming your hips into an angular metal box that’s an inch or two narrower than your flesh (under the watchful eye of resentful tourists) then sitting motionless in there for five hours while you fold your arms and shoulders up like a dying orchid in order to be as unobtrusive as possible, run, don’t walk (p. 136).

This echoes the “poo-eating penitence” that West quips. If your embodiment is “obtrusive”, then you must make everything else about yourself as small and accommodating as possible. Air travel is a particularly uncomfortable arena for this shrinking to take place, not only for fat people but for anybody on a plane who happens to have an embodiment deemed other—your wheelchair will be damaged, you are holding up the boarding process with your walker, are you sure you’re meant to be in first class?²⁵ While West tells the story of a moment where she spoke

²⁵ To say nothing of the irony that this world, which demands the maintenance of the nuclear family to uphold these very systems of bigotry, *hates* to hear a crying baby on a plane.

up, this process of becoming the outspoken killjoy is not easy or straight-forward. “The Day I Didn’t Fit” is not only about the orientation of air travel but the moments in fat life where you reckon with your own fatness and relationship to it.

As I stated at the beginning of this chapter, such a reckoning starts early. Reflecting on puberty, West (2016) writes about seeing her friends grow taller and leaner: “I remained a stump. I wasn’t jealous, exactly; I loved them, but I felt cheated” (p. 17). This feeling of being “cheated” demonstrates how, even at an early age, fat people can perceive which bodies are praised and can understand the currency of youth. She continues,

[w]e each just get a few years to be perfect. [...] I was missing my window, I could feel it pulling at my navel (my obsessively hidden, hated navel) [...]. Deep down, in my honest places, I knew it was already gone—I had stretch marks and cellulite long before twenty—but they tell you that if you hate yourself hard enough, you can grab just a tail feather or two of perfection (West, 2016, p. 17).

In the framework of anti-fatness, hating yourself is the first step toward being ‘better’; it is to agree with anti-fatness that you are against your own body, and you will accept your punishment(s) accordingly. Moreover, it is to begin your penance. It is to begin to show less and less of your flesh, less and less of your being, less and less of yourself. West’s (2016) comment about missing her window echoes the anti-fat rhetorics of “letting yourself go”, as if there is a specific place that is ‘here’—and of course, for the anti-fat world, the only way to be ‘here’ is to be thin. Before I turn to presence and bravery, I want to briefly reflect on the unbearable weight of the clavicle.

In “Bones”, West (2016) speaks to the experience of trying to make herself smaller, and the societal expectations that pressure fatness to shrink and bodies to conform. She writes:

So, what do you do when you're too big, in a world where bigness is cast not only as aesthetically objectionable, but also as a moral failing? You fold yourself up like origami, you make yourself smaller in other ways, you take up less space with your personality, since you can't with your body. You diet. You starve, you run until you taste blood in your throat, you count your almonds, you try to buy back your humanity with pounds of flesh (West, 2016, p. 13, emphasis mine).

While her fat body is not so easily changed, her personality could, in some ways, be muted to be more “materially anonymous” (Garland-Thomson, 2011, p. 595) than her embodiment allows. West (2016) remarks on changing her personality, on making her affective presence less noticeable, of attempting to buy back a piece of dignity through the sacrifice of flesh when other methods fall short. Additionally, West’s reference to almonds is a nod to a popular diet food—a handful of almonds instead of the snack you really want, each one a rough (and dry) price to pay for performing contrition for your fat body. An important method of refusing this contrition, however, is the reclamation of the word ‘fat’. The fat killjoy is *fat*, not ‘curvy’, ‘plus size’, or ‘big’. These euphemisms attempt to distance the fat *person* from their fat *body*, as if these can be separated. West (2016) writes, “I dislike ‘big’ as a euphemism, maybe because it’s the one chosen most often by people who mean well, who love me and are trying to be gentle with my feelings. I don’t want the people who love me to avoid the reality of my body” (p. 14). To use ‘big’ is not gentle; rather, it is as irritating as the almond skin that sticks in your teeth. It is an attempt to make fat smaller through language, especially if one’s body cannot shrink as quickly as it ‘should’. West continues,

I don’t want them to feel uncomfortable with its size and shape, to tacitly endorse the idea that fat is shameful, to pretend I’m something I’m not out of deference to a system that hates me. I don’t want to be gentled, like I’m something wild and alarming. (If I’m going to be wild and alarming, I’ll do it on my terms.) I don’t want them to think that I need a euphemism at all (2016, p. 14).

The euphemism is not for the fat person; it is for the speaker. West (2016) again conjures Ahmed's (2013) maxim to remain unhappy: "[...] we are *not* going to soften our appearance or words to make you feel more comfortable" (p. 209, emphasis in original). Ironical when you consider the softness of fat versus the softness of bones. As West (2016) explains,

People go on and on about boobs and butts and teeny waists, but the clavicle is the benchmark of female desirability. It is a fetish item. Without visible clavicles, you might as well be a meatloaf in the sexual marketplace. And I don't mean Meatloaf the person, who has probably got laid lotsa [sic] times despite the fact that his clavicle is buried so deep as to be mere urban legend, because our culture does not have a creepy sexual fixation on the bones of meaty men. Only women. Show us your bones, they say. If only you were nothing but bones (p. 18).

To reach the clavicle is to "buy back your dignity" (West, 2016, p. 13) with an unlimited amount of flesh. West continues: "The real scam is that being bones isn't enough either. The game is rigged" (2016, p. 19). Indeed, it is a trap. If intercourse is a crucial part of the (hetero)sexual marketplace, then several of the characters in "Lady Kluck" should be considered successful—they did not become mothers through immaculate conception. But they are not, by virtue of their fatness (unlike Meatloaf, as the case may be). West (2016) remarks in "Bones" that "there were people-sized people, and then there was me" (p. 12). Is it any wonder, then, that so many of the cultural images West references in "Lady Kluck" are not fat *people*, but fat creatures or animals? Under the system of whiteness, fatness is decidedly 'unhuman' (Strings, 2019; Harrison, 2021), and crucial to this unhuman-ness is the way that fat bodies are both hypersexualized and fetishized as well as reviled.

It is true that "mainstream culture portrays fat as an invisible sexuality, and further portrays fat as undesirable, or implies that you're 'stooping' to have sex with someone fat" (Lee,

2014, p. 89). This cultural messaging clearly comes through, as West concludes “Lady Kluck” with the lessons she learned from those fat movie characters available to her:

I could not claim any sexual agency unless I force myself upon a genteel frog; or unless, as part of a jewel caper, I was trying to deduce a base, horny fool such as a working-class rhinoceros; and if I insisted on broadcasting my sexuality anyway, I would be exiled to a sea cave to live eternally in a dank garden of worms, hoping that a gullible hot chick might come along once in a while so I could grift her out of her sexy voice. Even in those rare scenarios, my sexuality would still be a joke, an oddity, or a menace (2016, p. 11).

The trap goes beyond becoming bones, as even the ‘successful’ fats in West’s examples are “odd” and “menacing”. The logics of the (hetero)sexual marketplace continue to be profoundly illogical: if a fat woman is single, it is her fault, yet if she is partnered it must be some sort of joke. In 2022, West took part in an interview²⁶ with her spouse, Ahamefule Oluo²⁷ and their shared partner, Roya Amirsoleymani²⁸. Immediately, the comments became about how West was fat while Amirsoleymani was not, and thus Oluo ultimately wanted to leave West for this thinner person. The trio’s body language was “analyzed” by internet trolls who decided that West must be so miserable and desperate to keep her spouse that she “allowed” them to bring another woman into the fold. Addressing this in an Ask Me Anything (AMA) on her Substack, *Butt News*, West (2022) remarked:

There were a bunch of things going on at once: I’m super comfortable on camera and with sharing personal stuff and Roya is not at all. Aham and I both wanted to make sure that Roya felt supported and cared for, so I wanted him to be able to turn toward her and offer her whatever she needed. Also I remember thinking

²⁶ See StyleLikeU “[Polyamory is Not Too Good To Be True: Lindy, Roya, & Aham on the Best Relationship of Their Lives](#)” (2022).

²⁷ Oluo uses he/him/they/them pronouns. They are a multi-disciplinary artist and jazz musician, and the sibling of writer Ijeoma Oluo. See: <https://www.instagram.com/ahamefule/?hl=en>.

²⁸ Amirsoleymani uses she/her pronouns. She is an art curator, writer, and producer working in the contemporary and performance art field. See: <https://www.royamir.com/>.

explicitly that if I was clutching at Aham's arm in the video that viewers would seize on THAT to say that I looked desperate and sad.

Fat sexuality is continuously ridiculed and laughed at. It is a joke, of course, that a fat person could be desired and loved; it is unrealistic that not one, but *two* thin people could be interested in the same fat person.²⁹ The prevailing response to the trio's interview was that West is deluding herself and there is no way these partners are sexually and romantically interested in her. Remember: neither the mother nor the monster gets to be adored.

Additionally, the queer element of this dynamic no doubt contributed to the negative reactions (though West has a history of being trolled on the internet for doing anything and everything). There is an overlap between fat studies and queer theory, particularly around the queerness of fat sexuality by virtue of being a non-normative embodiment (White, 2012; 2016). Lee (2014) discusses the complication of understanding her own bisexuality while being fat, writing, "I felt that my sexuality wouldn't be accepted because I had always felt that my body was unacceptable, fat and ugly" (p. 91). West echoes these sentiments in her AMA responses where, when asked about her sexuality, she replied "Aham said a really insightful thing as this all started unfolding, which was that for most of life I didn't have a love for my own body so it was hard to imagine loving other women's bodies. I was wrong!" (West, 2022). She goes on to share that despite being a public figure of sorts, she resents having to navigate parasocial dynamics. Yet, at the same time, it felt shameful to hide. When asked about the decision to "come out", West (2022) answered: "This kind of public disclosure is actually not my favourite thing to do, but it would be wildly disrespectful to Roya to pretend that she isn't an important part of my

²⁹ West also remarks in *Shrill* (2016) that at one point there were message boards dedicated to comparing her to Oluo's first wife, who was thin.

life”. While this ‘coming out’ happened years after *Shrill* (2016), it is a part of West’s current public image, and I find that it still links to many of the themes highlighted in her book. In “How to Stop Being Shy...”, West comments on one of the moments where she realized how unflappable she had become: “[...] when my wedding photo with the caption ‘FAT AS HELL’ was on the motherfucking cover of a *print newspaper* in England (where Mr. Darcy could see it!!!!!!!!!!), and my only reaction was a self-high five” (2016, p. 37, emphasis in original). Bringing Jane Austen’s famous character into the space is both funny and poignant (Elizabeth Bennett was headstrong but she was not fat), as *Pride and Prejudice* remains a popular cultural image of romance. By contrasting herself with such a figure, West highlights the strength of a fat killjoy. The interview with West, Oluo, and Amirsoleymani, as well as West’s AMA remain public as do her social media postings about her partners. Though this was not a *fat* ‘coming out’, the view of fat sexuality as inherently deviant played a role in the response. This is not, however, the first public ‘coming out’ that West has been involved in. For that, I turn to “Hello, I Am Fat”.

Coming Out: Bravery, Presence, and the Bodymind

During her time at the alternative newspaper *The Stranger*, West published a somewhat infamous article, “Hello, I Am Fat” (2011). The article and the response involved the creator and editor of the newspaper, Dan Savage, now a popular gay relationship columnist and podcaster. In a chapter of the same name, West (2016) reflects on the original post and her reaction to it five years later.³⁰ I am interested in West’s changing approach to fat liberation as presented in her reflections, as well as the more recent iteration of “Hello, I Am Fat” in the television adaptation

³⁰ West ends the chapter “Hello, I Am Fat” remarking on the fact that the 2016 Dan she knows is different than the Dan in 2011. However, now nearly 10 years after *Shrill*, Savage remains an example of the decidedly not Queer politics of white, cisgender gay people – especially those who are wealthy and famous.

of *Shrill* (2019-2021). In *Shrill* (2016), West opens “Hello, I Am Fat” with a brief explanation of *The Stranger* and the looming figure of Dan Savage. She writes that by the time she became a full-time staff member, Savage was “already medium-famous” and while he was not in the office, “the culture of the place was all Dan” (West, 2016, p. 87). Despite Savage’s insistence in his responses to West that he was “not her boss”, he was indeed the editorial director of *The Stranger* and held a great deal of power. West (2016) explains that Savage was on “something of an ‘obesity epidemic’ kick” (p. 88). She writes, “At the same time that I was tentatively opening to the idea that my humanity was not hostage to my BMI, the rest of the nation had declared a ‘war on obesity’” (West, 2016, p. 88). The context of “Hello, I Am Fat” (2011) is that “a few perspicacious trolls” (West, 2016, p. 92) began to connect West’s embodiment to Savage’s anti-fat rhetoric. West writes that she, too, began to wonder: “Why didn’t he see that when he wrote about fat people, he was writing about me, Lindy West, his colleague and friend? Why should I, as an employee, have to swallow that kind of treatment at my job?” (p. 92). Anti-fatness at work is not a rare experience, and having it unfold online meant there was a public arena for this ‘debate’, which West unpacks in *Shrill* (2016) and re-imagines in *Shrill* (2019-2021). While working on this chapter for *Shrill*, West (2016) writes that she found that her original email was not quite how she remembered it. Shared in the book, West’s original email includes passages like: “Just curious: who are these hordes of fat people chasing you around insisting that eating pot pies all day is awesome and good for your health? Because, um, I don’t believe you” (2016, p. 93), and “I don’t give a shit if you think I lie on the couch all day under the Dorito funnel—I’d just rather not be abused on the Internet from inside my own workplace” (2016, p. 94). The sarcasm around “eating pot pies all day” being “good for your health” conjures the rules of what ‘health’ is, as well as the idea that fat people become fat solely due to their eating habits. Indeed,

this line is reminiscent of the contrition that fat people are required to perform and is less present in *Shrill* (2016) than in her 2011 post. At the same time, the joke about a “Dorito funnel” is a sarcastic response to the very images of fatness that fatphobes conjure up.

In response to her post, West writes, Savage reached out to her to ask if she ever felt that he was hostile toward her personally. She explains that things went “back to normal” with what the paper published around “obesity” until Savage wrote a post titled “Ban Fat Marriage”.³¹ Reflecting on the fallout of her response to Savage’s post, West (2016) writes: “Passively attempting to earn my humanity by being smart, nice, friendly, and good at my job had gotten me nowhere [...]” (p. 97). Instead, she says, “I did what—honestly—I thought Dan would do: On Feb 11, 2011, I wrote a scorched-earth essay and, vibrating with adrenaline, posted it publicly at the tail end of a sunny Friday afternoon” (2016, p. 97). This is the post titled “Hello, I Am Fat”, and it is a significant example of the complications of a fat ‘coming out’. West (2016) explains,

Remember that, at this point in my life, I had never self-identified as ‘fat’ except in that single e-mail exchange with Dan, and in private conversations with trusted friends. Even then, I spoke the word only with shame, not power. Never in public. Never defiantly. Something had snapped in me the week of this post. This was a big deal, a spasm of self-determination rendered in real time (p. 98).

The mobilization of ‘self-determination’ is worth troubling. As I wrote in Chapter One (Theory & Method), the closet—of size, of sexuality—is not a safe or even possible space for some to occupy. Some people are never able to seek comfort in the closet, while others stay inside until they emerge on their own. Moreover, self-determination is both not easy to grasp *and* something

³¹ The irony of this approach by Savage is addressed in *Shrill* the TV show, where Annie asks Gabe how he isn’t more sympathetic as a gay man. The response from Gabe is that being gay isn’t a choice, whereas being fat is. Savage’s choice to post something with this title when gay marriage was still four years from becoming legal in the U.S. highlights the importance of addressing overlapping systems of oppression and not treating them as disparate issues.

one can possess while remaining in the closet. They are not mutually exclusive. However, for West, this is a moment of claiming space for herself and being defiant; it is also the product of finally snapping under the weight of anti-fat bias. Ahmed (2017) writes that “the feminist killjoy might herself be a snappy figure; feminists might be perceived as full of snap. Maybe there is a relation between willful and snapful” (p. 190). There is a connection, certainly, as West describes herself as having “snapped” (2016, p. 98) while also addressing the fact that she knew she was too popular a writer on the platform to be fired. To refuse to go along to get along is central to the killjoy (Ahmed, 2010; 2017; 2023). Moreover, as Ahmed (2017) writes, “a snap might seem sudden, but the suddenness is only apparent; a snap is one moment of a longer history of being affected by what you come up against” (p. 190). The unrelenting anti-fatness of the world is enough to make one snap, whether their picnic table topples or not. What Savage (and other fatphobes) understood as projection³², and what continues to be read as misery and misplaced anger by anti-fat crusaders, is the result of what happens when the world is hostile toward you by design.

In the television adaptation of *Shrill*, Annie (based on West, played by Aidy Bryant) finally ‘snaps’ after a similar encounter with her boss, Gabe (based on Savage and Savage-like figures, played by John Cameron Mitchell). In the show, West and her creative team³³ visually illustrate this ‘snap’ when Annie returns home from an argument with Gabe and unleashes a rant

³² As West (2016) shares, Savage’s reply included “It sounds like you’re externalizing an internal conflict about being fat—you’re projecting your anger and self-loathing onto me [...]” and “I’m happy to be your own personal bogeyman” (p. 104).

³³ West was heavily involved in developing and executive producing the show, meaning she had some level of authority over the way things were depicted in the program.

onto her roommate, Fran (played by Lolly Adefope)³⁴ and Fran's love interest (played by Melanie Field), both of whom are also fat. Pacing back and forth, Annie emphatically declares:

Isn't it already bad enough that he is constantly writing about the obesity epidemic like it's some abstract, far away thing? And it's like, that's me, you know? Like, I'm the obesity epidemic, and you know me [...]. And also, it's like, okay cool man, really fucking cool, very original point, no shit. You don't think the whole world isn't constantly telling me that I'm a fat piece of shit who doesn't try hard? (Irby & King, 2019)³⁵.

Annie continues, “[...] it's a fucking mind-prison, you know? That every fucking woman everywhere has been programmed to believe, you know? And I've wasted so much time and energy and for what? For what, you know? I'm fat; I'm fucking fat. Hello. I'm fuckin fat, you know?” (Irby & King, 2019). This scene makes visual a fat ‘coming out’, similar to that which West describes in *Shrill* (2016), where she writes: “Something lurched awake inside of me. They talk to you this way until you ‘come out’ as fat. They talk to you this way until you make them stop” (p. 93). ‘coming out’ may be one piece of that equation, but it is also no guarantee that something will stop. It is, however, part of what it means to be a fat killjoy—to refuse to back down on the correct words, to be defiant and willful. Indeed, in both the response to West's post and in Annie's character, *they* are the problem, making something out of nothing in the eyes of bigots.

Near the end of the original “Hello, I Am Fat”, West (2011) comments that when she started ignoring anti-fat bigots, she started to lose weight. In *Shrill* (2016), she remarks that if she

³⁴ While this chapter is not about dissecting the TV show in detail (there are many excellent reviews on the subject), I find it puzzling that the show never made the connections between anti-fatness and racism. While Fran does have her own plotline outside of being Annie's best friend, and there is an episode where Annie gets checked on her decision to interview some white survivalists, there is never any discussions of their distinct experiences of fatphobia, misogyny, and racism.

³⁵ Samantha Irby was on the *Shrill* writing staff and penned this episode.

could, she would rewrite this, stating, “[w]hat I was trying to convey was that if anti-fat crusaders really want what they claim to want—for fat people to be ‘healthy’—they should be on the front lines of size acceptance and fat empowerment” (p. 103). West uses footnotes throughout *Shrill* to convey not only comedic anecdotes, but reflections like this one, and some of the points she makes are worth troubling from a fat studies perspective. She continues the aforementioned footnote, writing: “There’s hard science to back this up: Shame contributes measurably to weight gain, not weight loss. Loving yourself is not antithetical to health. It is intrinsic to health. You can’t take good care of a thing you hate” (West, 2016, p. 103). This argument is understandable, however, whether or not you hate or love your body does not guarantee you are able to “take good care” of it. At the same time, there is no guarantee that “taking good care” of yourself leads to ‘health’, and of course, what ‘health’ means is incredibly limiting. However, the overarching point being made is that if, as they claim, fatphobes truly were concerned with ‘health’, they would not be using bigotry as the means to achieve this so-called ‘health’. There is no ‘health’ without safety, and there is no safety alongside bigotry. This love-yourself approach is common in ‘body positivity’ and fat assimilationist rhetoric where the primary discourse used to combat anti-fatness is that fat people can be fat *and* just like thin people in every other respect. This further complicates ‘coming out’ by creating the expectation that one will immediately be ‘normative’ and prideful. In a conversation piece with Michael Moon, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick (1993) argues that ‘coming out’ as fat “is a way of staking one’s claim to insist on, and participate actively in, a renegotiation of *the representational contract* between one’s body and one’s world” (p. 27, emphasis in original). Despite the visibility of fat, to “come out” is to become part of the conversation as a subject. Fat studies scholar Samantha Murray (2005) argues that this process inherently demands a performance of positivity and is

critical of Sedgwick's insistence that to "come out" opens possibilities "to being *seen in new ways*" (p. 157, emphasis in original). For Murray, this process relies upon an individual approach of "self-empowerment" (2005, p. 106) and is part of an "assimilationist agenda" (2005, p. 106). Fat assimilationism demands normative performances of fat which are reflective of 'body positivity', yet it still requires a fat subjectivity that is thin-in-progress. On the one hand, as Sedgwick (1993) suggests, to "come out" can allow one to participate in the (re)negotiation of the relationship between one's embodiment and the world. Yet, at the same time, under the structures of anti-fatness there is only so much (re)negotiation allowed.

The irony of 'body positivity' is reflected in West's essay "You're So Brave for Wearing Clothes and Not Hating Yourself" (2016, p. 67). West (2016) writes, "'where do you get your confidence?' is a complex, dangerous question. First of all, if you are a thin person, please do not go around asking fat people where they got their confidence in the same tone you'd ask a shark how it learned to breathe air and manage an Orange Julius" (p. 67). In other ways, do not ask a fat person where they got their confidence as if it is an impossibility. West continues that the subtext of this question is: "You must be some sort of alien because if I looked like you, I would definitely throw myself into the sea" (2016, p. 68). The accusation of "bravery" implies that a fat person's confidence is unearned as they have not yet excavated the thin person inside. To say, "you are so brave" or "I could never be that confident" is to say, "you have broken the rules and dared to dress and act how you want without earning it through punishing your body". By flipping this on its head and sarcastically addressing "bravery", West employs a "fat present" (Crawford, 2017), which refuses an "ever-slenderer future" (Crawford, 2017, p. 466). Crawford (2017) argues that "fat people are mandated to live in the future exclusively, all while being denied access to any cultural fantasies of a future" (p. 448). This manifests in the discourses of

weight-loss where there is always an ‘after’ to strive for, while at the same time, the rhetoric of the ‘obesity epidemic’ is one of death and demise. For Crawford (2017), fat bodies are assigned causality more often than non-fat bodies—they are assigned fault or what Gay (2017) calls the “why”. In contrast, a “fat present” is one with a “fat *presence*” (Crawford, 2017, p. 448, emphasis mine). It is a temporality that will not be deterred by the insistence on a slender future, instead interested in “casting off economic rhetorics of personal investment and accumulation in favour of being ‘a lot’” (Crawford, 2017, p. 466). In other words, a future not governed by neoliberal body politics that promotes individual responsibility and participation in the market of ‘desire capital’.

Furthermore, Crawford (2017) theorizes “fat presents/presence” alongside Sedgwick’s (1994) poem “The Use of Being Fat” (p. 458) as it plays with temporality and affect. I find echoes of this poem in “You’re So Brave...” (West, 2016, p. 67). West, like Sedgwick (1994), tells a story of a shifting temporality that is fat in both past and present—it has a *fat presence*. She writes: “I hate being fat. I hate the way people look at me, or don’t. I hate being a joke; I hate the disorienting limbo between too visible or invisible; I hate the way that complete strangers waste my life out of supposed concern for my death [...]” (West, 2016, p. 77). Here, West conjures both death and the future while also lamenting the ‘disorientation’ of being fat in this world. She continues,

I also love being fat. The breadth of my shoulders makes me feel safe. I am unassailable. I intimidate. I am a polar icebreaker. I walk and climb and lift things, I can open your jar, I can absorb blows—literal and metaphorical—meant for other women, smaller women, breakable women, women who need me. My bones feel iron—heavy, but strong (West, 2016, p. 77).

This passage is reflective of some of Sedgwick's own words: "I used to have a superstition that / there was this use to being fat: / no one I loved could come to harm enfolded in my touch—/ that lot of me would blot it up [...]" (1994, p. 15). Like Sedgwick (1994), West (2016) returns to what her fat can do by virtue of its expansiveness and what it offers the people around her; moreover, for West the strength of being fat is inherently tied to her kinship with other women and a sense of feminist solidarity. In arguing for a "fat presents/presence", Crawford (2017) also challenges a reading of Sedgwick's poem such as that advanced by Berlant (2011) wherein fat is "a stable layer of protection that makes one not-present to feeling or the world" (p. 459). This idea can also be found in their contribution to *Feminisms: Redux* (2009), where Berlant argues that fatness results in a "a slower emotional metabolism" (p. 249). This metabolism includes "hoarding knowledge" and making one's body "into a grotesque shield" (Berlant, 2009, p. 249). For Berlant (2009; 2011), fatness is a layer of protection that keeps one emotionally and intellectually separated from the world, yet for West (2016) and Sedgwick (1994), it is quite the opposite. Crawford (2017) argues that the subtext of Sedgwick's poem is that fatness persists and is ever present; it is protection *and* it is present to feeling. This same sense of presence and protection is echoed in *Shrill*, not only in the passage above, but as West (2016) continues: "I used to say that being fat in our culture was like drowning (in hate, in blame, in your own tissue), but lately I think it's more like burning. After three decades in the fire, my iron bones are steel (p. 78)". That same steel leads Sedgwick (1994) to conclude "[...] maybe still there is something to my superstition" (p. 15) that being fat is useful. We might also read this "present" as a gift, something that West certainly reflects in the passage above through her admiration for the gifts that fatness provides her.

Crucial to a fat present/presence is a refusal of the body/mind separation. Critical disability studies scholars use the term “bodymind” to combat the Cartesian insistence on a body-mind dualism (Brocco, Meek, & Saffitz, 2025). Margaret Price (2015) describes the “bodymind” as an approach where “mental and physical processes not only affect each other but also give rise to each other—that is, because they tend to act as one, even though they are conventionally understood as two—it makes more sense to refer to them together” (p. 269). A common refrain in so-called ‘body positive’ rhetoric is that you are not your body; fat is something you *have*, not something you *are*. You are not your fat body, rather, it is merely an obstacle to overcome. Under this framework, since there is no *fat self*, there can be no *fat bodymind*. Instead, there is an insistence on changing your mind about your body as the primary route to liberation, but this path is complicated. On the one hand, as West (2016) discusses, there is something to be said for giving oneself love and care. On the other hand, this is not a solution to structural violence. In fact, structural violence is a hindrance to achieving ‘self-love’. Much like the complexity of self-determination in the passage I discussed earlier, to be embodied is not so easy. Or, as Kimberly Dark (2024) writes: “Nobody should be forced to be embodied and mindful—especially in locations with company where power imbalances abound. It makes good sense for some people, and in some settings, to be only partially present, or to keep one’s guard up” (p. 70). It is true that it is easier for some to claim their fatness as their own and their bodies as who they are. In mixed company, to say “I am fat” can yield the very responses that West (2016) describes; immediate refrains of “I wish you could see yourself the way I see you” (p. 71). Fat blindness does not exist; there is only the insistence that fat is a bad word and to own it is to say something disparaging about yourself. A “fat presence” demands to be firmly in the here and now—presently fat—yet it is possible to hold that presence while also keeping your

guard up. This is what the fat killjoy can do: remain willful and armed with the embodied knowledge of experience. The fat bodymind does not require that you be embodied at all times, but it does demand the recognition that fatness is not lost in the past and gone in the future the way that anti-fatness proponents might want.

West (2016) elicits a fat bodymind that also addresses the relational construction of subjectivity. She writes, “[p]lease don’t forget: I am my body. When my body gets smaller, it is still me. When my body gets bigger, it is still me. There is not a thin woman inside me, awaiting excavation. I am one piece” (West, 2016, p. 15). *Shrill* (2016) does not attempt to separate the body from the self. Fat is present throughout the text, as West, and there is no journey to loving yourself *in spite of* your fatness. West names what is done *to* her through the social rhetorics of ‘desire/ability’, while retaining a fat bodymind. In “You’re So Brave...” West (2016) continues, “[a]ny self-esteem issues I’ve had were externally applied—people *told me* I was ugly, revolting, shameful, unacceptably large. The world around me simply insisted on it, no matter what my gut said” (p. 68, emphasis in original). A gut can show fat; a gut can feel fat. Anti-fatness wants the gut to be ignored and hidden, both the instinctual and the physical, visible gut. Anti-fatness demands a separation of the bodymind, hoping to poison one into changing the other; it wants the fat body to have a thin mind. It does not want a fat present/presence. It is no wonder, then, that to be present elicits claims of bravery! How brave of you to leave the house, to deign to be in the world, embodied and willful.

Furthermore, West (2016) explains that her reaction to her own body “manifested outwardly instead of inwardly—as resentment, anger, a feeling of deep injustice, of being cheated. I wasn’t intrinsically without value, I was just doomed to live in a culture that hated me” (p. 68). While this might seem to align with a ‘body positive’ approach, and indeed West’s work

has been labeled as such, I find it more nuanced. In response to her seemingly unearned confidence, West (2016) writes, “I knew I was smart, funny, talented, social, kind—why wasn’t that enough? By all the metrics I cared about, I was a home run” (p. 68). She continues: “For me, the process of embodying confidence was less about convincing myself of my own worth and more about rejecting and unlearning what society had hammered into me” (West, 2016, p. 69). This flips the idea that a ‘positive’ approach advocates, one that focuses on changing your internal feelings about your worth and shifts the focus away from the social. In West’s version, the fat bodymind is present. Moreover, the fat bodymind is not perfect—it is not the result of, or predicated on, a singular subjectivity with a straightforward path toward being the ‘good fatty’. As West’s footnotes and reflections on her original “Hello, I Am Fat” essay make clear, there is nothing liberatory about striving for a slender future. She writes,

I don’t give a shit what causes anyone’s fatness. It’s irrelevant and it’s none of my business. I am not making excuses, because I have nothing to excuse. I reject the notion that thinness is the goal, that thin = better—that I am an unfinished thing and that my life can really start when I lose weight. That then I will be a real person and have finally succeeded as a woman (West, 2016, p. 203).

Not only does this passage demonstrate how West declines the ‘good fatty’ archetype, but it conjures the ways that gender is predicated on a slim body (White, 2021). To become thin is to ‘succeed’ as a woman, to have done it ‘right’. West (2016) declares: “I am not going to waste another second of my life thinking about this. I don’t want to have another fucking conversation with another fucking woman about what she’s eating or not eating, or regrets eating or pretends to not regret eating to mask the regrets. OOPS I JUST YAWNED TO DEATH” (p. 103). She may conjure death here, but unlike anti-fat rhetoric, this death is not *in the future* or a *denied* future, it is here and now: present, tired, and snapping under the banality of anti-fatness. West

fattens the killjoy by rebuking a performance of bravery that is invested in a fat-free future and denies a fat present, playing with the normativities of ‘body positive’ contrition, and showing that the fat bodymind is in on the joke—and the joke is not funny, it’s boring.

Keep Your Laughter/Bitterness (Reprise)

The question of laughter is central to Ahmed’s killjoy. An important killjoy principle is being unwilling “to laugh at jokes designed to cause offense” (Ahmed, 2017, p. 261). In

“Chuckletown, USA, Population: Jokes”, West (2016) explains that her relationship to comedy began when she was a young fat girl. She writes that as somebody already deemed “too much” as a child, comedy was a haven: “[...] the caterwauling, the irreverence, the sometimes-inappropriate honesty, the incessant riffing, aren’t just welcome in comedy, they’re fundamental. For me, as a kid who felt lonely, ugly, simultaneously invisible and too visible, comedy felt like a friend” (West, 2016, p. 155). This comes as no surprise as *Shrill* is full of clever quips and humorous asides, but West also carefully examines the moments where comedy turned on her and she stopped laughing when it was not funny. Reflecting on a comedy set where the performer made a misogynistic joke—and people laughed, even people she respected—West (2016) writes:

There must be a secret contract I don’t know about, where women, or gay people, or disabled people, or black³⁶ people agreed that it’s cool, that this is how we joke. But in that moment at Bridgetown, it dawned on me: Who made that rule? Who drew up that contract? I don’t remember signing anything, and anyway, it seems less like a universal accord and more like a booby trap that powerful men set up to protect their ‘right’ to squeeze cheap laughs out of life-ruining horrors—sometimes including literal torture—that they will never experience (p. 167).

³⁶ Lowercase in West’s text.

While comedy started as a safe place for West to embrace her “too much”, the tentacles of misogyny were still able to reach her. She writes, “in a certain light, feminism is just the long, slow realization that the stuff you love hates you” (West, 2016, p. 19). Despite loving comedy, West discovered how it became a haven for predators and a tool for bigots to punch down. Many people laugh even if they disagree with the bigots in question; laughter takes hold, social expectations thick in the air. When you do not laugh, you become affectively alienated (Ahmed, 2010) or what West (2019) calls being “the squeaky wheel” (p. 138). In *The Witches Are Coming*, West (2019) writes that the ‘squeaky wheel’ is met with “a verdant pantheon of eye rolls all the way up to physical violence” (p. 138). The ‘squeaky wheel’ is the killjoy, willing to remain unhappy. West (2019) continues by describing what the decidedly smooth wheel—the wheel that is in line with what is going on—thinks of the disruptive squeak: “[...] coding empathy as the fun killer, consideration for others as an embarrassing weakness, and dissenting voices as out-of-touch, bleeding heart dweebs (at best). Coolness is a fierce disciplinarian” (p. 138). Although the term “killjoy has become commercialized (it can be found on endless shirts, buttons, pins, and the like, signifying a type of modern, stylish, cool ‘feminist’) to be a killjoy is about *not* relenting to the pressures of “coolness”. To refuse to “be cool”, as Ahmed (2017; 2023) explains, is then repackaged as being negative, unhappy, and humourless. Yet it is, as West explains, a love of laughter and laughing that keeps the fat killjoy from doing so.

In “Death Wish”, West (2016) reflects on her time at *Jezebel* and having to write a response to a misogynistic comedian’s latest set of rape “jokes”. Referencing her piece, she says: “I explained ‘I’m not saying all of this because I hate comedy—I’m saying it because I love comedy and I want comedy to be accessible to everyone’” (West, 2016, p. 171). If the premise of a “joke” is a very real, palpable threat, what is the joke? The response to West, as she expected,

was negative. No matter how carefully she crafted her words, she was the “squeaky wheel”. Unfunny. Not just unfunny but deserving of violence and harm for daring to point out the power difference in these “jokes”. Or, as West (2016) describes it: “Why Fat Lady So Mean to Baby Men?” (p. 108). Davies and Ilott (2018) argue that “[i]ntention is key, as is the position of power of both the deliverer of the joke and the butt of the humour” (p. 11). In *Shrill* (2016), West is both the deliverer and the butt of the joke, making the moments of discomfort she shares stand in stark contrast to her own comedic stylings. She demonstrates the moments that are decidedly unfunny and tools of misogyny and also offers her own comedic choices that allow the fat killjoy to laugh when something is truly funny. Ahmed (2017) notes that “[...] there are differences that matter in what laughter does. Feminist humour might involve the relief of being able to laugh when familiar patterns that are often obscured are revealed” (p. 261). This is something *Shrill* (2016) does well. West uses comedy throughout her memoir: sarcasm, hyperbole, occasional all caps, and somewhat chaotic footnotes. Though West makes use of humour, I do not find that memoir writ large is *expected* to be funny. In fact, it is the opposite. Memoirs are painted as tell-alls, as records of all the sordid and difficult parts of a person’s life (Piepzna-Samarasinha, 2018). They are expected, more often than not, to be a story of overcoming or healing (Robertson, 2012). At the same time, when a funny person writes a memoir there is an expectation of jokes, yet a curiosity about the dark parts of life remains. There is, after all, a prevailing cliché about funny people being depressed. *Shrill* (2016) was West’s first book, moving her to a more well-known name. In many ways, the choice to start with humour is a choice to introduce yourself in a particular way, to say something about yourself, your writing style, and your political commitments. West’s (2016) book is not the memoir *of a comedian*, but life writing essays from a cultural critic and feminist, *who is also funny* and interested in comedy.

Three chapters on the harm of humour and online trolls are placed in the middle, in near succession, while West's signature wit is a through-line. It is not that the killjoy lacks humour, but as I said at the beginning of this chapter, the killjoy is expected not to laugh when something is "designed to cause offense" (Ahmed, 2017, p. 261). In "Chuckletown, USA....", West (2016) writes that comedy "more than any other art form, [...] forces you to interact with it; it forces you to not feel alone" (p. 155). This "force" is part of what complicates comedy and laughter. You may not be alone when you are surrounded by laughter, but you might be alone in your decision to withhold it. And your silence can be louder than the raucous chorus. She continues, arguing that "you can't be alone when someone's making you laugh, physically reaching into your body and eliciting a response. Comedy is also smart. It speaks the truth. [...] Plus, if you're funny, it doesn't matter what you look like" (West, 2016, p. 155). Several important things are being said here. First, it is a myth that if you are funny your appearance is overlooked. As noted earlier, West herself claims that fat men can be a John Candy type; but fat women are more often the butt of the joke than the teller. The romanticized view of comedy is relatable; laughter is a powerful currency—but not as powerful as 'desire/ability' (or coolness). Secondly, West points to the physicality of laughter and how it reaches into the body. The sound of laughter is different for everyone, but it comes from a deep place. For some, the visibility of laughter is not just a smile or the toss of a head, it is a shaking belly. This is precisely why the fat killjoy must withhold their laughter, withhold the pleasure of jiggling flesh. It might not be easy to keep your laughter in (and the coercive potential of laughter is something I tackle in Chapter Four), but perhaps it is worth the effort. After all, West (2016) argues, "art isn't just indiscriminate shit-flinging. It's pure communication, crafted with intention and care" (p. 165). When that care is discarded, we must not laugh.

West (2016) further details the onslaught of vitriol she has received from “comedy fans” in “It’s About Free Speech, It’s Not About Hating Women” (p. 195). She examines the response to her appearance on W. Kamau Bell’s cable show *Totally Biased*, where she “debated” a comedian who thought he should be able to make jokes about anything, including sexual violence.³⁷ West writes: “They’d attempted to demonstrate that comedy, in general, doesn’t have issues with women by threatening to rape and kill me, telling me I’m bitter because I’m too fat to get raped, and suggesting that the debate would have been better if it were just Jim raping me” (2016, p. 203). Bitterness continues to be the only defence as the slow cumulation of unrelenting hatred becomes unbearable. West is the fat lady being mean to “baby men”, while the men in question are comedic revolutionaries, committed to free speech and their right to perpetuate harm. The misogynistic “joke” that fat women cannot be assaulted is so commonplace that it is addressed in the works of all the authors analyzed in this dissertation (Gay, West, and Irby), in one way or another. It is a profoundly unoriginal “joke” to make. West’s fatness plays a role in the violence she is met with as much as it plays a role in her refusal to laugh. The jokes that fat women cannot be assaulted are legion, so much so that they appear in the very responses to said jokes. When West says these jokes are bad, trolls respond that she deserves the very subject of that joke: rape. In her refusal to laugh, West is not just a killjoy, but a *fat killjoy* who is unwilling to give up her feminist commitments in order to be continually accepted in the comedic spaces where she once found comfort by virtue of her embodiment.

Another killjoy truth: “Silence about violence is violence” (Ahmed, 2023, p. 216). To remain silent (ironic, as it would be laughing for the sake of laughing, laughing to get along) is to continue violence. Ahmed argues that “[w]e might need to snap a bond to institutions to prevent

³⁷ This is a different comedian than the one she wrote about for *Jezebel*. There are too many to count.

other people from being damaged by them” (2023, p. 216) and this is part of *Shrill*’s ontology: when we know what we know, we have to share it. West’s essays are, in many ways, a chronicle of snapping. She ends “Chuckletown, USA...” by saying she felt her relationship to comedy change the moment she did not laugh, ultimately demonstrating how one can remain funny while not laughing at what causes harm. Cultural studies scholar Maggie Hennefeld (2021) argues that “laughs expel unresolved energy, whether in a convulsive storm or a steely triumph of wit. But laughter is also a way of letting go of the past, as much as it is of savouring the moment at hand” (p. 128). Reflecting on her past with humour, West (2016) brings the reader into the present. At the same time, bitterness is the result of not letting go and refusing to forgive or forget (McFall, 1991). By being the teller of the joke, West demonstrates the bitterness in indifference while highlighting the present-tense inequality at hand. West manages to use “feminist killjoy’s humourlessness as an intervention into comedy as a genre” (Balkin, 2020, p. 81). And this intervention is “snapful” (Ahmed, 2017, p. 190):

You can hear the snap in the sound of her voice. Sharp, brittle, loud; perhaps it is like the volume has suddenly been turned up, for no reason; the quietness that surrounds her ceases when she speaks, her voice cutting through the atmosphere, registering as the loss of something; a nicer atmosphere; a gentler mood (Ahmed, 2017, p. 189).

Full of snap, *Shrill* is the “notes from a loud woman” (West, 2016). West’s so-called humourlessness is a loud silence, the sharp quiet that stands out when laughter is withheld. It is also the cutting nature of a voice that speaks up, that refuses to make oneself smaller when their body cannot shrink. West inserts this snap into her love of—and mobilization of—comedy and the way people respond to her. Ahmed (2017) continues her description of the snapful killjoy, writing, “violence is assumed to originate with her. A feminist politics might insist on renaming

actions as reactions; we need to show how her snap is not the starting point” (p. 189). West not only remains funny but demonstrates the ways that bitterness can remain, eye rolls can be returned, and laughter does not have to be given away freely. She signals the ways that she is assumed to be the problem by turning the joke around, using her own sarcasm and wit to turn the focus back on that which makes her snap in the first place.

Conclusion: Killjoy (Shrilljoy)

On the final page of *Shrill*, West (2016) writes: “I think the most important thing I do in my professional life today is delivering public, impermeable ‘no’s and sticking to them” (p. 258, emphasis in original). It is integral for fat liberation to say no to being polite, ‘desire/able’, and demure. This chapter has troubled the process of ‘coming out’ and ‘desire/ability’, demonstrated the possibilities of a fat presence that embraces the fat bodymind, and ultimately advocated for fattening the killjoy through West’s approach to humour and ‘snapping’. Fattening the killjoy addresses the ways that fat studies might kill some of the joy of assimilationist approaches to the body. The fat killjoy is necessary for disrupting what has become mainstream fat assimilation politics (through ‘body positivity’, HAES, and other trends) and the regression of any, however slight, fat liberation. As West writes:

I’ve noticed that a lot of people have trouble with the basic definition of fat acceptance—they want to argue and nitpick about calories and cardio and insurance and health and on and on and on—if you’re one of those people, wallowing in confusion, fret no more. I can sum it up for you in one easy-to-remember phrase: GET THE FUCK OFF ME, YOU FUCKING WEIRDO. Print it, laminate it, be it (2016, p. 99)

Anti-fatness is a liberal value as much as it is a conservative one; while each approach might vary, the result is that, as West writes, fatphobia needs to “get the fuck off” of us. Despite any

progressive claims of ‘inclusion’, anti-fatness requires the maintenance of the gender binary and heterosexuality; and it demands that if you are fat—which already defies normative gendered expectations—you perform that fatness with contrition. If you do not buy back your humanity through “pounds of flesh”, you have to earn tokens of ‘desire/ability’ by making your personality smaller and smaller. You cannot be loud or brash or shrill. Fatness may complicate who is able to be the killjoy as well. Despite the stereotypes of the angry, ugly feminist that also plague the non-fat killjoy, a fat, obstinate feminist must contend with the additional anti-fat stereotypes that position them as gluttonous, lazy, and ‘unhealthy’. Anti-fatness wants the fat body to disappear, and it does not even consider a fat mind; the “oppressive liberation” (Kotow, 2020, p. 191) of assimilatory fat politics attempts to create a fat body with a thin mind; but the fat killjoy *demand*s a fat bodymind. *Shrill* is an exemplar of what the fat killjoy not only contributes to *affective misfitting* because of its commitment to ambiguous, messy feelings, but how a fat killjoy participates in the significant discussion around whiteness and civility and the promise of saying no to the performance of ‘health’. What West demonstrates is the power of a decidedly shrill fat politic.

Chapter 4

Ugly Laughing: Samantha Irby Essays

*I love the way it feels to be a hater
Something so sweet about thinkin' that I'm better
Just to wake up every morning
Lay in bed and somehow never ever
Rise to the occasion
Or even hold up under pressure
But we all know that it doesn't even matter
If I waste away and no one thinks I'm clever
Just as long I've got my ego
And it tells me I'm superior
I could probably go a lifetime
Being barely mediocre
I'd still convince myself every time that I'm better
Than you
- Infinity Song, "Hater's Anthem"*

*IT'S BETTER TO DIE IN THE FLESH OF HOPE /
THAN LIVE IN THE SLIMNESS OF DESPAIR*

- Grace Nichols, "The Fat Black Woman's Motto on Her Bedroom Door"

Samantha Irby is funny. Her essays are bursting with insecurity, humour, and scatological escapades. By her own description, "I have low self-esteem and put all my mental illness on the page [...]. I can look at my life and find the jokes" (Marchese & Doumbouya, 2023, para 1). Irby is just as likely to write about her Crohn's disease (and consequently, defecating on the side of the road) as she is about her prestige TV writing jobs; she will talk about arthritic pain and diet culture while also touching on poverty and her (dead) parents. This chapter will examine selected essays across her four books: *Meaty* (2013), *We Are Never Meeting in Real Life* (2017), *Wow, No Thank You* (2020), and *Quietly Hostile* (2023). As Irby's texts do not require a linear read, essays were chosen that centered around the "fleshy materiality" (Orsini, 2020, p. 361) of fat embodiment. I focus on Irby's discussion of fatness, disability, and the 'ugly'/ugly parts of having a body as well as the complicated feelings therein. This chapter begins with setting the "tone" (Ngai, 2005, p. 43) through a discussion of laughter and what Hil Malatino (2023) calls "flat affect" (p. 57). Next, I move into a discussion of the 'ugly', before focussing on material

messes or what Irby calls “body horror” (2023, p. 64). Finally, I conclude with a rumination on staying fat. Ultimately, Irby demonstrates the significance of laughter and comedy for affect theory, as well as the power of ambiguity in fat subjectivity, ugliness, and what Mia Mingus (2011) calls “magnificence” (p. 140).

The relationship between fatness and comedy is complicated, and the relationship between fat *women* and comedy even more so. On the one hand, as Kata Kyrölä (2021) writes, comedy is a rare area where fat women can find fame and success. And yet, a common comedy trope is that of ‘thin’ women in fat suits to show their “former fat” self, one of the most prominent examples being Monica in the 1990s TV sitcom *Friends*.³⁸ This tired routine feeds into the idea that inside every fat person is a thin person waiting to be excavated through enough discipline. Likewise, the success of thin Black men dressing up as Black women, such as Eddie Murphy or Tyler Perry, produces characters that continue the Black Mammy stereotype (Kyrölä, 2021, p. 111). Angela Stukator (2001) also notes the recurring “unruly fat woman” where the laughter is often *at* her and not *with* her, where she is a spectacle evoking the *carnival* not *comedy* (p. 201). This is echoed in what Kyrölä calls “the deluded fat woman” character (2021, p. 111), such as Mimi in *The Drew Carey Show*, whose confidence and belief in her own beauty is treated with dramatic irony. Yet it is also possible for comedy and laughter to be subversive. Fatness in comedy can “articulate a revolutionary cultural politics, one that releases the body from the restrictions of socially sanctioned gendered, racial, and sexual roles” (Stukator, 2001, p. 211). Such an approach has certainly been used in fat liberationist movements, including *The Fattlympics* and *The Chubsters*, which Charlotte Cooper (2016) and Vikki Chalklin (2016) describe as queerly negative and irreverent, spaces “where freakhood is capital” (White, 2013, p.

³⁸ The show *New Girl* also does this with Schmidt and his “formerly fat self”, aptly referred to as ‘Fat Schmidt’.

22). Irby uses sarcasm and facetiousness to plumb her own experiences and in her broader cultural commentary. Throughout her work, this includes an open discussion of bodily waste and fluids. Her ability to be disgusting, something usually pointed *at* fat people (and something women are never supposed to be) contributes to what Zoë Meleo-Erwin (2012) calls “disrupting normal”. Often, to be a ‘good fatty’, fat people are expected to hide the realities of corporeal form: sweat, exhaustion, mess. To show these things is to show the underbelly of being fat. Through the lens of disability studies, Meleo-Erwin (2012) argues that the “entanglement of fat embodiment and subjectivity” (p. 389) should embrace a queer approach that moves outside “binary choices of reclamation and celebration of shame and normalization” (p. 397) and instead relishes in contradictions, multiplicity, and the instability of ‘normal’. Mobilizing humour as an affective technology, Irby orients fatness towards mess and away from the sterility of fat assimilationist subjectivity and turns fatphobic assumptions into the butt of the joke.

Comedy allows “more possibility for coming out as fat, unruly, unashamed and unapologetic” (Kyrölä, 2021, p.109), and Irby’s work teaches us to embrace the queerly negative, ambiguous elements of fat subjectivity. Often attributed to Lee Edelman (2004), queer negativity or anti-social queer theory is rooted in the idea that instead of running from the negativity that has been ascribed to us as queers, we should embrace it. A queerly negative fat politic can similarly reject the liberal impulse to rebuff negativity and instead use it to “confront normative assumptions and value systems that tend to be subsumed within the positive, redemptive models for fat subjectivity” (Chalklin, 2016, p. 110). As Allison Taylor (2021) argues, we can embrace queer not just as a subject position of gender and/or sexuality, but as “a conceptual tool or framework to critique normative systems of power” (p. 281). By disrupting

the mainstream subjectivity of fat politics, Irby is able to play with the very binaries of “reclamation and celebration” that Meleo-Erwin (2012) suggests we must disturb.

Setting the Tone: Laughter as Flat Affect & Applying for The Bachelorette

As I outline above, this chapter is primarily concerned with how a comedic approach is mobilized in Irby’s work and how that tone allows her to share her embodied knowledge in irreverent ways. Sianne Ngai (2005) describes tone as less of an ‘attitude’, and more “a literary text’s affective bearing, orientation, or ‘set toward’ its audience and world” (p. 43). The ‘tone’ makes it possible for a work or class of works to be referred to as “‘paranoid’, ‘euphoric’, ‘melancholic’” (Ngai, 2005, p. 43) and the like. Understood this way, the ‘tone’ of Irby’s work is a spectrum of irreverence, sarcasm, and self-deprecating humour; the tone is *funny*. This does important work in how fatness and disability are addressed in her work; they are not oriented towards positivity or combatting fatphobic and ableist rhetorics with detailed arguments. Instead, Irby’s work points *toward* ugliness.

We Are Never Meeting in Real Life (2017) opens with a fictional application for *The Bachelorette*, a ‘reality’ television program where a group of women inexplicably ‘compete’ for a man. I begin here because this essay illustrates how Irby’s work sets a tone. “My Bachelorette Application” allows for an instant recognition that what you are about to read is funny. Everybody on *The Bachelorette*, its counterpart *The Bachelor*, or really any show of this nature (looking for ‘love’ under contrived circumstances) is what you could call ‘conventionally attractive’. We know that a fat, Black, queer, disabled woman is not going to be on *The Bachelorette*. Using such a well-known cultural artifact lets you in on the joke (and even if you do not know the show, a quick Internet search would tell you all you need to know to be ‘in’ on it). Irby opens the essay:

I am squeezed into my push-up bra and sparkly, ill-fitting dress. I've got the requisite sixteen coats of waterproof mascara, black eyeliner, and salmon-colored streaks of hastily applied self-tanner drying down the side of my neck. I'm sucking in my stomach, I've taken thirty-seven Imodium in case my irritable bowels have an adverse reaction to the bag of tacos I hid in my purse [...] (2017, p. 2).

Already the tone is set. You do not expect *The Bachelorette* to be paired with 'bowels'; and you are surprised to find tacos hidden in her purse. But there is more happening here. Irby continues her fictional application, listing her gender as "passably female" and her weight as "Lane Bryant model? But maybe on her period week" (2017, p. 3-4). Many of the contestants on *The Bachelorette* could be (or are) models, but none of them are Lane Bryant models and none of them are "passably female".³⁹ The framing of "passably female" is self-deprecating humour, Irby knowingly acknowledging how her embodiment falls outside of gendered expectations for women while simultaneously nodding to the ways that Black women are often denied their gender. The idea of being "passably female" hints at the ways that fatness is gendered as "gender normativity is predicated on the possession of a slender body" (White, 2021, p. 79). To be fat is already to have failed: fat women are too masculine, fat men are too feminine, and fat trans people are barely legible. Sabrina Strings (2019) writes about how Black women's bodies were deemed 'savage' and something to gawk at, and how this is fundamentally baked into the foundation of white supremacy. The historical account that Strings (2019) presents can still be seen in contemporary cultural depictions as well as in the everyday experiences of Black women like Irby. Breeden and Stewart (2023) place this history into popular culture. They write about the ways that Black women have been depicted in media and culture through three controlling

³⁹'Female' and 'male' are not the terms I prefer to use in my life or work, but I am employing Irby's own language choices throughout this chapter.

images: the Mammy, the Sapphire, and the Jezebel (Breedon & Stewart, 2023, p. 267).

‘Controlling images’ are what Patricia Hill Collins (2000) describes as “images designed to make racism, sexism, poverty, and other forms of social injustice appear to be natural, normal, and inevitable parts of everyday life” (p. 69). The Mammy is “desexualized, docile, and often fat-bodied” and usually cares for white children; The Sapphire is “the angry Black woman archetype” which “functions to see Black women as malicious, domineering, and loud”; and The Jezebel archetype “showcases Black women as loose, promiscuous women or seductive temptresses” (Breedon & Stewart, 2023, p. 267-8). Irby (2013) explicitly acknowledges such stereotypes, writing, “if white guilt were tangible currency I’d be in the one percent. I’m pretty sure it’s because in your mind I fill the role of the minimally threatening sidekick or the sassy black maid white people have been conditioned by cartoons and television sitcoms to yearn for your entire life” (p. 111). The Lane Bryant model with swollen ankles is desexualized as she lines up to participate in *The Bachelorette*, but she does have tacos to keep her company. When Irby writes “passably female” she nods to the ways that her performance of gender is already inherently racialized and thus among what Fahs (2018) calls “failed femininities” (p. 237). This failure “addresses not only women’s desire to avoid ugliness but also the complicated ways that women criticize other kinds of femininities they find abject, devalued, or less powerful” (Fahs, 2018, p. 237). Surely, the other women of *The Bachelorette* would question Irby’s ‘passability’ in contrast to their own. What Irby gestures to are the roots of “desire capital” (Harrison, 2021, p. 12), and who is taught they are closest to beauty and who is not.

The ‘tone’ of Irby’s work—comedy by way of sarcasm, irreverence, and self-deprecation—can be further positioned through what Malatino (2023) calls “flat affect” (p. 57). Malatino (2023) argues that “flat affect occurs when we don’t know how we feel in the midst or

aftermath of an encounter, or when we don't have the space or support to feel a certain kind of way, with a certain kind of intensity, or when an encounter might shatter us if we don't impose some kind of distance or cushion between it and ourselves" (p. 57). Serving as another type of this "flat affect" (Malatino, 2023), humour does similar work to curate and control our affective responses. Humour can be a method of creating this distance, a cushion to protect you from the full bearing of a world that is against you, and it can allow us to generate a particular distance between what is in front of us and what we are feeling. In her own words, Irby (2020) says "the idea that bad things can't hurt me if I tell everyone about them in a funny way seemed like a fun way to grieve these tiny deaths" (p. 304). The "tiny deaths" in question not only include the literal death of both of Irby's parents, but abuse, poverty, disability, and the borderline mundane experiences of dating while fat, trying to work while sick, and never really knowing what to do with money (Irby, 2013; 2017; 2020; 2023). To describe these as "tiny deaths" conjures death into the space of fat life. And yet the "tiny deaths" are not about the inevitability of fat death/demise that anti-fatness is predicated on; rather, they speak more to the grief of lack or loss. The many "tiny deaths" of abuse includes the grief of relationship loss or having an unstable home instead of a safe one. The "tiny death" of disability, of being unable to do the things you may want, is not a criticism of self but an acknowledgement of the complicated feelings around disabled embodiment in a world designed for the able-bodied. Indeed, poverty can entail its own string of "tiny deaths", of lack and loss. Thus, to never laugh would be to collapse under the weight of such unbearable grief, of too many small funerals, mini burials, tiny deaths.

Humour functions throughout the essays I have selected (and indeed, all of Irby's work) to both create and alleviate tension. Ahmed (2008) argues that laughter as affect is problematized

by the way that it can spread “contagiously, even coercively” (Hennefeld, 2021). This coercion can happen when the pressures to go along are too great; Ahmed’s “killjoy” is such because they resist this coercion (2010). On the other hand, laughter can spread contagiously, rippling from one person to another not because of pressure or expectation, or what Hennefeld calls “predatory laughter” (2021, p. 113), but as part of an ambiguous collective that is at once “profoundly irresponsible and irresistibly hopeful” (Hennefeld, 2021, p. 139). Indeed, some may interpret Irby’s jokes as “irresponsible” given their serious subject matter, but laughter that can arise from reading work like Irby’s further conveys the epistemological potential of the work to begin with, particularly in feminist spheres. If a reader feels pressure to laugh or perhaps laughs for awkward reasons, the moment of that unrecognition is itself an opportunity for learning. Henry, Bryan, and Neary (2023) argue that “humour enacts an ‘incongruous’ or unsettling quality by playing on the fact that the supposed fixedness and security of established norms are not so fixed or secure at all” (p. 155). By mobilizing humour that both addresses and embraces the contradictions of fat feelings and the orientations of fat life, Irby toys with the assumptions about fatness circulated in anti-fat discourse.

The ‘feeling’ of tone is perceived as “fundamentally negative, regardless of what the particular quality of the affect is” (Ngai, 2005, p. 76). Irby’s tone of sarcasm and facetiousness could be seen as negative in this way, just as comedy and laughter can be employed to different ends; but when one shares an episteme or ideological commitment, the tone and its intended affect is clear. However, you do not necessarily have to share the experience to understand the tone. While ‘negativity’ and “ugly feelings” (Ngai, 2005) may have an unfavourable connotation, they are inherently generative in a fat, queer approach. After all, Meleó-Erwin (2014) describes ‘queer’ as “[moving] us outside the politics of shame and toward an ethos in

which we neither deny the complicated, messiness of the body nor are tempted to redefine these characteristics as normal as a strategy of stigma-management” (p. 107). Irby’s work is queer, and through comedy she presents an archive of fat life that is fantastically complicated and contradictory; she does not deny the messy body. The body, then, is not entirely free of shame nor bursting with pride, it is both and neither.

In “Fat Stories”, Susan Stinson (2021) writes that “Irby’s tone is an orientation toward the world” (p. 89). This orientation points towards the messy, ambiguous, and ‘ugly’ elements of being human—of being fat—that a fattened feminist approach desperately needs. Humour is a central element of this orientation, returning to what Hennefeld (2021) calls the potential for laughter as a “combustive affect to do tangibly reparative and/or politically incendiary work” (p. 117). Importantly, Hennefeld argues that laughter is a “collective forming affect” (2021, p. 136), and there is also a cathartic element that can depend on the power dynamics at play. Irby’s humour is not abstract; it puts these affective, feminist issues into the context of a life lived. By opening her book with “My Bachelorette Application”, Irby (2017) not only sets the tone but mobilizes a non-traditional writing style that further highlights the tension between a fat, Black woman and *The Bachelorette*. Instead of approaching it as a chapter simply reflecting on, or lamenting the normativity of *The Bachelorette*, writing it as an application puts Irby ‘in’ the context of the show, making the jokes and ironies clearer. In one “application”, Irby touches on racialized gender expectations, poverty, disability, and ‘desire/ability’. More than just fat jokes or jokes about fat, Irby’s work demonstrates that “if we laugh with the body, then what we often laugh at *is* the body, the strange fact that we *have* a body” (Critchley, 2002, p. 44). The fact of the body is made even stranger when the world is oriented away from you.

Irby (re)orients herself toward what Mingus (2011) calls “bodies and movements that disrupt, dismantle, disturb” (p. 140). Even in the spoof application for *The Bachelorette*, Irby disrupts and disturbs the space of this fantasy program. Her bachelorette hopeful is bursting at the seams, shoving tacos in her purse, and scarfing down Imodium. She places herself in a space that is oriented away from her and in doing so reorients herself away from what normativity demands. At the end of “My Bachelorette Application”, Irby (2017) lists her proudest accomplishment: “If this is a real book that someone is actually holding in her sweaty, chocolaty paws, then *this* is my proudest achievement” (p. 11). This acknowledgment also helps orient the reader to Irby; a fat reader may infer from this joke that they are similarly oriented while another reader may not. Either way, Irby is situating her work in the context of those who may read it, and as I have already discussed, her zest for the humour in (chocolatey, sweaty) fat life.

Being Ugly: Beauty, Tapeworms, and Hostility

The third essay in *Meaty* (2013), “Black Beauty”, opens with a jolt: “I was still a kid when I first figured out that I am ugly” (p. 45). What Irby is saying throughout this essay is not “I *am* ugly” but “I am ‘ugly’”. Irby is naming the way she was—and is—marked as ‘ugly’. She continues: “This was in the 1980s, back when there were still real-looking people on primetime television and magazines weren’t saturated with women made of cocaine and Photoshop who set an impossible standard of un-obtainable beauty, so it wasn’t glaringly obvious what a hideous little beast I was” (Irby, 2013, p. 45). This remains relevant, as the contemporary trend of weight-loss drugs is flourishing and any progress toward the eradication of fatphobia seems to have evaporated alongside waistlines. The flippant way that Irby describes both herself and beauty standards is not arbitrary. To say these things plainly, unpolished by politeness, highlights their impact and the way they are lived. Put another way by Tressie McMillan Cottom (2019): “When

I say that I am unattractive or ugly, I am not internalizing the dominant culture’s assessment of me. I am naming what has been done to me. And signaling who did it” (p. 60). Irby’s work addresses this while also toying with the ways that these messages *do* become internalized. Anti-fatness states that fat people hate themselves *because* they are fat and are fat because they hate themselves (and thus turn to food). By calling herself a “hideous little beast”, Irby is not making a moral claim about herself but signaling what she was made to be, and doing so through hyperbole means that the comedic tone cushions—flattens—the blow of this reality, as hyperbole emphasizes the “contrast between what is said and what is meant” (Neuhaus, 2023, p. 315). What is said—“I *am* ugly”—and what is meant—“I’ve been marked *as* ugly”—contrast with one another. The comedic angle that Irby takes allows greater freedom in how this reality is expressed: bluntly and without apology.

The candid way that Irby refers to herself as ‘ugly’ could be interpreted as reinforcing negative ideas about fat people, but it is her refusal to be ‘positive’ that makes her work so compelling. Malatino (2023) argues that ‘positive’ narratives are useful, but they are limited and there needs to be a real engagement with the negative affects that are so ordinary for, in Malatino’s case, trans folks. As discussed in Chapter One, fatness and transness are not disparate entities. For many of us, they overlap and are informed by one another. I bring Malatino (2022) in here because he is getting at the very banality of negativity when your embodiment resists normativity. While it may seem harsh to refer to one’s younger self as a “hideous little beast”, Irby (2013) is naming the way that fat children—especially fat, Black children—experience negativity as ordinary. She writes, “‘Samantha is ugly and smells like pee’ [...]. It was true, and it didn’t bother me all that much. I mean, it sort of did, because we are reminded from birth that girls are supposed to be pretty and delicate, but I came to terms with my ugliness relatively

quickly” (Irby, 2013, p. 46). The insidiousness of anti-fatness is such that it is inescapable, even in childhood. In Irby’s words, “fat babies are adorable, while fat children are a little less so. Fat teenagers are chided into either end of the eating disorder spectrum [...]” (2013, p. 168). It is not as simple as Irby’s quip implies, with one ‘end’ of this spectrum being over-eating and the other ‘end’ being under-eating, but her comment gestures to the ways that bodies are taxonomized as ‘good’ or ‘bad’, ‘right’ or ‘wrong’. Fatness is positioned as disordered because it is ‘out’ of order, while extreme thinness is viewed not as repulsive but with pity. Either way, fat people are never allowed to have eating disorders; under the system of anti-fatness, fat is already pathologized as sick, just not capable of being anorexic or bulimic. The only eating disorder associated with fatness is binge-eating, which is not viewed through the lens of disordered eating but instead as a moral fault and a lack of willpower.

Part of the reproach that Irby gestures towards is not only on the child or teen but the parent, most often the mother, who is held responsible for getting their child to a fat free future (Friedman, 2021). Never mind that children, like adults, can be fat for innumerable reasons, the anxiety of ‘obesity’ is so widespread that “childhood fatness is increasingly framed as a sign of parental neglect and abuse” (Quirke, 2017, p. 140). This framing is also deeply racialized, where Black mothers face the additional stigma associated with the “welfare queen”, a term rooted in misogynoir (Bailey, 2008), that positions poor Black women as “pathological and undeserving” (Bezusko, 2013, p. 40), lazy, and often fat (Bezusko, 2013). This has become another controlling image and is central to neoliberal ideas about individual responsibility, bringing us back to the body and the ‘choice’ of fatness. Irby’s candor points to the fact that some people must come to terms with how the world is oriented away from them at an early age. She puts this into the context of growing up with a single mother who had multiple sclerosis, writing, “my mother had

a college education, but she was severely disabled, and the two of us lived on less than eight hundred dollars a month in government aid. When survival is your imperative, what you look like while doing so becomes of increasingly diminishing importance” (Irby, 2013, p. 46). Irby is once again naming what has been done to her, where “the fear of fatness morphs into broader fears about social class, disease, and other markers of abjection” (Fahs, 2018, p. 241), including a fear of bodies that “smell” or are “dirty” (Fahs, 2018, p. 244). All of these things—disability, government aid, smelling like pee, being ‘ugly’—speak to the broader structure that reinforce ideas about how poor people are lazy, smelly, and ugly.

Irby further demonstrates why some people might be reluctant to adopt a fat liberation stance that requires the pretense of ‘feeling good’, writing about the freedom of being ‘ugly’/ugly:

Being ugly affords you a unique sort of freedom, and as I progressed through school I became more comfortable with how effortless some aspects of life are when you aren’t considered physically attractive. Eating whatever you want is fucking amazing. So is being able to shave your head at sixteen because you’re goddamned sick of curling irons. You can be a jerky smartass without having to worry about offending someone who might otherwise want to stick his dick in you (Irby, 2013, p. 47).

Her sentiments here address the pressure put on young women to perform gender in particular ways, to run toward being ‘desire/able’, shrinking their bodies and their personalities. Irby continues, writing, “[i]t stung, for sure, because the potential sexual interest of post-pubescent young men is the currency of female youth [...]. But beauty is this fixed thing. At least conventionally, and either your face and body are constructed in a way that fits those parameters or they aren’t” (2013, p. 47). Through her glib yet blunt approach, Irby speaks plainly about the experiences of being oriented toward ‘ugly’ at an early age and does not shy away from

acknowledging her complicated feelings about it. This is in alignment with what Chalklin (2016) calls a “decidedly queer fat” approach (p. 107) to fat liberation which “is invested above all in sheer irreverence about beauty, weight and health” (p. 107). Such irreverence is common throughout Irby’s work, and the comment above about “eating whatever you want” is a theme she continues to explore. One version of fat liberation holds that fat people can eat ‘healthy’ and still be fat. This is meant to prove that fat bodies are not created through an unrelenting smorgasbord of fried foods but are just a part of human variation, that they are ‘normal’ (Meleo-Erwin, 2012). Instead, Irby’s approach “embrace[s] the negative and often damaging rhetorics of ugliness, gluttony, misery and abjection through which fat people are positioned in contemporary society” (Chalklin, 2016, p. 23). Her work fits nicely in the camp of the queerly negative (Chalklin, 2016; Snider, 2018; White, 2016) and this is particularly salient in her essay “The Tapeworm Diet”.

Much like “Black Beauty”, “The Tapeworm Diet” opens in a way that can best be described as flippant. Irby (2013) begins:

It’s hilarious to me when people try to pretend not to know why they are fat. Like, really dude? You eat three small meals and exercise an hour every day, yet somehow have no idea why there is a spare tire around your waist? Because if those things were true you would be skinny. Skinny-er. Skinny-ish. Does each of those three meals consist of Big Macs washed down with an entire ham? By ‘exercise’ do you mean ‘stand up’? (p. 165).

At first glance, this does not seem to turn fatphobia on its head. Yet Irby's approach follows in the history of fat liberation movements like *The Fattylympics*⁴⁰ and *Hamburger Queen*⁴¹ (Chalklin, 2016), which rely on a queering of fatness that "relinquish[es] the desire to be normal, respectable and polite" (Cooper, 2016, p. 193). This is contrary to methods that distance the fat self from the body and uphold neoliberal performances of respectability. The queerly negative approach refuses to be made palatable and participate in "another symbolic death of our fat bodies" (Owen, 2012, p. 302) in order to "avoid being fully implicated in the negative connotations of fatness" (Kyrölä & Harjunen, 2017, p. 108). Irby (2013) claims her body as 'her' doing, "implicating" herself in a humorous way. She continues, "I have never in my life pretended to have some undiagnosed 'glandular problem' or speculated about a goddamn 'slow metabolism'. I eat bad things and then go to sleep immediately afterward. There, I solved the mystery of fatness for you. You're welcome" (Irby, 2013, p. 165). Here Irby addresses what Roxane Gay (2017) calls the "why" of the fat body in a different way than the 'good fatty' that seeks to prove fat can be 'healthy' by attempting to remove the fat person from being implicated in their own fatness.

Irby continues by listing three reasons for her fat "why", writing: "So here is why I am a massive, gigantic person" (2013, p. 165). She begins: "My delicious, delicious feelings. I was

⁴⁰ Spearheaded by fat activist and scholar Charlotte Cooper, The Fattylympics took place two weeks before the 2012 Summer Olympics in London. It was "a fat activist response" to the many problems caused/exacerbated by hosting the games, including "social cleansing; gentrification; militarisation; corporatisation; nationalism; surveillance" (Cooper, 2016, p. 213). It was a "fake Olympics that sought to highlight a multitude of intersectional issues; it was ridiculous, irreverent and rude, though accessible to people of all ages, free and open to everyone" (Cooper, 2016, p. 213). It included a 'kitsch' fat queer aerobics class hosted by Vikki Chalklin; an event that involved spitting on the BMI chart (though, as Cooper notes, one participant even emptied their menstrual cup onto it); food stalls, etc.

⁴¹ Hamburger Queen was a beauty/talent show for fat people, a performance event and "queer spectacle of negativity" and "engagement with narratives of shame and trauma that are usually considered to be responsible for the 'undoing' of subjectivities, but in this case, in fact contribute to the potential formulation of a radically different type of subject position" (Chalklin, 2016, p. 117). Like The Fattylympics, the promotion for Hamburger Queen was clearly political and "unashamedly indulged in stereotypical associations between fat people and relentless appetites" (Chalklin, 2016, p. 118).

never taught to cope with all of the batshit voices rattling around in my head [...]” (Irby, 2013, p. 165). Two things are happening in this brief explanation. First, it could be read as playing on ableist notions of being ‘crazy’. This is complicated, however, by what comedic approaches can do, as Irby herself has disabilities and mental illness. In her own words, “Diseased Brain is louder and meaner—and if we’re being honest, funnier—than Regular Brain” (Irby, 2023, p. 190). Second, it could be seen as reproducing the idea that fat people are emotional eaters, which anti-fatness mobilizes in its rhetorics of gluttony and willpower. However, Irby is pointing toward the fact that there are many reasons one can eat, including to satisfy emotional needs—something echoed by Wilson (2023) in her critique of current approaches to body liberation. Wilson (2023) argues that positioning food as something that should only be consumed when hungry and until full (and not for any other reasons) “attempts to distance fat people from the hedonism assigned” (p. 151). The assigning of hedonism can be found in the work of scholars like Berlant (2010), who argues for the need to “cure self-induced ill-health from appetitive excess” (p. 27), a polished way of saying that fat people are to blame and they need to put down the fork. Instead of distancing herself, Irby follows in the footsteps of queer negativity and approaches to fat liberation that embrace the messy, ambiguous, and irreverent. She continues, “I was a chubby little poor kid who ate a lot of snack cakes because boys thought I was ugly. Not to mention the fact that my parents were tired and old and the only pigskins we tossed around were the ones my father had liberally sprinkled with black pepper and hot sauce. Mmm, crunchy” (Irby, 2013, p. 166). Fat people are not supposed to talk about the potential origins of fatness unless they are in the process of trying to become ‘thin’, and if they do, they are meant to repent and show the new path of ‘health’ that they have found. Irby not only speaks about the origins of her fatness, but she celebrates them with a literal crunch. The second reason Irby gives for her

fatness is: “The vegetables I had to finish before I could leave the table always came from a can” (2013, p. 166). There is no winning when you are poor and fat. Anti-fatness champions the idea that fat people do not eat vegetables, while at the same time critiquing which ‘type’ of vegetables are the right ones. Irby (2013) continues,

I’m not telling you anything new when I say that poor people don’t buy a whole lot of fresh vegetables, particularly when they are poor people with young, wasteful children. [...] I liked frozen corn and canned peas and probably didn’t have a tomato that hadn’t been fried or wasn’t glistening atop a double cheeseburger until I was a goddamn teenager (p. 166).

I am reminded of Matt Brim’s “Queer Dinners” (2020), which discusses both the class implications of food as well as the importance of a queer theoretical approach that attends to the “stretchy middle” (p. 24) where poor operates “both as a material space and a discursive construct” (p. 25). Irby’s discussions of being poor are beneficial to a queerly negative approach which rebukes respectability. The material space of poor is one where Irby’s fatness is implicated, and instead of pretending that is not the case, she brings that space to her text, destabilizing both anti-fat narratives as well as the ‘positive’ approaches that distance fat subjectivity from ‘un-health’. The final fat “why” that Irby offers is: “If you’ve never been skinny, the appeal of thinness < the tastiness of simple carbohydrates. There’s freedom in a double-digit elastic waistband. It’s like, what’s a handful of Milk Duds if you’re already fat?” (2013, p. 167). Irby once again says the quiet part out loud: what does thinness have to offer? In her framing, fatness grants a freedom that ‘thinness’ does not.

‘Thinness’ is not simply the state of being ‘thin’, but a system that requires participation in anti-fat practices and aesthetics, in ‘desire capital’ and all the white supremacist norms it trades in. Described by Harrison (2021) as a politic, ‘thin’ “demands that one consume less,

desire less, rather than make the demand that we end a [w]orld where what one desires would leave others without” (p. 20). This is the world that feminist scholars like Berlant (2010) believe in: one where the fat take from the thin and where fatness signals death and not freedom. Moreover, it is not only that one must consume ‘less’, but that one must consume the ‘right’ things and adopt “good habits” (Ahmed, 2010, p. 34). The fat assimilationist, invested in what LeBesco (2004) calls a “will to innocence” (p. 112), cannot hold a can of peas. Instead, the peas must be fresh, in line with being a ‘good’ subject who is oriented to the ‘right’ things. Objects are not neutral but already have affective value (Ahmed, 2010) and this is certainly true for food. Ahmed (2010) writes that “we acquire habits as forms of good taste that differentiate between objects in terms of their affective as well as their moral value. We have to work on the body such that the body’s immediate reactions, how we sense the world and make sense of the world, take us in the ‘right’ direction” (p. 34). So much of anti-fatness, diet culture, and ‘desire capital’ requires that we deprive ourselves in order to be correctly oriented, to have (or perform) ‘good taste’. Or, as Wilson (2023) writes, “we might swallow parts of ourselves, rather than food, to become more palatable to others” (p. 7). Instead of swallowing these parts of herself, Irby embraces the past and the present of her fatness and her social position. With her comedic approach, Irby upends rhetorics of anti-fatness where elastic waist pants signify an inability to ‘fit’ in ‘normal’ clothes and fat people are endlessly shoveling snacks down their throats. Instead of fearing these experiences, Irby leans into them.

“The Tapeworm Diet” continues with a list of diets and Irby’s review of them, so to speak. She begins with “The Twinkie Diet”, which is “60% junk food supplemented by a protein shake, multivitamin pills, and a can of green beans or four stalks of celery every day” (Irby, 2013, p. 167). Irby (2013) notes what a nutrition researcher at Kansas State University ate to

create the “Junk Food Diet”: a mix of chips, cereal, and pre-packaged snack foods such as Twinkies, Mountain Dew, and Doritos. Of this diet, she concludes: “Just reading that shit makes my fucking teeth hurt. I think I also might’ve just caught diabetes through the computer screen. This can’t be life, right? Snack cakes and baby carrots? NO IT CANNOT” (Irby, 2013, p. 168). There are several interesting things happening in this passage. For one, Irby’s quip about diabetes can cause an instinctive recoil because of its connection to fatphobia; diabetes is a common ‘insult’ or ‘warning’ lobbed at fat people.⁴² However, Irby’s irreverence points to the hypocrisy of ‘health’ claims. A researcher can advocate for a diet based on foods associated with fatness and call it science, while fat people are always warned that a handful of Milk Duds is going to give them diabetes. Irby (2013) flips this back onto the diet itself. She is gesturing toward a way of life that is much more expansive and diverse on the palate.

Next, Irby (2013) critiques Nutrisystem as costly and unfulfilling. Then she turns to the titular diet of the tapeworm. “So this is a real thing”, Irby (2013) writes, “it’s illegal in America, because we hate infectious parasites, but other people in countries that understand how hard it is for a bitch to keep her grubby little mitts off cheese dogs obviously have governments that care about them” (p. 169). This ‘diet’ is exactly what it sounds like: ingesting a tapeworm via raw meat which will then eat the food you eat so you do not gain weight. Irby quips, “sounds amazing. Worm-infected meat. Totally not gonna die” (2013, p. 169). Her hyperbole and sarcasm about an inability to keep her “grubby little mitts off cheese dogs” and the illegality of the tapeworm point to the chaos of diet culture. Irby’s joke lies in the desire to keep eating

⁴² Anecdotally, as mentioned in Chapter One, semaglutide injectables like Wegovy® and Ozempic® were (and are) intended for diabetes treatment, yet it is now easier to access them for the purposes of weight loss, with some Canadian doctors advocating that it be covered by provincial health insurance as a means of treating ‘obesity’ (CTV News, 2023). So if the concern is diabetes, as fatphobes concerned with ‘health’ always claim, then why is diabetes medication becoming harder for diabetics to obtain?

whatever one wants without gaining weight, while also pointing out how ill-advised it would be to give yourself a tapeworm. She is not pointing toward a future of ‘thinness’ but highlighting the means of achieving ‘thinness’ as a path to peril, given how fatal ingesting a parasite could be. Irby (2013) then lists other bewildering diets, including the Grapefruit Diet, The Cigarette Diet, The Sleeping Beauty Diet (a medically induced coma), The Cabbage Soup Diet, Baby Food Diet, Slim-Fast, Bridal Bootcamp⁴³, The Blood Type Diet, and only eating raw foods (p. 170 – 176). These diets involve exactly what their names suggest, including “The Cotton Ball Diet” (Irby, 2013, p. 74) which requires replacing food with gelatin-soaked (or dry) cotton balls. Irby (2013) remarks that “[t]he rationale is that the cotton balls contain some calories, and they fill you up, preventing you from wanting to eat anything fattening, like real food. STOP IT” (p. 174). She concludes this essay boldly: **“Don’t try any of this crazy fucking shit”** (Irby, 2013, p. 177, emphasis in original). Indeed, such a ridiculous premise elicits a playfully serious response. Instead of the common reproach that “diets are bad” or “I’ve tried all of these, and the weight comes back” or “you have to love yourself”, Irby says: aren’t these ‘suggestions’ utterly absurd? This sarcastic approach to diets continues in “Fuck it, Bitch. Stay Fat”, where Irby (2017) writes:

Dieting is crazy and turns most of us jerks into insufferable babies. Either (1) you’re a crabby asshole on the verge of tears all day long because you’re desperate for a handful of Cheetos, or (2) you’re perched atop a high horse made of fewer than twelve hundred daily calories, glaring down your nose at me and pointing out how much saturated fat is in my unsweetened iced tea. Man, don’t you *hate* a fat-skinny bitch more than anything else on the planet?” (p. 142-143, emphasis in original).

⁴³ Irby writes that the woman who created this “researched the bootcamp training methods of the U.S. military” (2013, p. 176). I am reminded of a recent piece from Da’Shaun L. Harrison (2024) on the connections between domestic anti-fatness and global violence. They write, “War preparedness has been coupled with exercise-as-an-act-of-patriotism since at least the 1930s. It is, in many ways, central to military strategy and recruitment; it’s necessary to maintain an ‘effective’ ethnostate” (para 28). As I write this thesis, US “Secretary of War” Pete Hegseth vowed to rid the military of fat people (Stewart & Ali, 2025).

Instead of trying to participate in the performance of ‘health’, Irby embraces the ambiguity and negativity of fatness with her “grubby little paws”. Moreover, she continues to use humour to address the absurd premise of diet culture as well as the hypocrisy of the former-fat that acts as though they have both beat the stereotypes and ‘proven’ that fatness is a choice and can be undone.

Irby is not only laughing at herself but is read as funny by her literary community. For *Kirkus Reviews*, Lisa Kennedy (2018) writes that in “Irby’s able hands, the embarrassing can be harrowing and hilarious, but it seldom takes on the patina of shame” (para 3), while an interview in *Elle* praises Irby’s “curmudgeonly musings” (Tang, 2017). Of course, like the response to Gay’s (2017) work that I discuss in Chapter Two, reader-generated platforms like The StoryGraph⁴⁴ host very different perspectives on Irby’s tone and comedic leanings. Some reviews skew negative: “She seems so bitter it’s hard to read” (goldengeode, n.d.); “the humor in this book felt monotonous” (katherinebll, n.d.); “She was just downright mean at times, came across as a very negative person” (mlgrem, n.d.); even “TMI⁴⁵, TMI, and way TMI” (enyanyo, n.d.), all generally accompanied by a two-star rating. On the other hand, four and five star ratings included comments like “it is humor with heart and real insight, seeing the messy and the broken and the tragic but with wit and attitude” (shanayates, n.d.); “[...] there’s really something about hearing her experiences and her humor in her own voice that makes this special” (intothewildewood, n.d.); and “this shit is FUNNY. like lol irl funny [sic]. I haven’t related to

⁴⁴ Created by Nadio Odunayo, The StoryGraph allows for more tracking tools and rating tools (including content warnings). It has become increasingly popular as an alternative to the Amazon-owned Goodreads. I have a StoryGraph account.

⁴⁵ Meaning “too much information”, generally used in response to “giving too many details about a subject in a way that is embarrassing, usually personal details about something that should be kept private” (Cambridge Dictionary, n.d.).

anything so much in my life. [...] Just know if you're a person who has experienced a thing, you'll find something to relate to in here" (atsimoes, n.d.). For some, Irby's (2017) intention and mobilization of humour is clear while for others it rings as gimmicky or tacky. In either case, there is a dialogue and acknowledgment of the role of comedy in her work, and a reflection of the ways that people with similar experiences can find relief in their laughter.

By opening "The Tapeworm Diet" with such bold statements about the "why" of fatness, Irby (2013) sets the tone for the rest of the essay as satire. Feminist comedy scholars Julie and Cynthia Willett (2019) write that "humour is not merely for escape but also a way to handle our gut instincts and to get to the guts of an issue" (p. 1). Irby attends to both the metaphorical and literal guts of diet culture and anti-fatness. Instinctively, we know that to engage in some of these diets would be detrimental, but the *gut* of the issue is that people try anyways. At the same time, "the gut is always minded: it ruminates" (Wilson, 2015, p. 22). Humour is a way to both present and examine those ruminations in Irby's text. By positioning her own fat body as a creation of 'laziness', enjoying fattening foods, and a disinterest in exercise, the rest of Irby's (2013) essay is a hyperbolic foil—how absurd it seems to do any of these things just to get closer to 'thinness'. When Irby jokes about the "why" of her fatness, she is what Chalklin (2016) calls an "obstinate fatty" who embraces the "negative and often damaging rhetorics of ugliness, gluttony, misery and abjection through which fat people are positioned in contemporary society" (p. 23). Below, I put laughter into the context of 'ugliness'. Not only does Irby laugh at the 'ugly' things, which is to say things that "evoke pain or displeasure" (Ngai, 2005, p. 11), but she opens a space for fat people to be ugly in their expression. Ngai (2005) theorizes "ugly feelings" by recouping some of their productivity without romanticizing them either. Irby certainly recoups the productivity of laughter's incongruity and "capacity to disrupt the status quo" (Hendry, Bryan, &

Neary, 2023, p. 154), while balancing the corporeal and material realities—the ugly parts—of having/being a body, particularly a fat, disabled body.

Alongside recouping the productivity of laughter’s disruptive potential, Irby recoups the negative feelings of hostility. In “A Total Attack of the Heart”, Irby (2017) narrates her experiences of mental illness and a panic attack that lands her in the hospital. Driving home with her Subway sandwich (tuna on wheat), she begins to feel chest pains and dizziness. Irby recalls:

Seriously, I for real thought I was having a motherfucking heart attack, and while balanced precariously on the precipice of death, my biggest concern wasn’t life insurance or whether my toilet had been bleached or if I had time to write a list of who would get my worthless belongings, it was SHOULD I TAKE A BITE OF THESE TUNA FISHES BEFORE THEY GET SLIMY OR NAH? (2017, p. 105).

Irby’s facetious tone plays with the ‘obesity epidemic’ narratives often hurled at fat people, that they are one meal away from a heart attack. By approaching this story from a sarcastic position, Irby maintains the refusal to be a ‘good fatty’. Her story continues that once in the hospital, she learns it was not, in fact, a heart attack: “No, instead of a ‘life-threatening cardiac event’ the reading on the EKG came out ‘not right emotionally’. Not kidding, all those lines and squiggles on that mile-long piece of tape spelled out the words ‘MENTALLY ILL’ like an electric Ouija board” (Irby, 2017, p. 109). Irby’s expression not only demonstrates a fat obstinance but begins to excavate the connections between fat studies and disability, something which is clear in her writing on the messy materiality of the body that I discuss later in this chapter. Here, Irby hints toward what J. Logan Smilges calls “crip negativity” (2023), an “affective praxis: an expression of bad crip feelings felt cripplly” (p. 73). The affective elements of “crip negativity” include “pain, guilt, shame, embarrassment, exhaustion, fear, and anger” while also framing how these are felt “deeply, slowly, tearfully, fitfully, sleeplessly, suicidally, hungrily” (Smilges, 2023, p. 8).

These expressions are clear throughout Irby's work, not just her writing on mental illness. There is no hero narrative or overcoming, no hiding the ugly feelings *of* ugly feelings (or "crip feelings felt cripplly"). Instead, Irby writes clearly:

Not being able to deal with your life is humiliating. It makes you feel weak. And if you're African-American and female, not only are you expected to be resilient enough to just take the hits and keep going, but if you can't, you're a Black Bitch with an Attitude. You're not mentally ill; you're ghetto. Sitting in that hospital bed, talking with a dude who was fresh out of medical school and looked like he was playing doctor with his father's stethoscope looped around his neck, I was so fucking embarrassed, ashamed to be talking to him about being so mad and so sad most of the time [...] (2017, p. 110).

Not only is Irby engaging in "crip negativity", but she also elucidates the intersections of race and disability, as well as the very real ways that the Strong Black Woman stereotype impacts who is able to engage with crip negativity in the first place, and who is not. She continues: "When I was young I was frequently described as 'moody'. Or dismissed as 'angry'. According to the social worker who routinely pulled me out of class, I was intellectually right but 'quietly hostile'. [...] I was diagnosed as having an 'attitude problem'. The Black Girl curse. So I rocked with that" (Irby, 2017, p. 111). Here, Irby makes use of medicalized language, making a joke out of the 'diagnosis' of an attitude problem. Moreover, her reference to being "intellectually right" is worth noting. Erevelles and Minear (2010) write that "the association of degeneracy and disease with racial difference [...] translated into an attribution of diminished cognitive and rational capacities of non-white populations" (p. 133). In other words, this association between cognitive ability and race is part and parcel of white supremacist ideology.

Likewise, Therí A. Pickens (2019) further examines this attribution and its complicated legacy within Black communities. She writes that "[a] Black cultural context mandates a different set of interpretive strategies because of the confluence of structural racism from the

outside and its impact on the intracultural community, and structural patriarchy and ableism emanating from within the community” (Pickens, 2019, p. 51). Within discussions of disability, impairment, mental illness or “madness”, “Blackness changes things” (Pickens, 2019, p. 51). Irby’s perceived “quiet hostility” or diagnosis as “moody” are inherently racialized descriptions. Moreover, she notes the responses from her own family members around her depression and ‘attitude’, which included physical violence from her father. This is not to make claims about Black households, but to address, as Irby does, that both at home and in the world her “Blackness changes things”. She writes: “When I was growing up, no one in my house was talking about depression. That’s something that happened to white people on television, not a thing that could take down a Strong Black Woman” (Irby, 2017, p. 110). Irby’s “crip negativity” is not perceived as a bold rejection of ableism but as a threatening force. Even as Irby gets a stamp of approval for her intellectual capacities, she is unable to escape a comment about her (perceived) irrationality and her ugly feelings, i.e. her “attitude”. She expresses this through her signature sarcasm and returns to what ‘good fats’ should always avoid: food and feelings. Irby writes, “[a]ll of this might be easier if I could punch something, but I’m not a punch-something person. I’m a ‘sit in the dark in the bathroom with a package of sharp cheddar cheese slices’ person. Except I don’t even really eat cheese anymore. Plus I can’t fight. I’m soft, man. And I don’t have any answers” (2017, p. 115). Not only is Irby deconstructing the idea of toughness assumed by her Blackness, but she demonstrates the intentionally ambivalent approach of a fat liberationism that is neither “straightforwardly jovial or sincere” (Chalklin, 2016, p. 120).

Furthermore, in “Mad Black Rants”, La Marr Jurelle Bruce (2023) argues for a “ranting and raving” as “a condensed research report—orated in a brilliant flourish” (p. 49). Bruce’s perspective works in lockstep with “crip negativity”, ensuring an acknowledgement of an

“antimad-antiblack world” (Bruce, 2023, p. 53). Irby’s work is not a straightforward ‘rant’ or ‘rave’, but her use of comedy emerges from ugly feelings like hostility, while also playing with what those words mean and how they have been weaponized against her. Irby (2017) concludes “A Total Attack of the Heart” by acknowledging the role of jokes in her work, writing: “Do black girls even get to be depressed? If I ever have more than \$37 in my pocket I’m going to open a school for girls with bad attitudes where we basically talk to therapists all day while wearing soft pants and occasionally taking a field trip to the nearest elote cart. And if that doesn’t work, I’ll just tell some more stupid jokes. Good thing I’m hilarious” (2017, p. 116). Ultimately, “good thing I’m hilarious” distills the way that comedy functions throughout Irby’s work as a tool of expression. It is that same hilarity that helps to grieve tiny deaths, addresses the role that ‘desire’ plays in our social locations, and, as Irby (2017) writes in “Fuck it, Bitch. Stay Fat.”, cushions the blow of a shattering chair.

In telling the story of meeting her girlfriend’s friends for the first time, Irby touches upon one of the most common fears and possibilities in fat life: being the chair-breaker. She writes, “I was picking at my breakfast in a convincing way (I hate eating in front of strangers), and I had just begun to relax when I felt a weird hitch in my wobbly chair. Three seconds later, I went CRASHING TO THE FUCKING GROUND, taking a platter of French toast bites with me” (Irby, 2017, p. 166). Irby discusses the discomfort of public eating for fat people, echoing Lindy West’s (2016) public pizza anxiety discussed in Chapter Two. Even though the brunch took place at home, Irby acknowledges the ways that a comfortable space can become *uncomfortable* when you are suddenly on display. She continues, listing “the five stages of Holy Shit I Just Broke a Chair in Front of People” (Irby, 2017, p. 166). The list includes:

1) “**Denial.** ‘I’m not on the floor, you’re on the floor!!’”, 2) “**Anger.** THIS IS WHAT HAPPENS WHEN YOU BUY CHAIRS AT A RESALE SHOP, BITCH”, 3) “**Bargaining.** ‘Please, God, if you kill everyone in this dining room right now, I promise I will try to recycle all of the SlimFast cans I swear I’m going to start buying’”, 4) “**Depression.** ‘I am fat enough to kill chairs. I don’t deserve oxygen’”, and finally 5) “**Acceptance.** ‘Welp, since I’m already fat, fuck these toast points; let’s get a pizza’” (Irby. 2017, p. 166-67, emphasis in original).

By riffing on the five stages of grief, Irby plays with another popular cultural image. Stages one and two are relatively straightforward in their delivery and comedy, but stages three, four, and five have more fat layers to peel back. Stage three, bargaining, contains both a hyperbolic joke (killing everyone in the room) and a play on yet another diet culture emblem: SlimFast. She says she’ll *try* to recycle the SlimFast she *promises* to buy—the joke is not just that she vows to start recycling but that the very object she refers to recycling is a joke about her fatness. The bargain is not an exchange of killing everyone for recycling, but that Irby will *finally* start dieting, she promises! By stage four, depression, Irby’s blunt approach is not dulled but sharpened. The message of anti-fatness is that if you are unable to ‘fit’ properly in ‘regular’ furniture, you do not deserve to exist. Why wouldn’t this enter your mind as you tumble to the ground? Not to mention the collision of Irby’s own mental illness. Depression is not sarcasm when you do, in fact, have depression. Yet the use of “depression” in the context of breaking a chair at brunch can still be read as humorous. This list concludes with her usual “suckerpunch wit” (Tang, 2017, para 5) in stage five: like the handful of Milk Duds earlier in this chapter, why bother with measly toast points if the chair beneath you is already broken? The tension between fatness and the chair is relieved in the next passage but quickly replaced with something equally difficult. Irby (2017) writes that it “[t]urns out Mavis hadn’t put the chair together correctly, but tell that to the bruises spreading like wildfire across my tender ego” (p. 167). The reality of the incorrect

assembly can only do so much when you are literally and figuratively bruised, not to mention the fact that the ‘thin’ experience of this same breakage would have been different. If another person’s chair had broken, and they were not fat, they would all immediately agree that there was something wrong with the chair. However, this is not the case for the fat person whose chair breaks. On that note, Irby concludes: “We bought new chairs the next goddamn day. METAL ONES” (2017, p. 167). Irby’s use of comedic writing is an intentional choice to approach her ugly, crip feelings through an affective technology that can distance oneself from the pain, while also refusing to acknowledge ‘positivity’ and politeness as the best ways to fight against anti-fatness. This continues throughout Irby’s writing on her physical disabilities and the olfactory elements of embodiment.

Material Messes: Disability, Hysterics, and Diarrhea

An important part of Irby’s orientation toward obstinance is her discussion of the material messes of the body, something fat people are never supposed to acknowledge. ‘Material messes’ is a riff on what Robyn Longhurst and Linda Johnston (2014) call “messy materiality” (p. 273), the “fleshy, material and messy bits of bodies” (p. 274). Writing as human geographers, Longhurst and Johnson (2014) discuss the ways that women’s bodily messes, particularly relating to menstruation and incontinence, are rarely brought into discussions of embodiment and affect. They write, “it is now acceptable to discuss emotion and affect but other words more directly used to describe the materiality of bodies still remain unspeakable” (Longhurst & Johnston, 2014, p. 273). It is rare for the discussion of defecation, sweat, and other materials to be unpacked around fat embodiment outside of anti-fat discourse. *Material messes* is a useful framing because not only are they material themselves—feces, sweat, tears, menstrual blood—they stem from the “fleshy materiality” of the body, and they *matter*; that is, they are germane to

fat life; they are not immaterial. Under the structures of anti-fatness (which are inherently white supremacist and patriarchal) not only does menstruation remain taboo but sweat is a sign of weakness—each bead is ‘proof’ of the fat body being ‘out of shape’, out of place. Material messes of the body are present in Irby’s work, and she does not shy away from describing them in graphic detail. Across her texts, Irby (2013; 2017; 2020; 2023) writes about having to defecate on the side of the road into a paper bag held by a college classmate; wiping the sweat off her underbelly during sex with men who think she should be grateful to be with them; and the perils of an uncooperative menstrual cycle. She addresses the corporeality and the material messes of her body across a variety of spaces, some where the olfactory and bodily secretions are more acceptable (the doctor’s office, the bathroom) than others (the car, the bedroom, the gym). By orienting herself away from respectability, Irby refuses to structure the spatiality of fatness as something that must be contained within a performance of ‘health’ and ‘desire/ability’. Irby discusses a variety of corporeal messes and fluids throughout her work, but for the purposes of this chapter, I specifically discuss sweat, defecation, and menstruation.

In *Bodies: Exploring Fluid Boundaries*, Longhurst (2001) argues that aversions to bodily fluids apply to different social and corporeal spaces and focuses her analysis on men’s fear of “homosexual contamination” in public washrooms and washrooms as “feminised spaces” (p. 6). Ironically, women are taught that they should not discuss any bodily functions, be it menstruation or the scatological. As Irby (2023) explains, “it’s common knowledge that beautiful women don’t take shits and are horrified when ugly peasants do” (p. 182). This is particularly salient for fat women—fat people—who are meant to hide the corporeal realities of a fat body, lest they confirm fatphobic assumptions about their physical deviance. There is also a spatial element to this that is entangled with affect and embodiment. Adams-Hutcheson and Smith

(2020) argue that “emotion and affect structure spatial relationships that expose the dominant discourse of acceptability and Otherness and how place plays a central role” (p. 82). The idea that bodily fluids “rupture boundaries that are supposed to be shored up, solid and impermeable” (Adams-Hutcheson & Smith, 2020, p. 82) is applicable to how fatness ruptures social spaces as well as how ‘bad fats’ like Irby break social boundaries. A common fatphobic refrain is that fat people “just need to work out”, to get up off the couch and go to the gym. Yet the space of the gym is very much oriented away from fatness, both in atmosphere and in the literal construction of space. Writing about spatial discrimination, Lesleigh Owen (2012) notes “weight limits on exercise equipment” among the “constant reminders that fat persons don’t fit” (p. 294). There is no way to win (i.e. achieve or at least perform ‘health’ the way that fatphobia demands or healthism tries to mobilize to liberationist ends) when the stage upon which you are meant to perform ‘health’ cannot hold you. There is also the question of sweat, something fat people are already accused of having too much of, as “sweaty bodies can be sites of shame or pride, with the fit sweaty body often revered while the fat sweaty body is reviled. Sweat leaks from the body, it smells and exposes the fragility of bodily spatial boundaries” (Adams-Hutcheson & Smith, 2020, p. 82). Hence, fat sweat—the sweat that can come with the daily movements of fat—functions as proof of being ‘unhealthy’.

Although the gym, with all its ill-fitting exercise machines, is a space where sweat might be expected, fat sweat still crosses boundaries. Irby (2017) describes the pain of the gym in “Fuck it, Bitch. Stay Fat” where she writes:

Working out is a bummer. Walking on a treadmill for forty-five minutes while listening to the same Metallica playlist over and over and trying to read the closed captioning of a television show you don’t even care about is a total drag. The elliptical machine makes uncoordinated people like me look stupid. The

stair machine reduces mere mortals to tears within four minutes. The stationary bike feels like uncomfortable butt sex (p. 147).

Irby's sense of humour means this message lands with laughter, but at the meat of it, she is embracing negativity. Exercise is positioned as a necessary punishment in the rhetorics of anti-fatness and diet culture; it is not supposed to be comfortable, but you are not supposed to speak that discomfort either. The Health at Every Size (HAES) approach, for example, advocates that fat people "exercise in pleasurable ways (and within environments that are conducive to movement and free from harassment)" (Farrell, 2011, p. 12), yet whether one such place exists at all is up for debate. There have been fitness fads that attempt to make the process more 'fun' and less, as Irby describes it, "like uncomfortable butt sex" (2017, p. 147). One such craze that Irby addresses is Zumba, a type of fitness-dance class that attempted to play on the idea that if it feels *fun* it is not exercise but you are still engaging in fitness and thus doing the 'good' thing. Before she describes taking the class, Irby (2017) writes, "'Ditch the workout and join the party!' the official website shouted at my eyeballs" (p. 147). In contrast to the people shown on the website, "perfect bodies beaded with sweat" (Irby, 2017, p. 147), she explains: "I was winded after the first song, and twenty minutes in I told the woman struggling next to me to call me an ambulance. I was sweating in the grossest possible way, sweat dripping from my hair into my eyelashes before rolling down my nose" (2017, p. 149). While Irby's *sweaty* body might be 'in place' at a Zumba class, it still exceeds the limits of what type of sweat is acceptable. This echoes the agita that Gay (2017) expresses where she writes, "I feel like people are staring at me sweating and judging me for having an unruly body that perspires so wantonly, that dares to reveal the costs of its exertion" (p. 18). Although different in their approaches, Irby and Gay are hinting at the same thing: the very human elements of fat embodiment are still 'too much'. When fat is made abject, every part of fatness is 'undesirable'. Sweat, like fat, is excess—it drips from

the (fat) body the way fatness spills over the sides of a chair, it ruptures the boundaries of the ‘right’ corporeal expression; it leaks and sticks and smells. As quickly as exercising orients fat people toward the ‘right’ things, sweat marks and reveals a “failed orientation” (Ahmed, 2006, p. 51), unable to use the objects and performance of ‘health’ in the ‘right’ ways.

It is understandable that fat politics attempts to rebuke anti-fatness by falling into healthism narratives that fat *can be* or *is* ‘healthy’. Importantly, however, no matter the motivation, ‘health’ is not obtainable by all. Below I discuss the ways that Irby cleverly demonstrates the intersections of fatness and disability throughout her work, using humour to do so. She writes, “running to the bathroom all the time has to qualify as minimal cardiovascular exercise” (Irby, 2017, p. 143). While a reference to her Crohn’s disease, this joke also highlights the way that movement has different manifestations, some of which are deemed ‘right’ (running for exercise) while others are the butt of jokes (running to the bathroom). In “Black Beauty” Irby (2013) explains:

I was diagnosed with Crohn’s disease when I was 25 which, as autoimmune diseases go, is one of the least glamorous of the bunch. It has ruined my joints and causes me to have diarrhea all the fucking time, and I’m not sure if there is anything less beautiful than a woman with a jammed up colon limping along ten feet behind you while shitting an adult diaper (p. 47).

Here, Irby plays with ‘desire/ability’. Outlined in Chapter One, Harrison (2021) describes “Desire/ability politics [as] the methodology through which the sovereignty of those deemed (conventionally) Attractive/Beautiful is determined” (p. 13). Meaning ‘desire capital’ and ‘desire/ability’ “each speak to the structure and metaphysics of Desire, Beauty, Prettiness, and Ugliness as things to be traded and saved as with any other economy” (Harrison, 2021, p. 13).⁴⁶

⁴⁶ I have opted to leave Harrison’s original capitalization in these quotes.

The determination of ‘desirable’ depends on the performance of a (cis)gender, which is predicated on normativity—being both non-fat and non-disabled. Being ‘desirable’ means being ‘desire/able’ (Harrison, 2021). When Irby conjures the language of ‘beauty’ she is addressing the way that disability falls outside of it. Her limping, defecating body is not within the framework of ‘desire/ability’, and it can never be marked as ‘healthy’ despite what assimilationist politics may want. Moreover, Irby’s “ruined” joints, “jammed up colon”, and limp are all *her*. She both *has* and *is* her body, unwilling to separate them in the name of embracing a ‘desire/able’ fat subjectivity that apologizes for its own corporeality. Irby offers us a way to recognize what Mia Mingus (2011) describes as “the magnificence of a body that shakes, spills out, takes up space, needs help, moseys, slinks, drools, rocks, or curls over on itself. The magnificence of a body that doesn’t get to choose when to go to the bathroom, let alone which bathroom to use” (p. 140). Mingus’s insistence on embracing and running towards the ugly is not easy for us to do, particularly those of us who already fall outside of ‘desire/ability’.⁴⁷ Hence the reliance on a ‘positivity’ approach that seeks to fit ‘ugly’ within the framework of ‘desire’. By spilling her guts onto the page, Irby demonstrates the steps (or limps) we can take toward an embrace of ugliness. Irby likewise “offers work that is deeply corporeal and looks beyond the limits of fat itself to explore instead many of the grotesque components of our bodies that are often excised from traditional scholarship” (Friedman, 2019, p. 249). In other words, she makes important contributions for an approach to fat studies that not only takes seriously a fat epistemology, but is messy, contradictory, and at times, ugly.

⁴⁷ An ‘us’ that includes Irby and her fat reader.

Irby (2013) further places herself in the discourses of ‘disease’ that run through both ableism and anti-fatness (and is part of their intersection) in “Skin Rashes and Arthritis”. She writes,

I try not to ever talk about this business with strangers, because the word ‘disease’ is off-putting and scary, and I don’t want anyone to ever move [their] chair away from me in public. But then that makes me feel all ashamed, like I’m hoarding some awful dirty secret. And lately I am trying to operate from a shame-free place [...] so I am writing in this book that I have Crohn’s disease (Irby, 2013, p. 182).

Intertwined with the “corporeal deviance” (Garland-Thomson, 2021, p. 74) of ableism, fatness as “death and disease” (Dark, 2021, p. 37) is a significant part of the anti-fat ‘obesity epidemic’ rhetoric. In response, there is a fat insistence on ‘health’ that dismisses the intersecting experiences of those who are both fat and disabled and thus can never be ‘healthy’. Continuing her biofluid comedy, Irby writes “[...] twenty minutes ago I took a soupy shit that splattered all over the inside of my jeans because this complicated belt is obviously here to ruin my life” (2013, p. 182). The graphic description and impoliteness of “soupy shit” orients Irby toward the leaky body that Mingus (2011) deems magnificent. Similarly, Longhurst (2000) argues that “the defecating or excreting body [...] is often understood to be a potentially dangerous body” (p. 129); and what is more dangerous to the stability of anti-fatness than the embrace of ugly and a refusal to plug up the leaks and spills of the body that excretes?

In the aptly titled “Hysterical!”, Irby (2020) writes about the pitfalls of her endometriosis-riddled uterus, or, as she calls it, a “gooey, unpredictable blood bag” (p. 113). Endometriosis (often referred to as endo) is a condition where tissue like that of the uterus—endometrium—grows in places outside of the uterus (Endometriosis Network Canada, n.d.). Often left out of disability discourse, Cara E. Jones (2016) offers a feminist disability studies analysis of endo that

“acknowledge[s] pain in a way that allows for both medical intervention and critiques of that intervention” as well as exploring “how disabling pain intersects with gender, race, class, and sexuality” (p. 558). “Hysterical!” details Irby’s experience of a particularly gruesome period and subsequent ablation. She writes: “I woke up in a congealed pool of blood so deep you’d need galoshes to wade through it. This is the kind of corporeal surprise that, no matter how many gerbil-sized clots I’ve passed in filthy bar bathrooms or navy-blue towels I’ve laid across unsuspecting Uber rear seats, I don’t know that I ever would have been prepared for (Irby, 2020, p. 106). Menstruation has long been stigmatized as something disgusting and dirty, “as monstrous and polluted” (Chrisler, 2011, p. 203). Much can be gleaned from Irby’s discussion of her menstrual nightmare, including the connections between racism and gynecology; the need to situate endometriosis within disability; and the trouble with the anti-fat narratives that our bodies are entirely in our control. First, Black women experience higher rates of medical discrimination when it comes to conditions like fibroids or endometriosis (Resilient Sisterhood Project, n.d.). Moreover, gynecology as a field was borne from experiments performed on enslaved Black women and overall eugenicist “science” (Owens, 2017; Strings, 2019). In her quest to alleviate the pain and discomfort of her periods, Irby (2020) seeks out a hysterectomy, explaining, “I have spent years held hostage by the whims of a small, pear-shaped sex organ located somewhere between my butt and where pee comes out, that I can’t see and have never had plans to make use of” (p. 111). The quip about having no plans to “use” her uterus cleverly rebukes the prevailing approach to endo where “clinicians more quickly attribute symptoms to endometriosis when patients report pain with sex or difficulties getting pregnant than when they disclose severe pain” (Jones, 2016, p. 560). Again, this is complicated by medical racism. Black women’s pain is

ignored, and they are significantly less likely to receive a formal endometriosis diagnosis than white women (Resilient Sisterhood Project, n.d.; The Endometriosis Network Canada, n.d.).

“Hysterical!” can also be read through Alyson Patsavas’s (2014) “cripistemology of pain” (p. 205), which she defines as being “produced from the socially situated experience of disability” (p. 205). Like the overarching epistemological foundation of this project, Patsavas (2014) argues that instead of making “an *a priori* claim to ‘authentic’ or ‘true’ knowledge, a cripistemology of pain produces knowledge from experience *while simultaneously* claiming a specific positionality to mark the limits of the knowledge claims produced” (2014, p. 205, emphasis in original). Irby’s work emerges from her particular social location, reflecting both an important personal experience and its connection to broader social structures through “the *felt* experiences of cultural discourses” (Patsavas, 2014, p. 207, emphasis in original). Irby (2020) continues:

The doctors didn’t know what was going on, either. I mean, dude knows more than I do, for sure, but I had three transvaginal ultrasounds and a battery of bloodwork and diagnostic tests, and every single time, he shrugged like, ‘Welp, I dunno! I guess you’re just a heavy bleeder’ while my uterus sloshed around sounding like a dishwasher and I could feel liquid seeping through four layers of protective padding onto that embarrassingly crinkly paper spread across the exam table (p. 111).

By employing humorous imagery like “sloshed around sounding like a dishwasher”, Irby demonstrates how laughter can be a “flat affect” (Malatino, 2022, p. 57). In this case, cushioning the discomfort of both sitting in a pool of your uterine lining and having invasive medical procedures that result in no further diagnostic information. Irby continues:

It seemed like he was cool with the idea that maybe I would just eat raw steak for every meal in an effort to keep my iron up while waiting it out, until I finally just asked him if we could take a blowtorch to the entire apparatus and, after making sure for the millionth time that I really don't want to have a baby despite my apathy and rapidly advancing age, he was like 'Wait, but are you actually sure?' (2020, p. 111).

Through joking about her doctor's response to her pain and her wishes, Irby demonstrates the disinterest that many Black women receive at the doctor while also illustrating the prioritization of fertility over comfort that Jones (2016) describes.

Furthermore, as Jones (2016) writes, "gender norms overshadow lived experience to normalize pain and limit the option of medical intervention" (p. 560), and this is particularly salient for Black women, whose pain is dismissed due to medical racism and the controlling image (Collins, 2000) of the Strong Black Woman. Irby (2020) drives this point home through another sarcastic list, this time: "Things I Would Rather Do Than Carry A Human To Term In My Battered Uterus, Which I Imagine At This Point Looked Like One Of Those Purplish Beefsteak Tomatoes That Has Rotted And Been Left In The Compost Bin Under The Sink For Weeks" (p. 111). She offers things like "take a soupy diarrhea shit in the middle of the floor in a public place, then eat it", "listen to a man's jokes", and "post all the pictures of my nine greasy chins I've accidentally taken with my front-facing camera" among others, before concluding the list with "have a wildly uncomfortable menstrual cycle for approximately 6,570 days, the eighteen years that I would be legally mandated to be responsible for my child" (Irby, 2020, p. 111-112). As I mentioned earlier in this chapter, fat mothers are often criticized more harshly than their 'thin' counterparts and this is exacerbated by racism. Yet that same racism also demands that Black women suffer in silence and have their medical wishes ignored in service of the not-so-subtle Christian nationalism that underscores patriarchy and is obsessed with

reproduction. Irby's pain being ignored in service of an experience she does not want (pregnancy) is another "tiny death" that she tries to laugh at.

Hendry, Bryan, and Neary (2023) argue that "humour enacts an incongruous or unsettling quality by playing on the fact that the supposed fixedness and security of established norms are not so fixed or secure at all" (p. 155). This is certainly the case in Irby's comedy, which unsettles gendered norms about reproduction as well as respectability politics. Irby (2020) continues to highlight the hypocrisy in her doctor's hesitation to remove her uterus, writing that if she had arrived at her appointment pregnant, "that dude would have shit his pants and sat me down for a Very Serious Conversation about why embarking on the journey of motherhood at my advanced age and in my current state of advanced corporeal decay was a Very Bad Idea" (p. 113). Ultimately, despite her request to "yank this gooey, unpredictable blood bad" out of her body (Irby, 2020, p. 113), Irby is instead granted a dilation and curettage and endometrial ablation. She concludes: "It's been three blissful, period-free years since I had a charcoal grill shoved into my vagina. I'm looking forward to living the rest of my life like I'm in a tampon commercial" (Irby, 2020, p. 117). Irby once again brings in a normative cultural artifact and highlights the irony that the only way to exist under the norms those commercials suggest is, of course, to not menstruate at all. Moreover, those commercials only ever feature thin, cisgender women, often going about domestic activities or athletic ones, insisting that women be demure regardless of the uterine lining leaving their bodies. Irby (2020) brings endometriosis into the disability conversation in a way that Jones (2016) deems necessary, while also attending to the compounding experiences of multiple disabilities, as it is common for those with endo to "experience immunological and gastrointestinal disorders" (Jones, p. 555). This is highlighted when Irby details her intestinal and arthritic pain, both the result of her Crohn's disease and "its

little bastard cousin ulcerative colitis” (2013, p. 182), in addition to her endometriosis pain. As Meleo-Erwin (2016) notes, “impairment, and particularly its relationship to pain, is part of daily experience and cannot be ignored in disability rights or studies” (p. 104). Irby brings a myriad of pains into the discussion of her disabled life and refuses an approach where this pain would be alleviated by losing weight.

Furthermore, Irby demonstrates how little ‘control’ we really have over our bodies, despite fatphobic narratives that fat people are the result of their own bad habits and lack of self-control. She writes, “sure, I move this body around every day but I’m not actually in charge of it, and I have no idea and no control over anything that happens within it” (Irby, 2020, p. 110). We can also read this lack of control through the idea of hysterical laughter. Irby’s (2020) title “Hysterical!” harkens back to ideas of women’s hysteria and premenstrual syndrome, but it also reflects the idea of laughing hysterically. Hennefeld (2021) brings hysteria into the context of laughter where “‘hysterical’ and its cognates ‘hysteric’ and ‘hysteria’, explicitly imply fun, exuberance, or enjoyment” (p. 117). If, as Kyrölä (2014) suggests, laughter is “corporeal training”, perhaps Irby’s work can be part of the training that allows us to “face and incorporate new and unforeseeable elements into the realm of what we perceived as imaginable and acceptable” (p. 96). Fatness is made abject—disgusting, fearsome, ‘ugly’—and the respectability of fat politics means that fat people must appear to be ‘healthy’, ‘clean’, and invested in increasing their worth under ‘desire capital’. By rejecting this approach, Irby refuses to be ‘acceptable’ and embraces ambivalence. She puts it all out there: leaky bowels, dripping sweat, and the gush of unpredictable menstruation. There is also something to be said for ugly laughing, both in our hysterics and the contortions of the face and body as we laugh, and in laughing at the

ugly elements of our embodiment. Perhaps not just “crip feelings felt cripplly” (Smilges, 2023, p. 73), but *ugly laughing felt uglily*.

Conclusion: Staying Fat

I open this chapter with the statement “Samantha Irby is funny”. Ranging from full blown scatological humour to clever asides about diets, Irby uses comedy to communicate her experiences of fat life. This chapter has argued that a significant part of not only eschewing but divesting from ‘desire capital’ is embracing that which is revolting and orienting towards the mess; something Irby produces with wit and sarcasm. To challenge both the investment in being ‘good’ and the dichotomy between what constitutes ‘good’ and ‘bad’ fat, Irby contributes to the messy middle, the *affective misfitting* of a fat politic that does not seek liberation in the structures of oppression. Through sarcasm and irreverence, Irby’s texts reflect the negative approach championed by queer and fat studies scholars like Cooper (2016), Chalklin (2016), Meleo-Erwin (2012), Murray (2005), Snider (2018) and White (2016). Moreover, her discussions of the material messes of the body contribute to the important intersections between fatness and disability, and why fat liberation must take seriously disabled experiences. Irby makes no claims to being ‘normal’ or ‘healthy’, instead presenting a full range of complicated and at times contradictory experiences of her embodiment, thereby elucidating the affective encounters so ordinary for fat life.

In an interview following the release of *Quietly Hostile* (2023), Irby responds to the question: “What do you think of happiness as a goal that we should all be striving toward?” (Marchese & Doumbouya, para 8). She says,

What if I’m disabled? Or too poor? The thing where whatever you aspire to be is a thing we should all aspire to—I hate that. That kind of messaging just exists

to make people feel bad. When you flatten everything into ‘Be happy,’ it’s like, ‘What does that mean?’ It means a different thing for you than it does for me, and can you ever get there? For most people, the answer is no. The dishonesty behind positivity grates on my nerves (Marchese & Doumbouya, 2023, para 8, emphasis mine).

‘Happiness’ and ‘positivity’ as objects that fat subjects should strive towards does, indeed, grate on the nerves. By refusing to accept the promise of happiness, Irby positions herself as the ‘bad fat’, affectively misfit within the frameworks of ‘positivity’ that liberal fat politics demand. Furthermore, the object of ‘health’ is, as Irby says, different for some than others. Anti-fatness creates an impossible matrix of responses that range from assimilation and HAES to “obstinate fatties” (Chalklin, 2016). Through a spectrum of comedic approaches including irreverence, sarcasm and facetiousness, Samantha Irby’s essays guide us toward a fat studies that refuses politeness. Perhaps, by proposing we “fuck it, bitch. stay fat” what Irby really answers is May Friedman and Calla Evans’s (2022) question of “who gets to be indignant and who doesn’t and does that really shift?” (p. 125). Irby demonstrates how toying with the ‘ugly’/ugly can lead us away from a timeline where one must always be moving toward ‘thinness’ and being ‘desire/able’. Instead, she leads us towards our magnificence, ugly laughing all the way there.

Chapter 5

Discussion: In Fat Company

*I don't know where the blame lies
But you better believe I'm not gonna carry it all
I don't know where the shame dies
But it's helping me to scream this is not my fault*
- MUNA, "Loudspeaker"

*A page, turning, is a wing lifted with no twin, and therefore no flight.
And yet we are moved.*
- Ocean Vuong, *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous*

There are moments in this thesis where I have briefly referred to Roxane Gay, Lindy West, or Samantha Irby in another author's designated chapter. In this chapter, I draw the through-line between these works, particularly encounters with objects; humour (or lack thereof); (in)coherence and temporality; and the texture of reading. I also discuss their incongruities, specifically troubling the idea of humour, as well as the divergences around the connection between anti-fatness and race, and engagement with ideas of weight loss. Beginning with a 'sense of fat', I return to some of the discussion of José Esteban Muñoz's (2020) work that began in Chapter One and set the stage for the shared affective sense of fatness that runs through the writing of Gay, West, and Irby. Next, I turn to the theme of encounters with objects, specifically the airplane, the chair, and the table. Next, I turn to humour, which is clearly present in both West and Irby's work, yet the lack of humour in Gay's memoir is interesting as she is known for her quick wit. In addition, the (in)coherence I unpack is two-fold. Chalklin (2016) describes a "refusal to cohere" as part of queer negativity and I also find that the works discussed in this thesis refuse to cohere to specific styles of life writing. In their own ways, each author plays with both style and tone. There is both an incoherence of fat performance as well as stylistic choices which do not gel with linear triumph narratives that are expected in memoir (Robertson, 2012;

Piepzna-Samarasinha, 2018). Finally, I conclude with thoughts on the book as a tactile object and the sensory experiences of my fat reading.

In Chapter One (Theory & Method), I outline my interest in reading the chosen pieces of life writing through an affective lens, including approaches like that presented by José Esteban Muñoz (2020) in *The Sense of Brown*. Muñoz offers the idea of ‘brownness’ as an affect through a “sense of brown” and a “brown commons” (2020, p. 2). He writes that “as a concept, as a method even, [brownness] offers us a sense of the world” (Muñoz, 2020, p. 149); ‘brownness’ is not simply an acknowledgement of ethnicity or race, but a sense of the world and a way to address how objects are shaped and ‘browened’ by the world. Fatness offers a similar sense of the world and its orientations and affective encounters. This is not to suggest that Muñoz’s approach is somehow removed from ideas of corpulence, indeed he acknowledges the role that ‘health’ plays in the construction of the ‘Latino/a’ as “excess” (2020, p. 11), but that his framework offers something to fat studies at the meeting point(s) of affect and embodiment in particular. I want to start with a sense of fat affect to set the ‘tone’ for the following discussions. This thesis has analyzed different ‘senses of fat’, fat as it moves through the world, and fat as a site of affect and subjectivity. Indeed, the overarching goal of this project is to demonstrate the epistemological potential of these works at the intersection of fat affect and embodiment. Throughout this dissertation, I have highlighted the “ugly feelings” (Ngai, 2005) of fat life that Gay, West, and Irby present, thus positioning their work as doing *affective misfitting* in contemporary fat liberation politics. They each present the complex, ugly feelings that emerge from fat life.

The moments of “misfitting” (Garland-Thomson, 2011) that arise in encounters between fat objects and a lean world are not just encounters between flesh and a material object, but the

affective responses of those also inhabiting the space. For instance, the *misfit* between fatness and the airplane seat is not isolated as happening between the fat material body and the object of the chair, but through the affective forces that shape this encounter in the first place. As Muñoz (2020) writes, “we are all weighed down, burdened, by emotions that are radiated towards us” (p. 51). This is certainly true of the extra weight placed on fat people boarding planes who are, as I will discuss below, met with an immediately tense affective atmosphere (Anderson, 2009) by means of the stare and what Rinaldi, Rice, Kotow, and Lind (2020) call “the circulation of fat hatred”.

The affective force of anti-fatness is rooted in the same affective normality that Muñoz (2020) argues is demanded by white supremacy. To attend to a ‘sense of fat’ would mean challenging the singular subject position of fat politics and the affective normalities it regenerates, that is, the ways that it reproduces “white civility” (Lind, 2020) and an investment in ‘desire/ability’. It would also mean addressing the affective components of fat life as neither solely formed by and through encounters with anti-fatness, nor as autonomous and somehow removed from the social locations of fat. The insistence on ‘positivity’, ‘health’, and ambition to be ‘desire/able’ require hiding the “ugly feelings” (Ngai, 2005) of fat life, and in some ways demand that fat subjects take responsibility for the negative affects that “stick” (Ahmed, 2010, p. 29) to them. It is the complex, messy, and “ugly” expressions in these pieces of life writing that make them so interesting for fattening the subjectivity of fat feminist studies. At the beginning of this dissertation, I mention that it can be difficult to share fat stories in mixed company (Malatino, 2022); here, I bring these works back together in *fat* company.

Slender (Raced) Gender and Weight Loss

Sharing fat company does not, as I have stressed throughout the discussions of epistemology in this project, guarantee a shared politic or monolithic experience of fatness. Although the works by Gay (2017), West (2016), and Irby (2013; 2017; 2020; 2023) have more in common than they do major divergences, the connection between race, gender, and fatness is present in Gay and Irby's works in a way that it is not in West's. For example, as I discuss in Chapter Two, Gay (2017) expresses that people overlook her gender because of her fatness and her race. She writes, "[m]y fat body empowers people to erase my gender" and that "[r]ace plays a part in this too. Black women are rarely allowed their femininity" (Gay, 2017, p. 256). Gender is not only constructed on the pretense of a slender body (Crawford, 2017; White, 2021) but the anti-Black foundations that demonize fat to begin with (Harrison, 2021). It is no wonder, then, that Irby (2017) describes herself as "passably female" (p. 3), gesturing toward the ways that her fatness, her Blackness, and her shaved head orient her away from the "slender normativity" of gender. Moments of being misgendered are central to Malatino's (2022) "side affects"; the inevitable bad feelings of trans life that leaves the trans subject disoriented. Yet both Gay (2017) and Irby (2017) demonstrate how this same disorientation impacts them as cisgender subjects by virtue of their fatness and their Blackness. They both exhibit "failed femininities" (Fahs, 2018, p. 237) because legible gender is predicated on slender whiteness.

Although West comments on her somewhat failed femininity and how she was (and is) denied recognition as 'desirable', *Shrill* (2016) is located in her experience of womanhood and race is not addressed as part of the anti-fatness she encounters. This is not to say that a recognition of racism is entirely absent from her text. She addresses the role racism plays in misogynist comedy in both "Chuckletown, USA, Population: Jokes" (West, 2016, p. 149) and

“Death Wish” (West, 2016, p. 165), lamenting the ways that comedians stand behind what they consider to be “‘edgy’ racism” (West, 2016, p. 167), as well as how her spouse, who is Black, is treated in these spaces. However, West’s (2016) overall discussions of her anti-fat encounters and how her body “fails” expectations are addressed through gender norms without attention to race. This is not a failure of her text, but it demonstrates why fat feminists need to understand the roots of anti-fatness as anti-Blackness. Moreover, as I discuss in Chapter Three, West’s (2016) fat killjoy stance rebukes “white civility” (Coleman, 2006; Lind, 2020) in meaningful ways and signals the possibilities for white fats to engage in fat liberation without upholding the normativities and respectability politics of whiteness.

In addition to the role of race, these authors discuss weight-loss in different ways. Both Irby (2013; 2017; 2020; 2023) and West (2016) make passive comments about weight-loss, whereas Gay (2017) expresses more of an open desire to lose weight. Where Irby does joke about ideas of weight loss it is usually in service of critiquing or satirizing ‘wellness’ and diet culture. For example, in “Body Negativity”, Irby (2020) spends sixteen pages outlining the “confusing, overwhelming messages for how to properly care for and feed” (p. 135) your body, including quips like: “Where do these positive bodies find time for all that sauerkraut and avocado? [...] Loving yourself is a full-time job with shitty benefits. I’m calling in sick” (2020, p. 150). In “Fuck it, Bitch. Stay Fat”, Irby (2020) tells the story of seeing her doctor after trying Nutrisystem, writing, “truth be told I didn’t know whether I’d actually lost weight, or if the colonic effect of those protein shakes had just flushed out the seven pounds of undigested food in my colon” (p. 165). Her doctor ultimately concludes that given her gastrointestinal diseases she’s not a good candidate for *that* method of weight loss, but either way, Irby’s oeuvre is filled with jokes about the many attempts to concede to diet culture while highlighting just how impossible

and absurd it is. Similarly, West (2016) approaches discussions of weight loss through a critique of diet culture and anti-fatness. She argues,

[N]o fat activist who says ‘diets don’t work’ is suggesting that you cannot starve a fat person to a thin death. Rather, we are referencing the rigorously vetted academic conclusion that traditional diets—the kind that are foisted upon fat people as penance and cure-alls and our entry exam for humanity—fail 95 percent of the time. Whether fat people fail to lose weight due to simple laziness and moral torpor or because of a far more complex web of personal, cultural, and medical factors, those numbers are still real. Those fat people still exist (West, 2016, p. 100).

Where Irby (2013) approaches this issue in “Tapeworm Diet” by documenting the absurdity in popular diets, West (2016) takes a more direct route to say the same thing. Moreover, West (2016) addresses the complicated growth in fat liberation when she includes a footnote about wanting to change what she has previously said about losing weight after tuning out fat hatred. I discuss the use of footnotes later in this chapter, but ultimately West (2016) highlights the hypocrisy in how “if anti-fat crusaders really want what they claim to want—for fat people to be ‘healthy’—they should be on the front lines of size acceptance and fat empowerment” (p. 103). Part of what marked Gay’s (2017) text as “selling out” (Brown & Herndon, 2019) was her open admission of desiring to lose weight and feeling a “swell of vanity” when she does, as well as her subsequent decision to have weight loss surgery. The complicated feelings around her fatness expressed in *Hunger* (2017) are part of what make it so compelling. Gay does not eschew her “ugly feelings” in favour of presenting a happy, triumphant narrative, nor does she claim to only have ‘positive’ feelings about her fat bodymind. She writes both “I don’t want to change who I am. I want to change how I look” (Gay, 2017, p. 149), and “I am not happy at this size, though I am not suffering from the illusion that were I to wake up thin tomorrow, I would be happy and

all my problems would be solved” (Gay, 2017, p. 153), as well as directly addressing the question of her fat political commitments:

I have been accused of being full of self-loathing and of being fat-phobic. There is truth to the former accusation and I reject the latter. [...] To be clear, the fat acceptance movement is important, affirming, and profoundly necessary, but I also believe that part of fat acceptance is accepting that some of us struggle with body image and haven’t reached a place of peace and unconditional self-acceptance (Gay, 2017, p. 153).

Gay might ‘admit’ throughout her memoir that she is unhappy with her body and how she “no longer needs the body fortress” (2017, p. 303) that she built, but she continues to address the social components of anti-fatness and how that has tangible effects on fat life. Together, Gay, West, and Irby echo the MUNA lyrics that open this chapter: “I don’t know where the blame lies / But you better believe I’m not gonna carry it all / I don’t know where the same dies / But it’s helping me to scream this is not my fault”. Maybe fat bodies are built fortresses, maybe fat people are at ‘fault’ for their embodiment, but even if that is the case, they are not at fault for the structures that shape fatness as full of shame. Gay (2017) says: “I don’t know where I fit in with communities of fat people” (p. 153), and I believe that she fits in the fat company of West and Irby, not despite their different approaches to expressing the encounters of fat life, but because of them.

Encounters with Objects

In this section I address “the active role of *nonhuman* materials in public life” (Bennett, 2010, p. 2).⁴⁸ I bring together discussions of encounters with objects, particularly the table, the chair and the airplane seat, as well as the ‘object’ of anti-fatness and its very presence in these encounters. A commonly troublesome encounter in fat life occurs between the fat body and the airplane seat

⁴⁸ Interestingly, though, this could describe not only the encounters with objects but with the books themselves.

(Huff, 2009; Dark, 2019; Gordon, 2020; Rinaldi, Rice, & Lind, 2021). To put it mildly, air travel is already an uncomfortable experience. How else can one describe hurtling through the sky in a metal tube with recycled air? To say nothing of how congregating in airports-cum-shopping malls seemingly causes people to forget how to form a queue, lose their patience, and treat customer service workers as if *they* are the gatekeepers of airline regulations or control how many Timbits a Tim Horton kiosk has. This menagerie of chaos is exacerbated when you are fat, or when you have overlapping “*misfit*” (Garland-Thomson, 2011) embodiments like disability or old age. In an animated documentary short, *Flying While Fat*, Bethan Evans (2016) combines real audio with animations by Stacy Bias to illustrate the discomfort of what that fat experience is like. One voice recounts: “It’s nerve-wracking”, while another says, “When the other passengers look at you and you get ‘The Expression’” (Evans & Bias, 2016). Any fat viewer (or reader, as the case may be) will know what ‘the expression’ is, but it can also be understood through “the stare” (Mollow, 2015). Mollow (2015) argues that fat bodies are “routinely disciplined by the means of the stare” (p. 203). This discipline is fiercely deployed on airplanes, where consumers are crammed into tiny seats for a high cost, hoping that a fat passenger will not sit next to them (Evans & Bias, 2016). Yet the disciplinary nature of anti-fatness does not begin and end with ‘the expression’ but permeates the very experience of fat air travel. From ill-fitting seats and exorbitant costs to outright hatred and disgruntled seatmates, flying while fat is a special kind of discomfort.

In *Hunger*, Gay (2017) describes spending “five-hour flights tucked against the window” (p. 171) in order to shrink her body as much as possible. Similarly, West (2016) writes about upgrading to a first-class seat that merely “succeeded at being a chair instead of a flying social experiment about the limits of human endurance” (p. 135). Additionally, her summary of fat

travelling describes it as “sitting motionless in [your seat] for five hours while you fold your arms and shoulders up like a dying orchid” (West, 2016, p. 136). For her part, Irby only references air travel once, though she does make many references throughout her books to travelling via car. In *Quietly Hostile* (2023), listing how she “no longer [has] control over her bladder” (p. 72), Irby writes one short paragraph under the item “Seat 3B on Delta flight 2734 to LAX” (p. 72). She says, “I used to never have to pee on flights, due to a carefully calibrated combination of claustrophobic terror and forced dehydration” (Irby, 2023, p. 72). Her lack of plane tales could be because of the utter banality of fat plane horror stories and therefore a disinterest in repeating them, or a hope that the reader who knows this experience will understand the deeper meaning in her comment about claustrophobia. Indeed, inherent claustrophobia and forced dehydration are not uncommon fat feelings on a plane, particularly when getting out of your seat would require moving your body past a seatmate who is likely unhappy with your presence. Instead of causing uproar over your need to indulge a basic bodily function, it is easier to be dehydrated. It is interesting to think about this in the context of ‘health’. Anti-fatness declares fatness inherently ‘unhealthy’, yet the very force of anti-fatness keeps fat people from hydrating themselves before (and during) a mode of travel that nearly demands hydration to be manageable. Fat passengers remain folded up, claustrophobic and aching, dehydrated and afraid to disrupt the space more than their embodiment already does. Or, if they are lucky, manage to get an upgrade to a slightly more humane seat.

Fat bodies are not the only *misfit* on airplanes, but they are the ones blamed for this *misfit*. Reflecting on her solo play, *Things I Learned from Fat People on Planes*, Kimberly Dark (2019) discusses watching the treatment that a tall (six-foot-five) muscular man received on a flight. Even though his body did not ‘fit’ into the seat—the same way a fat body does not—he

was met with sympathy for his discomfort and admiration for his muscular frame. Dark (2019) writes, “flight attendants seem neither worried about the weight he adds to the aircraft, nor how he inconveniences them when they go by with their cart and need to ask him each time to ‘watch your shoulders’” (p. 309-10). It is not the *misfit* of all bodies that is a problem for anti-fatness and its foot-soldiers, but the *construction* of the body that does not fit. Airplane seats are designed with profits, and not people, in mind. Very few among us can find a seventeen-inch chair comfortable, yet airlines continue to shrink their seats to increase their bottom-line (Dark, 2019; Huff, 2009; Gordon, 2020). Despite this, as Dark (2019) argues, hatred and blame are directed towards the fat body, and “if the airlines can encourage trim passengers to focus on the fat passenger in the next seat then that takes the focus off how this conveyance is organized and structured [...]. The practice of focusing on the fat passenger may fuel a little animosity, a little hatred, but it won’t be toward the airline—and that’s good for business” (p. 311). Also good for business is the money that some fat passengers must spend on buying two seats, which Gay addresses in *Hunger* (2017) and I discuss in Chapter Two. She writes: “Airlines prefer that obese⁴⁹ people buy two tickets, but few airline employees have any sense of how to deal with two boarding passes and the empty seat once the plane is fully boarded” (Gay, 2017, p. 211). Then there is the inevitable moment where the other passenger in the row “tries to commandeer some of that space for themselves” (Gay, 2017, p. 211). It is an impossible trap to escape as the extra space suddenly becomes ‘free’ for the non-fat passenger, despite their disinterest in having a fat seatmate to begin with. Though ‘the expression’ may mark the beginning of an uncomfortable flight, the anti-fatness of air travel is built right into the Boeing. In other words, as West (2014) puts it, “no matter how magnificently you resent them, you cannot turn a fat person

⁴⁹ I do not use this word in my own work or life, but I am employing Gay’s language here.

into a thin person in time for the final boarding call, nor a full bladder into an empty one, nor a crying baby into a baked potato” (para 10). Ultimately, ‘the expression’ means that fat people endeavour to shrink themselves as much as possible even though it will not change their embodiment or the *misfit* that occurs.

The airplane seat is one of the many uncomfortable chairs that fat encounters. Fat studies scholar and cultural critic Caleb Luna even uses “Dr. Chairbreaker” as their social media handle⁵⁰, a tongue-in-cheek reference to the anti-fat stereotype (and possible self-fulfilling reality when objects are not made with fatness in mind). In *We Are Never Meeting in Real Life*, Irby (2017) writes about a chair crashing beneath her during an important brunch: “I had just begun to relax when I felt a weird hitch in my wobbly chair. Three seconds later, I went CRASHING TO THE FUCKING GROUND” (p. 166). Irby (2017) explains that it turns out the chair was not put together properly, but the moment unfolded as a fat person being the *only one* whose chair broke beneath them. Similarly, West (2016) lists “break a chair while sitting on the stage at a comedy show” (p. 49) in “How to Stop Being Shy in Eighteen Easy Steps”. She writes, “a loud crack echoed through the theater and I felt the chair begin to collapse under me. I jumped into a kind of emergency squat, which I nonchalantly held until the producer rushed out from backstage and replaced my chair with some sort of steel-reinforce military-grade hydraulic jack” (West, 2016, p. 49). In Chapter Three I focus on the longer story of West toppling over a picnic table, which I turn to in a moment, but I wanted to address the issue of the nonchalant chair squat. In *Hunger*, Gay (2017) writes, “I dread the humiliation of sitting, or half-sitting, my fat spilling everywhere, one or both of my legs going numb” (p. 203), echoing the sentiment of the squat that West describes, tiring one’s legs when the chair should be holding you. Gay continues, writing, “when

⁵⁰ [Instagram](#), [Spotify](#), and formerly Twitter.

I stand up and the blood rushes, the pain is intense” (2017, p. 202). The *misfit* is not tied to the moment of sitting but continues to linger on the body.

Chairs, ironically, loom large in theory. Not only the chair and table in phenomenology, but ‘the chair’ can also be found throughout fat studies, art, aesthetics and the like. In 1964, German artist Joseph Beuys created the piece “*Fettstuhl* (Fat Chair)”.⁵¹ A basic, wooden chair featuring a fat block (think Oprah’s wagon of fat) and a piece of barbed wire. In his analysis of this work, Mark C. Taylor (2012) writes: “Fat is one of the most unlikely materials with which to make art. Traditionally associated with excess and waste, fat is supposed to be slimmed, trimmed, and eliminated; it is unseemly, inelegant, and ugly. There is something gross, even grotesque about fat. Far from aesthetically appealing, fat is undeniably abject” (p. 16). I would be remiss if I did not acknowledge that fat *has* been present in art as a subject, though perhaps not in the same way as this slab on the chair. The existence of “Rubenesque” as a euphemism for fatness—for the ‘right’ kind of fat, that is—stems from the paintings of Peter Paul Rubens (Strings, 2019). While the *material* used in Rubens’s paintings was not fat, the subjects were, and this is often what contributes to the refrain that fat “used to be fashionable”, even though the subjects of such paintings were only ‘acceptable’ because they were white (Strings, 2019). My take on fat is markedly different than Taylor’s (2012), but even within the context of Beuys’s Fat Chair, the fat itself *is* trimmed, shaped into a wedge with sharp edges. Yet this very idea of excess continues to guide what ‘the chair’ is and does.

Taking Luther Vandross’s version of “A House Is Not a Home” as a starting point, Stewart et al. (2024) present a fat reading of the chair. As the song goes, “a chair is still a chair, even when there is no one sitting there” (Warwick, 1964; Vandross, 1981), but as they endeavour

⁵¹ See Artchive: <https://www.artchive.com/artwork/fat-chair-joseph-beuys-1964-germany/>.

to “center structures, such as chairs, as a problem and not the people who seek to use them”. the authors ask: “[W]hat about those who desire to fit, but do not fit?” (Stewart et al., 2024, p. 40). Stewart et al. (2024) present the findings of their photovoice research project among fat students on a college campus, filled with images of the various chairs they encounter and comments like “I had bruises because the lecture seats are so tiny”; “if I have to get up to give a presentation, I have to shimmy my way out of this desk. Where it would creep... [in a] really loud way”; and “I don’t know what they were thinking when they made the chair. And my desk is also really low, so it’s pushing up against my stomach and legs [...]” (p. 52-58). Something that seems so innocuous (the chair) has a profound impact on the movement, well-being, and comfort of fat life.

In part one of the series “Tell Me I’m Fat” for *This American Life*, Lindy West lets out a deep sigh before the word “chairs”, to which Ira Glass comments: “You catch that? Until this interview, it never occurred to me that a human being could sigh that way over chairs” (Glass, 2016). Given her academic profession, it is perhaps unsurprising that the dreadful lecture hall seat appears in Gay’s (2017) text. She writes, “[a]s an undergraduate, I dreaded the classrooms where I would have to wedge myself into one of those seats with the desk attached” (Gay, 2017, p. 203). The chair-desk hybrid is also not unlike the picnic table that West encounters in *Shrill* (2016). Describing her experience eating pizza at Sasquatch! Music Festival, West writes, “I misjudged the flimsy plastic picnic table’s center of gravity. [...] I fell in the dirt. The pizza fell on top of me. The Diet Pepsi tipped over and glugged all over my dress. The table fell on top of the Pepsi on top of the pizza on top of me” (2016, p. 46). Whether it is constructed from wood, plastic, or some other material, the chair is never made with fatness in mind. West’s pizza table topple and Irby’s crashing brunch chair are moments of particularly fat embarrassment, while at

the same time, Gay's description of purposeful restraint is just as uncomfortable. It is the forced discomfort in the hope that you can go unscathed, knowing how close those moments of breaking could be. Fat already ruptures the boundaries of the chair, but the exertion it takes to hold yourself in place is perhaps less painful than the collapse of the seat beneath you.

Temporalities & Fat Time

Not only is fat forced to *misfit* in material spaces, but it is also encouraged to bend to a normative temporality predicated on its disappearance. Gay, West, and Irby all share different stories of fat life and "fat time". Tidgwell et al. (2018) describe "fat time" as "temporal capaciousness" (p. 115). Fat time "moves bigger, resists containment, 'let's itself go,' and stretches boundaries" (Tidgwell et. al., 2018, p. 115). In the case of Irby and West, the use of essays that blend popular culture and personal reflection merges past with present, while Gay's story blends the past and present through narratives of emesis, tattoos, and shifting weight-gain. The non-linear timelines in the work of these authors are also reflected through a refusal of the weight-loss narrative. None of them are stories of fat to thin, a tidy ending packaged in a before-and-after photo. They are indeed fat stories that *let themselves go*, unwilling to present the desired 'ending' for fat life not through death, but through the end of a *fat* life and the start of a 'thin' one.

Throughout this dissertation I have argued for the importance of a fat subject in feminist theory. Following Crawford (2017), "[t]he literal denial of access to the marketplace of subjectivity cannot help but confirm for the fat subject that he or she or they cannot access cultural fantasies of futurity" (p. 465). If there is never a fat subject, how can there be a fat future? Moreover, if any future for fat is either dead or 'thin', then fat liberation needs to get rid of the idea of accessing 'desire' as the way to become a subject and therefore have a future (one rooted in being 'desire/able'). As discussed in Chapter Three, Crawford advocates for a theory of

“fat presence”, which is “defined as a mode of temporality that refuses to be pulled between traumatic pasts and slender futures” (p. 466). This idea of presence is interesting to consider not only in Lindy West’s work (Chapter Three), but also Gay’s story of a traumatic past that does *not* result in a slender future. The same could be said for Irby, who does not shy away from sharing traumatic experiences in her texts, though her books are not borne from the location of trauma in the same way that *Hunger* is. In this section, I discuss not only the shifting timelines in each author’s work, but memoir as memory, and the space of the text as one where the “being ‘a lot’” Crawford (2017) can take place.

Across four books, Irby’s (2013; 2017; 2020; 2023) writing goes back and forth through time as no book is a finite ‘portion’ of her life but a collection of different times. Though each book certainly captures eras of her life (she cannot easily go back to the past and infuse her earlier texts with new stories) they do not have to be read in chronological order to make sense. Likewise, West’s *The Witches Are Coming* (2019) emerged from the context of the 2016 U.S. election but reading it before *Shrill* (2016) would not ‘spoil’ anything occurring in her debut text. This could be read as a strength of life writing—there are no spoiler warnings needed. Whether through the form of essays or a more straight-forward read, life writing that diverts from the typical autobiography plays with time and memory. In *Reality Hunger: A Manifesto*, David Shields (2010) argues that “autobiography is ruled by chronology and is date-driven” (p. 41) while memoir is not, writing: “The very thing that would seem to be the basis of autobiographical writing—a life over time—is not the ground the memoir can stand on. It has to root itself in the same dilemmas and adventures as poetry and fiction. It has to make a story” (p. 41). Through essays, Irby and West create a myriad of different stories, some with connected timelines and some without. For instance, near the end of *Shrill* (2016), West has several chapters depicting different phases in her

early relationship with her spouse: “The Tree” (p. 213), “The End” (p. 223), and “The Beginning” (p. 232). Similarly, in *Wow, No Thank You* (2020), Irby has several essays in a row about adjusting to domestic life in Michigan and becoming a stepparent: “A Guide to Simple Home Repairs” (p. 161), “We Almost Got a Fucking Dog” (p. 180), and “Detachment Parenting” (p. 196). West’s chapter titles certainly conjure ideas of ‘time’ more overtly, but both her and Irby challenge “chrononormativity” (Freeman, 2010) in queer ways. West (2016) does not start at the beginning but at the end, circling back to a new beginning. Likewise, Irby’s (2020) timeline is queered. There is no meet-cute followed by buying a home and having children (then maybe getting a dog), but instead there is neither. Irby chronicles moving into her wife’s house, *not* adopting the dog, and being a hands-off stepparent. Moreover, by proposing that we “fuck it, bitch. Stay fat”, Irby (2017) gestures to a meaningful temporality for fat embodiments and fat studies where staying fat is a temporal mode that refuses normativity and is purposefully indignant. Both West and Irby share memories in ways that tell a story, whatever version of the story fits into the narrative of an essay and provides the reader something pleasurable. Neither is offering a perfect account of time, but a narrative of experience presented in the way that makes the most creative sense. Indeed, as Shields (2010) argues, “truth in a memoir is achieved not through a recital of actual events; it’s achieved when the reader comes to believe that the writer is working hard to engage with the experience at hand” (p. 42). We can also read the narrative disruptions discussed below as memory disruptions, a signal to the reader that the author is conscious of their own remembering and wishing they might have done something differently, and perhaps a signal that things are not always as they seem—memoir is not an act of producing capital T-truths but an act of creating from life in a more explicit way than fiction.

Roxane Gay uses time and memory in slightly different ways than Irby and West, as I discuss in Chapter Two. She speaks openly *about* memory—what she blocks out and does not want to remember. Eli Clare (2025) writes that “in this practice of remembering, time does not travel in straight lines. Instead, it swigs wide. Arcs, twists, folds into itself” (p. xv); this is certainly the case for *Hunger*. Despite telling the story of ‘before’ and ‘after’, Gay’s writing swerves between memories and the present. In many ways she carries the past with her through her embodiment, while moments of disorientation bring it back up to the surface more acutely. Through her discussion of her accretion, she writes that she was “swallowing secrets” (Gay, 2017, p. 61) by swallowing food. Yet she cautions, that even if we swallow it, “the truth turns rancid” (Gay, 2017, p. 45). Trying to cope with that sour truth, Gay (2017) turns to bulimia, each expulsion a reminder not only of the harm she experienced but her attempts to cope with it. Indeed, emesis may have its own temporality.

Moreover, Gay presents temporality through her shifting body weight, feeling closer to ‘desire/ability’ and therefore feeling unsafe when losing weight, and then feeling safer yet trapped when gaining weight. Despite a fleeting swell of vanity, the fear returns: “I get terrified. I start to worry about my body becoming more vulnerable as it grows smaller” (Gay, 2017, p. 157). Both admissions challenge the linear path to a slender future (Crawford, 2017) that anti-fatness hopes for. Instead, Gay presents a shifting timeline where the past is continually (and sometimes) involuntarily conjured in the present. Toni Morrison (1995) compares memory to water, writing: “All water has perfect memory and is forever trying to get back to where it was. Writers are like that: remembering where we were, what valley we ran through, what the banks were like [...]” (p. 99). In their own ways, Gay, West, and Irby are all remembering and presenting that memory to the reader in the best way possible for their writing and taking up the space that they need. It is

easy to be ‘a lot’ (or perhaps ‘too much’) when you have the creativity of the blank page ahead of you. Through their own narrative choices each author takes back time and space, marking the text as a place where they can be as much or as little as they need to be.

Humour, Affect, and Tension

Humour plays a role in all the life writing analyzed in this dissertation; both its presence and its absence is significant. Roxane Gay, despite being quite a funny person online, is decidedly not funny in *Hunger* (2017). In other words, she is not exactly cracking jokes. Compared to both West and Irby’s works, hers may stand out in stark contrast as lacking in humour. Though I discuss stylistic and tonal choices in the preceding section, it is worth noting that both Irby’s and West’s works are positioned as funny in literary spaces. A review of *Shrill* (2016) in *The Guardian* describes West’s book as mixing “humour with pathos so effectively that those qualities magnify each other rather than [cancel] each other out” (Quinn, 2016, para 12), while Irby’s work is described as combining “comedy, personal stories, and feminist narrative” (Gorden, 2017, para 1). On the other hand, as I have hinted, Gay herself is often described as funny even when her work is not, with one review noting that she “is also deeply funny, finding a lightheartedness in life that we sometimes gain a glimpse into on Twitter, and always deeply enjoy” (Calder, 2021, para 2). After all, this is the same Gay who is writing a “very sexy” romance novel with actor Channing Tatum.⁵² In this section, I discuss the relationship between each author and comedy, be it in their texts or in their public persona, while also accepting that this is one area where these works diverge. This includes the ‘debate’ around rape jokes, the irreverence mobilized by Irby and West, and letting discomfort sit in a space without alleviating it through a punchline.

⁵² See: [Gay on Stephen Colbert](#); [Glamour Mag](#); [LA Times](#).

In Chapter Two, I talk about the potential humour in the fork on the cover of Gay's (2017) memoir (i.e. a utensil for eating on the cover of a fat memoir). I read this choice as tongue-in-cheek, but also a reference to the complicated relationship to eating within the text. Additionally, I find the shadow of the fork meaningful itself, which I discuss more below regarding style and cover image, as well as in Chapter Two. Here, however, I want to gesture towards a different approach employed by Gay, which could be read through what Kate Fox (2018) calls "humitas". Combining "humour" and "gravitas", humitas refers to "the practice of humour and seriousness in the same frame at the same time in a way that does not undermine the efficacy of either mode" (Fox, 2018, p. 172). Gay's public image can be understood this way, including the use of "bad feminist" as a descriptor for herself and her methodologies. Certainly, *Bad Feminist* (2014) is riddled with "humitas", but *Hunger* (2017) has its hidden moments. For example, Gay talks about arguing against her mother's insistence that "fruit is a snack", saying, "I vowed, when I grew up, to decorate my home with clear glass bowls filled with M&M's and she laughed" (2017, p. 57). Some fat readers (including me) might find the humour in this very image. In some ways, it plays with the ideas of what fat people do and how they live—surrounded by a bounty of decadent snacks, only interested in foods coded as 'junk'. Or, as West writes, the image of laying "under the Dorito funnel" (2016, p. 94). Indeed, programs like *The Biggest Loser* play up this very idea with "temptation challenges" that deploy tablescapes full of every delicious and 'indulgent' carbohydrate-rich food (Babin & Orsini, 2025; Borgman, 2025).⁵³ Other small moments of levity in *Hunger* include Gay's (2017) discussion of her favourite childhood books like *Little House on the Prairie* and "everything by Judy Blume", where she began to assume "that all men called their dicks 'Ralph'" (p. 35). Funnily enough,

⁵³ The reframing of these stereotypes is part of the anti-social queer approach to fatness that I outline in Chapter One and throughout this dissertation – the irreverent movements like *Hamburger Queen* that embrace gluttony and camp.

West (2016) also employs Judy Blume for a laugh in her essay title “Are You There, Margaret? It’s Me, A Person Who Is Not a Complete Freak” (p. 23). There is a subtle joy in referencing work by an author whose books have been banned because they dare to address puberty and other adolescent experiences with both reverence and humour. The 2023 film adaptation of *Are You There, God? It’s Me, Margaret* is delightfully sweet and at times, cringe, because of the funny and earnest depictions of what growing up can be like. Similarly, Gay (2017) ‘admits’ her own moments of puberty-based silliness, writing, “I invented a boyfriend, Mr. X, and I don’t know what makes me cringe more now—that I used this bizarre pseudonym for my invention or that I invented a pseudonym at all” (p. 67). Maybe this does not illicit full throaty laughter, but it certainly evokes a smile or an exhale. *Hunger* may not be ‘funny’ in its essence, but it is far from empty of any joy and it is worth finding those small moments of levity in the portrait of life that Gay paints as they demonstrate the many dimensions of her story.

Humour is not used by Gay as a tool of expression the way that it is for West and Irby and this is certainly one of the divergences between these texts, but the difference between Gay’s memoir and her public persona is still interesting to unpack and interesting to read through the notion of “humitas”. Furthermore, Gay’s memoir could be understood as why we *cannot* laugh at everything, demonstrating a fat killjoy in a different way than West (2017) does. Gay’s killjoy is, perhaps, more aligned with the likes of Hannah Gadsby’s stand-up special *Nanette* (2018) that played with comedy and tension and was, to some, decidedly *not* funny. Sarah Balkin (2020) argues that through their special, Gadsby “casts [themselves]⁵⁴” as a feminist killjoy, “whose unhappiness positions [them] as a source of tension” (p. 73). During *Nanette*, Gadsby (2018) speaks to the role that tension plays in comedy: “Punchlines need trauma, because punchlines

⁵⁴ Updated to reflect Gadsby’s they/them pronouns.

need tension, and tension feeds trauma”. A joke is set up to create tension which is alleviated by the punchline. Instead of alleviating this tension, Gadsby (2018) leaves it there, refusing to make things easier to hear when they are heavy to live and experience. Gay (2017) similarly refuses to make her experiences more palatable in *Hunger*. While they are, of course, not unmediated by the process of publishing a text, they are also not so varnished as to be shiny and free of texture. I do not wish to present the idea that *Hunger* is comedic or assert that one should laugh a lot while reading it but instead highlight Gay’s connections to humour and how the near total absence of it from *Hunger* is worth noting. Speaking on Gadsby, Lauren Berlant (Markbreiter, 2019) argues that “*Nanette* remains a comedy, because it is a test of what kinds of observation, surprise, storytelling, lack of fit, insider knowledge, and solidarity the audience will go with on behalf of the jester’s higher truth” (para 19). It is certainly the insider knowledge of fat life and disordered eating that causes me to grin at the fork on Gay’s cover, chuckle at her dreams of M&M decanters, and exhale out of my nose at thoughts of Judy Blume stories.

How far an audience will go “on behalf of the jester’s higher truth” (Berlant, 2019, para 19), is perhaps what plagues the comedy ‘debates’ that West (2016) chronicles in *Shrill*. Unfortunately, fans of misogynistic comedy will go *quite* far to support what they believe is their jester’s truth. West (2016) not only mobilizes comedy in her work but speaks about her love of the genre and medium, and how that love is what causes her to take pause and not laugh when something is “designed to cause offence” (Ahmed, 2017, p. 261). In “Bones”, West (2016) makes plain a killjoy positionality, writing, “feminism is just the long, slow realization that the stuff you love hates you” (p. 19-20). This is not unlike the way that Åhäll (2018) describes feminism as an inherently affective project that stems from a ‘sense’ of something being off about our surroundings. Part of the turning point in West’s relationship with comedy is the

continual use of, and laughter at, rape jokes. Her truth, and the truth of countless others, is that these jokes are *not* funny. I discuss in Chapter Three that “intention is key, as is the position of power of both the deliverer of the joke and the butt of the humour” (Davies and Illott, 2018, p. 11). The intention of these jokes is never to demonstrate societal hypocrisy or, as Gadsby (2018) does, leave the tension of the horrors of sexual violence in the air for an audience to reckon with. Instead, as West (2016) writes, these jokes rely on “[squeezing] cheap laughs out of life-ruining horrors” (p. 167). Though it is not something I discuss in Chapter Four, it is worth noting that Irby references a moment of violation in a comedic way. In *We Are Never Meeting in Real Life* (2017), Irby writes that the first penis she ever saw was that of a handyman who exposed himself to her in the bathroom of her home when she was thirteen. After rejecting his “offer” to touch it, the man remarks on her weight: “‘No? Really?!’ he asked in disbelief. ‘Not even a chubby girl like you?’ What does that even mean? It’s not like he was standing there holding a warm loaf of banana bread—I might have taken him up on that” (Irby, 2017, p. 55). This moment, like West’s quips about being a “fat lady so mean to baby men” (2016, p. 108), “depend on the consensus that rape is not funny” (Balkin, 2020, p. 73). I can laugh at Irby (2017) and West’s (2016) methods to address a topic that, in *Hunger* (2017), is *not* presented through a comedic tone, because of my insider knowledge and solidarity with Gay, West, and Irby’s approaches and positionalities. Gay remains a cultural figure with a comedic presence. As she writes in *Bad Feminist*, “some jokes are funnier than others” (Gay, 2014, p. 177), and some memoirs are too. Gay (2014) continues: “Perhaps rape jokes are funny, but I cannot fathom how. Humor is subjective, but is it *that* subjective? [...] There are not enough years in this lifetime to create the kind of distance where I could laugh and say, ‘That one time when I was gang-raped was totally

hilarious, a real laugh riot” (p. 180, emphasis in original). Even here, “the humour is tonally deflationary” (Balkin, 2020, p. 80), which sometimes requires that tension never be relieved.

As a fat reader of these fat texts, I am willing to go with my “jester’s truth” not just on the handling of violence but through the queer anti-social, irreverent, and sarcastic discussions of fat life that Irby (2013; 2017; 2020; 2023) and West (2016) describe. Irby reflects a “fat-queer anti-sociality” (Chalklin, 2016) similar to that of fat activist movements like The Chubsters, a “fat girl gang” which “valued anti-social unruliness” and “did not want to be nice, respectable girls” (Cooper, 2016, p. 202-203). For instance, when Irby (2013) writes about food and fatness in “The Tapeworm Diet”, she remarks: “If you’ve never been skinny, the appeal of thinness < the tastiness of simple carbohydrates. There’s freedom in a double-digit elastic waistband. It’s like, what’s a handful of Milk Duds if you’re already fat?” (p. 167). Moreover, she uses descriptors such as “grubby”, “sweaty”, “hideous little beast”, and proposes that we “Fuck it, bitch. Stay fat” (Irby, 2017, p. 142). Employing the “often damaging rhetorics of ugliness, gluttony, misery and abjection through which fat people are positioned in contemporary society” (Chalklin, 2016, p. 23) to comedic ends, Irby plays with anti-fat narratives and refuses to perform contrition for her body or her eating habits.

West similarly evokes the anti-fat narratives of how fat people eat in her re-telling of the picnic table debacle. By remarking: “Can’t be a fat lady eating pizza with red pig-grease all over my face!” (West, 2016, p. 46), West brings into the text the very real presence of anti-fatness in daily life, turning it into a laugh. The very ‘sense of fat’ runs through all the jokes—or lack thereof—in these works. Whether it is overtly challenging or subverting anti-fatness or refusing to joke about it *because* it is painful, Gay, West, and Irby write from the location of fat being and all the affective encounters that entails. In comedy there is the concept of “breaking”, where an

actor or performer begins to laugh while reading their lines. There is something to be said for “breaking” in these texts, not as laughing at their own work but breaking affective boundaries of what is expected from an account of fat life. Even at their heaviest moments, neither Gay’s, West’s, or Irby’s work is solely downtrodden or depressing. All these writers make use of the complex web of encounters, feelings, and laughs in fat life.

Refusing to Cohere: Style, Persona, and Disruption(s)

In the previous section I hint at both the tone of Gay, West, and Irby’s works as well as some of their public image. Here, I want to unpack this further, pointing to the role that tone, style, and persona play in each author’s work and overall cultural footprint. Moreover, I argue that in their own ways each author demonstrates “a refusal to cohere” (Chalklin, 2016, p. 115) in two ways. First, what Chalklin (2016) describes as “a refusal to cohere to the dominant rhetoric through conceptions of the ‘good fatty’”, instead embracing negativity to “disrupt and circumvent” those norms (p. 115). This incoherence has been discussed throughout this dissertation as it is central to what fat studies can take from each work; however, there is also a refusal to cohere to straight-forward narrative and style choices. Each author demonstrates their own “narrative disruption” (Puican, 2021, p. 1) through breaks in the text (Gay), footnotes (West), and parentheticals (Irby). Gay’s *Hunger* (2017) is broken down into parts and short chapters and refuses the expectation of memoir that “tragedy is allowed only if the book resolves into triumph through a happy or ‘redemptive’ ending” (Robertson, 2012, para 4). Likewise, West (2016) and Irby (2013; 2017; 2020; 2023) both present essays which are full of messy, complicated, and mistake-ridden experiences that do not result in any ‘fix’ but offer a view of fat life that needs no redemption. Stylistically, West’s essays are full of footnotes while Irby’s contain many parentheticals in addition to list-formats (something West also uses, though not as much). The additional thoughts

in footnotes and parenthesis are their own disruptions, as I will discuss below. Turning to an aesthetic style element, I will also discuss book covers and what they may signify (or be perceived to signify) about the text. Though they have convergences, each author has their own distinct style and public image.

I want to begin with a brief discussion of how each author is positioned publicly and return to the personal connections between them that I mention in Chapter One. Without being indelicate, I would argue that Roxane Gay is the most successful of the three authors discussed in this thesis. She also happens to be the only one with a significant academic background who was a professor before she became a cultural critic and public figure. Lindy West and Samantha Irby occupy a somewhat different space, though they do share circles with Gay. West is a noted writer, feminist, and public figure. Having an online presence for decades, West is a known name in popular culture and even some academic spaces. There are academic reviews of her work as there are of Gay's. Irby, however, is not as well known in either academic or cultural spaces. Anecdotally, even when telling people about my dissertation, many have remarked that they know who Gay and West are, but not Irby. Ironically, both Gay and West *do* know Irby and are both professional and personally connected. In an interview following the release of *We Are Never Meeting in Real Life* (2017), Irby is asked about Gay being one of her fans. She responds:

Roxane doesn't even think of herself as famous, even though she is, so it's easy to be around her and not be all dazzled because she doesn't act famous; she's mellow and relaxed. It's like, 'Oh, this is just Roxane, my friend.' She is so soft spoken and funny and nice that you forget she is wildly popular until people start approaching her on the street (para 15).

Beyond being friends, Irby also wrote a piece for *The Rumpus* when Gay was editor after Gay read Irby's blog and asked her to contribute. As I cite below and have already referenced in

Chapter One, Gay and West have interviewed one another for *The Guardian*. In *Wow, No Thank You* (2020), Irby has an essay about working with West on the television adaptation of *Shrill* (“Hollywood Summer”, p. 243). Earlier in this chapter I mention an interview with West for *This American Life* for the first installment of the series “Tell Me I’m Fat” (2016). In the third installment of the series, Ira Glass interviews Roxane Gay and once again chats with West in the fifth and final installment. Much like the small circle of fat studies scholars (Friedman & Evans, 2022) it is perhaps unsurprising that these authors overlap in personal and professional circles. Though they have different levels of “fame”, different experiences, and different approaches to life writing, Gay, West and Irby collide in the canon of fat writing that is *not* presented as a weight-loss narrative or a ‘body positive’ manifesto.

A *Vice* review of Gay’s memoir addresses her writing style, stating: “Gay rose to prominence because of how accessible her essay collection *Bad Feminist* was, and she doesn’t abandon her readable, even bloggy style [in *Hunger*]” (Vanderhoof, 2017, para 8). The use of “bloggy” seems to imply something colloquial or less serious is happening in Gay’s writing, a claim I find curious to sit with considering her academic background. Not to say that academics cannot be unserious, but that nothing about *Hunger* screams “bloggy”. This description seems to echo what Gay herself has said in an interview with West, where they both remark on the idea that because their writing is personal, they are described as “diarists” and “there’s this smug sense that it’s just ‘Oh, I’m sitting in my bed and I opened up my heart-locket diary and I’m just jotting down some thoughts!’” (Gay & West, 2017, para 11). “Bloggy” feels like a similar label, as if Gay just sits down at her computer and jots down her thoughts freely and it is bound into a book. I find this claim particularly odd when it comes to *Hunger* (2017), which is written in a very different format to *Bad Feminist* (2014). Stylistically, *Hunger* is an *almost* linear but

fragmented text. While it more-or-less follows Gay's life from *before* and *after*, it is told across six parts and eighty-eight chapters, some only one paragraph or stanza. On this point Vanderhoof (2017) writes: "Because of her spare prose style, Gay has a tendency to reduce the views of her opponents or adversaries to unnecessary simplicity, and she is equally prone to making totalizing statements about herself" (para 8). The claim being that because of this style choice Gay's writing lacks nuance. Yet, from a fat studies perspective, I find her memoir rich with nuance *because* of its very contradictions as well as the stylistic choices. *Hunger*'s style refuses to cohere totally to what is expected of her: a "straightforward manifesto" (Vanderhoof, 2017, para 3). My best guess regarding the claim of "manifesto" is the expectation that the work of a fat, Black woman is, on the one hand, going to be a triumphant declaration of personhood, and on the other hand, offer a very clear list of demands to be met. Gay's memoir is neither of those things, but a rich account of a complicated relationship to embodiment and being.

While Vanderhoof (2017) argues that the sparse style means that Gay is both totalizing and reductive, I find that Gay's style is more closely aligned with Mike Puican's (2021) discussion of "narrative disruption". Puican (2021) writes, "if narrative is the straight-ahead engine of the story, digression is its indirect, yet insistent, emotional heart. Digression interjects points of focus and intensity at unexpected junctures" (para 4). Although the footnotes and parentheses in West and Irby's work are perhaps more straightforward digressions as I discuss below, I argue we can read the short chapters of *Hunger* as another type of digression. Lisa Lowe (2015) argues that one of the ways we can read memoir is by reading "for the ellipses, interruptions, contradictory shifts in voice or tempo that surround particular episodes" (p. 50). This is certainly true for *Hunger* and Gay's use of parts and short chapters. The breaks between these chapters, whether a page demarcating a new 'part' (I, II, III...VI) or a very short chapter

(such as chapters 1, 5, and 61, all of which are less than a page), can be read as interruptions or disruptions. Furthermore, most of the chapters in *Hunger* (2017) are two to four pages, unlike the essays in West or Irby's works, which range from twelve to thirty pages. Reading continual short chapters can be quite confronting, the words ending sooner than you might expect and asking the reader to sit with the "emotional heart" of the text. The chapters which feature only short stanzas—one, five, and sixty-one—are two, three and a half, and seven and a half lines respectively. The length leaves negative space around the text, forcing the reader to feel both the potency and isolation of the words, indeed contributing to their intensity. Readers are, in a sense, left with the space or perhaps the tension of the words, unable to be alleviated by preceding sentences and instead left with the gravity of what has already been said.

The idea of form also comes up in descriptions of Samantha Irby's work. In a review of *Quietly Hostile* for NPR, Jason Heller (2023) writes that calling the book "a collection of essays is a bit limiting" (para 5). Instead, he offers: "These 17 pieces are more like essays crossed with stand-up bits" and that Irby's voice is "nonchalant yet authoritative" (Heller, 2023, para 5). Conversely, I would argue that Irby's work is not "nonchalant" or free of anxiety. The colloquial nature of her language does not mean it is "nonchalant", and her parentheticals are a good example of that. I read some of the parentheses not only as a comedic tool but as a manifestation of anxiety where you feel the need to qualify what you have said. *Meaty* (Irby, 2013), for example, has approximately one-hundred-seven parentheticals in the first one hundred pages, thirty of which qualify items on a list. Ranging from short asides like "(right?)" (Irby, 2013, p. 38) and "(snort)" (Irby, 2013, p. 223) to comedic reflections such as "(MY MAN HAD ACTUAL CURTAINS)" (Irby, 2017, p. 21), "(there was a broken coffee maker and my iron and some lamps under a blanket in the back seat)" (Irby, 2020, p. 267), and even comments *to* the

subject of a story “(JUST GET TO THE DESSERT, DIANE.)” (Irby, 2017, p. 55), Irby brings us along on her thoughts outside of the narrative at hand. Her disruptions are those that “give the impression that this is something that occurred to the narrator in the middle of telling the story” (Puican, 2021, para 6). Moreover, although these books are products and not raw, unfiltered thoughts, the stylistic choices allow us to “enter the mind of the narrator and creates the feeling that we are hearing the narrator’s true thoughts on the subject” (Puican, 2021, para 6). Even if these thoughts are mediated through the publishing process, they are deliberate parts of Irby’s writing style that have continued across all her books. Different digressions than Gay’s sparse pages, Irby demonstrates the ways that “thoughts and emotions insert themselves into our own everyday lives” (Puican, 2021, para 4) which Puican argues “creates an intimacy with the reader” (2021, para 4). At one point in *Quietly Hostile* (2023) Irby even uses parenthesis to directly address the reader: “People always ask if my friends are nervous to end up in a book, and the truth is, no one cares because people don’t read. (Except you. You are handsome and literate with excellent taste in reading material)” (p. 178). Indeed, it is hard to argue with that.

Not unlike the claims of “bloggy” or being a “diarist”, a three-star review on The StoryGraph describes West’s (2016) *Shrill* as written in “an aggressively millennial voice” (christinereichard, n.d.), while another laments: “[...] thought she focused on her size a lot and how it related to Feminist issues” (bookbug39, n.d.). Similar to Irby’s (2013; 2017; 2020; 2023) parentheticals, West (2016) employs footnotes to share additional information and personal reflections with the reader. Additionally, her footnotes make use of comedy and are tools to infuse more laughs into her essays. For example, where she talks about Ursula the Sea Witch in “Lady Kluck”, she has a footnote about King Triton: “I HAVE SOME QUESTIONS ABOUT KING TRITON. Specifically, King, why are you elderly but with the body of a teenage

Beastmaster? How do you maintain those monster pecs? Do they have endocrinologists under the sea?” (West, 2016, p. 8). Not only is this a humorous aside, but it also plays on the very ideas of ‘desire/ability’ that the essay itself unpacks. Ursula is a fat villain while King Triton inexplicably has visible abs. Sometimes her annotations are more earnest, such as her note to her mom in “Are You There, Margaret? It’s Me, A Person Who Is Not a Complete Freak” (West, 2016, p. 23). Qualifying her quip “[t]hanks for nothing, regular human mom”, West writes: “‘Nothing’ except for the unconditional love and support and meticulous care to make sure that I faced the world fully informed about my body and reproductive health!” (2016, p. 28). Not only does this add a layer of texture to both the writing and reading—your eyes scanning down to read the annotation before returning to the main text—it once again situates us alongside the writer. In other words, “we experience this disruption as happening in real time, as though the narrator is in the process of thinking and is sharing [their] thoughts as they occur. We have a sense that the narrator isn’t merely stating what happened but is reflecting on the narrative at the moment of writing it” (Puican, 2021, para 8). As I discuss in Chapter Three, this is certainly the case throughout “Hello, I Am Fat” (West, 2016, p 86), where West reflects not only on Dan Savage’s response to her speaking out, but on her own past behaviour. For example, annotating a moment where she discusses Savage’s remark that “rolls of exposed flesh are unsightly” (West, 2016, p. 101) she writes:

Dan took me to task for cherry-picking that quote, explaining that he wasn’t mocking the flesh rolls of fat people specifically, he was mocking flesh rolls of all women who wear low-rise jeans without having the correct bodies for it. Oh, okay. FYI, feminism isn’t super jazzed about men policing women’s clothing choices either. (Also, it was totally about fat people, you liar.) (West, 2016, p. 101).

Like Irby, West uses this aside to speak directly to the subject of the story, bringing the reader along with her and making us feel like we are experiencing her thoughts in real time. In that same chapter, West (2016) directs her reflections to herself, responding to her decision to include a statement about losing weight once she stopped listening to fatphobes. She writes, “If I had it to do over again, I would write this last part more clearly, because I think the way it stands undermines my point a bit” (West, 2016, p. 103). Be it through short chapters, parentheticals, or footnotes, each author offers their own narrative disruptions throughout the very works that this dissertation argues already do the work of “disrupting normal” (Meleo-Erwin, 2012).

Before I turn to the texture and sensations of reading, I want to touch on the style of book covers and what they can reveal. Importantly, as I mention in Chapter One, these pieces of life writing are not unmediated capital-t truths, but rather, products that are bought and sold. In other words, “memoir is a creative product, but it is still a product” (Rak, 2013, p. 44), and this includes aesthetic decisions about its packaging. We are often taught at a young age to “not judge a book by its cover”, but the cover of a book does tell us something and it is often how we judge what to read. In *By Its Cover*, Ned Drew and Paul Sternberger (2005) examine the style and communication of the book cover in American history, arguing that “[t]he cover is a book’s first communication to the reader” (Drew & Sternberger, 2005, p. 8). Not only do book covers communicate to the reader, but they communicate to retailers and publishers, often determining who buys what books and even where they are positioned in bookstores (Matthews & Moody, 2007). The covers of Gay, West, and Irby’s works are similar yet different. Gay’s *Hunger* (2017), like her other non-fiction book *Bad Feminist* (2014), features a white background with the title in a mix of black and colour serif font. *Hunger*’s title and Gay’s name are in larger black font with the subtitle *A Memoir of (My) Body* in smaller red letters. Conversely, *Bad Feminist*

features the title in pink font with Gay's name in black, while the tenth anniversary edition is entirely metallic pink, including the page edges, with the title in white and Gay's name in black. Similarly, West's book *Shrill* (2016) features the title in large serif font with a subtitle in a different colour. Originally released in hardcover *Shrill*'s book jacket is red, with the subtitle and dot on the titular "I" in yellow, West's name in white, and both the subtitle and her name in all capital letter sans serif font. Published in 2017, the paperback version of *Shrill* has a grey cover with the title and West's name more akin to Gay's covers: large, serif in black and white, this time with a picture of West at the bottom. Her 2019 book, *The Witches are Coming* (West, 2019) is similarly styled to *Shrill*'s (2016) first printing and Gay's books: an all-black cover with both the title and West's name in ombre serif font, a blend of colours from yellow to red, echoed in the splatter print that lays on top of the text. Irby's book covers, however, are colourful and feature bold font alongside an image of a different animal. The original *Meaty* (2013) cover features a photograph of a chicken in grass, with the title in bold yellow serif font, and Irby's name at the bottom atop a coloured stripe. This was modified in 2018 to match her other works, now a bold pink with title in black and an image of a hedgehog. *We Are Never Meeting in Real Life* (2017) is yellow with an image of disgruntled looking cat (an homage to her own angry cat who she writes about in the essays); *Wow, No Thank You* (2020) is green with the image of a bunny, and *Quietly Hostile* (2023) is orange with an image of a squirrel, tail up and mouth open. It is possible that Irby's book covers are read as less serious, which could be why they come up less often (if at all) in academic spaces. Nicole Matthews (2007) argues that book covers have "signalled the cultural value that should be placed on each book. Is it a serious tome or a paperback to be read on holiday?" (p. xii). It seems common practice now for books geared towards adults to not only have bright, bold covers but include hand-drawn illustrations closer to

cartoons (even on ‘smut’ and romance novels) (Donaldson, 2024). Interestingly, West’s upcoming book *Adult Braces: Driving Myself Sane* (2026) features an illustration of her face with mountains and a van in the background. Though it is not cartoonish *per se*, it is a departure from her previous covers, and I wonder if this is consistent with the overall trend of modern illustrated covers.

Also of note, none of Irby’s books are available in hardcover while West’s and Gay’s are. As I discuss below, there is certainly something to be said for the textural feeling of a book in your hands, and paperback feels different than hardcover. They also result in different reading practices—some people keep a book jacket on while reading and others do not. The book jacket has its own history in publishing, coinciding with the “definition of the field of graphic design as a profession” around the 1930s (Drew & Sternberger, 2005, p. 20). Despite the role of the designer in the process, Drew and Sternberger (2005) highlight the very production of books as objects that are consumed. They explain: “Book cover design required reconciliation of the individuality of the designer with the needs of the client. The jacket was understood to be an ephemeral utilitarian protective device and odious marketing necessity whose useful purpose was all but depleted when the book was purchased by the consumer” (Drew & Sternberger, 2005, p. 20). Indeed, the book does not need the book jacket to stay together, whereas ripping the cover off a paperback would cause the book itself to be torn apart.

Though we cannot, as Rak (2014) writes, fully know “the journey of a book from the mind of author (or agent) to the hands of a reader” (p. 46), we can understand the role that a cover plays and dispel the myth that we cannot (or do not) judge books by their covers. I find it interesting that Gay’s work—with the most austere, formal covers—is often the subject of academic writing and debate, where West’s—somewhere austere but colourful—less so, and

Irby's—bold, bright covers with images—very rarely. I have discussed here both the text and the methods of subtext or aside, but the texture of the writing goes beyond the words and moves to the sensations of reading itself.

The Sensation(s) of Books

Each of the books by Gay, West, and Irby are objects that I have held in my hands, and I would like to end by ruminating on the book as a 'thing'. This final note includes more of the personal as the object before me necessitates that I am 'here' to hold the object to begin with. It is my encounter with these objects and the tactile experience of reading that informs my analysis. Here, I begin with a discussion of smell, the physical book and practice of digital reading or audiobooks. Next, I discuss the sounds of non-audiobooks and the noises of reading, such as the moving of pages, the sounds occurring in the spaces where one reads, and even the music one might listen to. Lastly, I discuss the material and emotional 'weight' of books before concluding with a discussion of books as meaningful, personal objects.

Though academia often requires accessing readings online, I generally opt to print articles instead of reading the digital copy. When it comes to reading for 'pleasure' (which is not to say that academic reading is not pleasurable), I continue to avoid the eBook trend. I need to feel a book in my hands and to my surprise "physical books still outsell e-books no matter whether they are read on Kindle or iPad" (Spence, 2020, p. 903). As Spence (2020) writes, the tactile and olfactory components of books play a significant role in how we read. Books, new and old, can have that "book smell" (Spence, 2020, p. 904), whereas an iPad does not. Additionally, physical books can serve as "records of your journey" (Spence, 2020, p. 905) be it emotional, physical, or intellectual, as well as a book's own journey; older books have distinct smells from newer books, olfactory records that tell a story. I have a penchant for the smell of a

library book, and while I have never experienced *new car smell*, I know *new book smell* all too well. Unfortunately, I cannot demonstrate or share a smell with you, but I want to unpack the visual, tangible, and aural elements of the book as an object.

Audiobooks are not the only books with sound; they are not the only books that generate noise. When we read physical books there is the sound of our fingers against the paper, the sound of moving pages, and even the “unique soundscape of the place in which those books are stored and read” (Spence, 2020, p. 912). As I mention in the preface to this dissertation, more often than not I am listening to music as I read. This is not just because I find music pleasurable and can set the mood to suit what I am reading, but because I find other sounds overwhelming and overstimulating. When I am reading *without* my noise cancelling headphones, I find myself distracted by other sounds in the room in a way that is difficult for my autistic brain to navigate. Ironically, while the sound of a turning page is delicious in many ways, if I am reading in the same room as my partner, the sound of their turning page in addition to my own can contribute to sensory overwhelm. On the other hand, reading on a digital device is difficult for my eyes and often leads to or exacerbates migraines. The practice of reading certainly interacts with my own disabilities and sensory needs. This is not to say that there is one way of reading that is better than another—for some, their own sensory or disability demands require the use of digital books, audiobooks—and I find the popular critique that audiobooks are “not reading” to be elitist and ableist, something Sara E. Jensen and Anna Veprinska (2022) tackle in “Ability, Academia, and Audiobooks: In Conversation”.⁵⁵ They write that audiobooks are viewed “as not being a ‘serious’ way of engaging with a text” (Jensen & Veprinska, 2022, p. 134) even though “more titles are being published as audiobooks” and “audiobooks are also currently more widely available and

⁵⁵ True to form, there is [a free audio version of this article on SoundCloud](#).

free through public libraries than ever before” (Jensen & Veprinska, 2022, p. 134). I did not read them in audio format but *Shrill* (West, 2016), *Hunger* (Gay, 2017), and all of Irby’s (2013; 2017; 2020; 2023) books are available as audiobooks narrated by West, Gay, and Irby respectively. My tactile encounter with books is part of my own reading practice and informs my interaction with the texts I analyze in this thesis as well as my relationship to them. The books in my home are treasured possessions, each marked by hand with an embossing stamp donning either my name or my partner’s name, albeit with the same symbol. When sharing books, my reading practice changes as my spouse does not like pen marks in their books or dog-eared corners (I acquiesce and use a bookmark) whereas I like my books to *look* and *feel* loved, read, and held.

The feeling of books is not just the way a book makes *us* feel but the feeling of the object. Although both “smell and sight are relevant senses when it comes to reading”, Baron (2015) writes that “touch may be the most important” (p. 142). My desire to interact with books and leave marks is to demonstrate both. It is an object in hand that I have touched with other objects (pens, post it notes, my own hands) and I have marked the feelings it has evoked or left a description of my reflections. Kathleen LeBesco (2004) argues that texts can “work to represent a politicized surface for the fat body (p. 108)”, and this is certainly the perspective I have taken in this project. In addition to the fat texts themselves, there is also the encounter between the surface of my fat body and each book. The tactile sensations of reading begin when you pick up a book and feel its weight, “there is, after all, more than a grain of truth to the phrase ‘a weighty matter’” (Spence, 2020, p. 909). There is certainly something here regarding the “weighty matter” of the texts analyzed in this thesis. Not just the weight of the books in hand but the weight of stories, though only one of those can be literally held in our hands. In “Tactility Tactics”, author and professor of neuroscience David J. Linden (2015) shares (or as he writes,

“confesses”) what he has observed when watching potential customers at the bookstore. Linden (2015) writes, “[...] once a book is selected, there is usually a brief moment of assessing its weight. Again, this is not always a conscious process. There is no optimal weight for a book⁵⁶—it depends on the individual reader, the author, and the genre” (para 3). I cannot help but address the idea of “optimal weight” in the context of this project. Books may have no optimal weight, yet Gay, West, and Irby certainly come up against ideas of *their* optimal weights. Each of their books is not particularly weighty in the hand; they are all roughly the same though I would not venture to guess what that weight is in actual numbers. However, the weight of a book can tell us something, perhaps, about genre. Often more ‘serious’ books are heavier (textbooks, encyclopedias, books you might find donned with the Routledge, Oxford, or Sage logos) whereas ‘lighter’ reading can, indeed, be lighter. Paperback versus hardcover can also contribute to this, with the latter often weighing more or feeling heavier in the palm. There is also something to be said, as Spence (2020) writes, for the connection to smaller books that can “more easily be hidden and/or kept close to the body” (p. 910), particularly “at times of persecution” (p. 910). At a time of heightening book bans and manufactured consent for violence, smaller, easily concealed books could be precious. They are more easily shared, hidden, and even transported.

If, as Anderson (2009) argues, affective atmospheres are “always in the process of emerging and transforming [...], always being taken up and reworked in lived experience—becoming part of feelings and emotions that may themselves become elements within other atmospheres” (p. 79), then perhaps each book can be understood as having its own affective atmosphere. They are not only archives of the “ordinary affects” (Stewart, 2007) and encounters

⁵⁶ Anecdotally, there was, in fact, a time where a book was beyond “optimal weight”. When I was recovering from top surgery two of my dear friends gifted me a book that was so long it weighed more than the five pound, which was more than I was permitted to lift at that time. It was a book I had wanted so this made us all laugh.

of fat life and fat being-in-the-world, but through narrative choices these encounters are reworked and become part of the book's affective atmosphere. There is also the broader political atmosphere and how that is felt and expressed (the social/political location of the author, for instance, shapes the broader atmosphere from which it emerges), as well as the affective reactions of the reader and their own social/political locations. We create certain atmospheres while we read, not just in the physical spaces where we read but how we react, what emotional responses we have, and perhaps even the speed at which we read.

The touch of a book is not just about the weight of it but the feeling of the paper beneath your fingers. As part of his observations, Linden (2015) writes, "I see the subtle, exploring movements of customers' fingers over the pages, spine, and jacket, and I know that they are evaluating the book as a tactile entity, a real-world object" (para 4). To hold a book in your hands is to hold the results of production, yes, but also creative efforts, artistic expression, and storytelling. This chapter opens with an epigraph from Ocean Vuong's (2019) exquisite novel *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous*: "A page, turning, is a wing lifted with no twin, and therefore no flight. And yet we are moved" (p. 190). The first time I read those words they struck me, so I engaged in my usual practice of dog-earring the bottom corner of the page, something I have always described as tagging the pages that "move me". We are moved by what we read as we move the pages along, wings lifted but not flying, as Vuong (2019) describes. We move the pages as they move us, emotionally or literally—I am 'moved' to move my hand and fold the corner of the page. I have been moved by the pieces of life writing analyzed in this dissertation and in that process, I move them, too.

Conclusion

This chapter has endeavoured to bring together the themes that run through Gay (2017), West (2016), and Irby's (2013; 2017; 2020; 2023) works. Beginning with an affective sense of fat, I have outlined similarities around encounters with objects, humour, fat time, and incoherence through disruptions and style. Ending this chapter with a rumination on the tactile sensations of reading, I reflect on my own experiences of reading these books and the textures of reading fat writing. While each author has something unique to offer for a *fattening* of feminist studies, their similarities reflect the affective, material, and discursive overlaps in fat life. Moreover, stylistically, they make interesting interventions into the genre of life writing and what it looks like to blend memory and reflection with creativity while refusing tidy endings.

Conclusion

*in the fat of the shoulders, artful, improbable
brand, the double outside curve,
an ear.*

For hours (showers, clothes) it doesn't fade
- Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Fat Art/Thin Art*

*You called me a crybaby
But you're the one who got teary
Tellin' me what you believe
How we're stuck in entropy
How it hurts to hope
Oh, it hurts to hope for more
Oh, it hurts to hope the future
Will be better than before*
- boygenius, "Afraid of Heights"

Lindy West concludes *Shrill* (2016) with a hopeful refrain: "We're all building our world, right now, in real time. Let's build it better" (p. 258). Throughout this dissertation, I have favoured the negative, the irreverent, the contradictory, and the uncomfortable; I have embraced the ugly and even suggested that we run toward it, all things that may seem incompatible with hope. Yet to be hopeful—to be *full* of hope—is not to worship at the altar of 'positivity' but to believe that we can hold ugliness, anger, and laughter all at once. This is part of the hope that I have for the future of fat feminist studies. Using Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) grounded in a rich theoretical framework, I examined Roxane Gay's 2017 memoir *Hunger: A Memoir of (My) Body*, Lindy West's 2016 collection of personal essays *Shrill: Notes from a Loud Woman*, and selected essays from Samantha Irby's books: *Meaty* (2013), *We Are Never Meeting in Real Life* (2017), *Wow, No Thank You* (2020), and *Quietly Hostile* (2023). Through a *fattened* lens, I have analyzed these pieces of life writing to highlight their strengths as epistemological resources, particularly around a (fat) affect theory, embodiment, and subjectivity. This dissertation has not

only advocated for a fattening of feminist theory, but a thickening of fat feminist studies through the continued incorporation of disability, queerness, and race to dismantle anti-fatness.

In Chapter One, I presented a robust theoretical framework to ground the analysis and methodology of this dissertation. This framework included fat studies, feminist theory, affect theory, disability studies, queer theory, and epistemology. Beginning with the relationship between fat studies and feminist studies, I presented the current landscape of fat politics and the popular methods of ‘body positivity’ (BP) and Health at Every Size (HAES), two movements which can be understood as assimilationist in nature. Fat studies scholar Kathleen LeBesco (2004) describes “fat assimilationism” as relying on a “will to innocence” (p. 112) that seeks to “relieve [fat people] of responsibility for their much-maligned condition” (p. 112). Assimilationist methods of liberation are invested in participating in the very structures that sustain anti-fatness and they rely on the “repetition of heteronormative culture” (Chalklin, 2016, p. 113) and “desire/ability” (Harrison, 2021). While the interest in re-signifying fat as beautiful and ‘desirable’ is understandable given the oppressive force of anti-fatness, moving the ‘right’ fat bodies into the category of ‘desire/ability’ is a shallow (and often temporary) victory. I explained that the collision of neoliberalism with feminist thought has resulted in the adoption of “neoliberal body discourse and practices as signs of empowerment and subjectivity” (Harjunen, 2023, p. 34) that manifests in a ‘good fatty/bad fatty’ dichotomy where the ‘good’ fat engages in personal responsibility via ‘health’ and ‘wellness’ under the guise of choice and those who do not constitute the ‘bad fats’.

Additionally, I highlighted important work by Da’Shaun L. Harrison (2021) and Sabrina Strings (2019) on the connections between anti-fatness and anti-Blackness, as well as Harrison’s (2021) “desire/ability” methodology (p. 13) which argues that ‘desire capital’ governs more than

just who is deemed attractive, but who has access to safety, resources, and humanity. In Chapter One, and throughout this project, I emphasized that addressing the origins of anti-fatness as a white supremacist project is essential for the future of fat feminist studies. Furthermore, I connected the situation of anti-fatness with ableism alongside the work of scholars like Rosemarie Garland-Thomson (2011), Anna Mollow (2015; 2017), and Zoë Meleo-Erwin (2012; 2014), also drawing from queer theory to illustrate how fatness and disability offer a queered sense of the world and should meaningfully engage with negativity.

Regarding affect theory, I turned to the work of José Muñoz (2020), Sara Ahmed (2010), Sianne Ngai (2005), and Hil Malatino (2022) among others. I argued that, following Muñoz's (2020) "sense of brown", fatness offers its own sense of the world, something I also highlight in Chapter Five. I demonstrated how Ahmed's (2006; 2010) significant work on affect and phenomenology are crucial for this project and offer a sense for how fat subjects encounter objects, as well as the affects that shape those encounters. Moreover, I argued against both a separation of affect and emotion as well as the prioritization of an "affective turn", instead highlighting the work of Linda Ahäll (2018) who argues that feminism is already an affective project. Both Ngai (2005) and Malatino (2022) offered ways to elucidate the negative feelings that can occur in fat life and set the foundation for the way I champion irreverence and obstinance in this dissertation. Before reflecting on my own social location and the importance of reflexivity in feminist research, I outlined my methodology and emphasized the significance of life writing in social sciences and feminist work, while simultaneously addressing the way that life writing is not an unmediated literary form or raw data. This chapter set the foundation for this project through a rigorous theoretical framework that highlights the concepts mobilized throughout this dissertation.

Chapter Two focused on Roxane Gay and the affective work presented in her memoir *Hunger* (2017). I argued that Gay (2017) demonstrates the everyday disorienting encounters in fat life and read these encounters through Hil Malatino's (2022) "side affects" to argue that through these disorienting encounters, Gay reflects Rosemarie Garland-Thomson's (2011) notion of "misfitting". Additionally, I discussed the role of rage and envy in fat life and their connection to the very disorientations that fat subjects come up against. Finally, I argued that *Hunger* (Gay, 2017) offers a temporal mode of slow, shifting, "liminal fat" (Kyrölä & Harjunen, 2017) time, and presented hunger itself as full of complicated affects and emotions.

Chapter Three centred around Lindy West and the fat "killjoy" (Ahmed, 2010) approach she takes in *Shrill* (2016). I argued that West presents a fat killjoy politic through her discussions of comedy and what is worth laughing at. Moreover, her expressive and sarcastic descriptions of moments where her fatness ruptures boundaries are meaningful for turning away from "desire/ability" (Harrison, 2021) and challenging the ideas of "white civility" (Coleman, 2006; Lind, 2020) so central to the maintenance of anti-fatness. Complicating what it means to "come out" as fat, West's work also illustrates the queerness of fat life.

In Chapter Four, I turned to the essay collections of Samantha Irby (2013; 2017; 2020; 2023). This chapter examined the role of irreverence and sarcasm as tools to express painful encounters in fat life, and I argued that Irby offers a meaningful affective approach that can lead fat studies toward the "queerly negative" (Chalklin, 2016; White, 2016; Taylor, 2021). Additionally, I showed how Irby's work demonstrates the intersections between fatness and disability and what it means to take a "cripistemology of pain" (Patsavas, 2014) seriously. Overall, I argued that Irby's work exemplifies the importance of embracing the ugly, messy, and fluid realities of fat embodiment.

Finally, in Chapter Five, I discussed the overlapping themes between Gay, West, and Irby's works as well as some divergences. These themes include encounters with objects, humour, and incoherence around narrative, as well as the style and tone of each author. I concluded with thoughts on the book itself as an object and the tactile sensations of reading, as well as my own reading practices.

This project has made four contributions: 1) It has demonstrated the significance of life writing as an empirical site of fat embodied knowledge, including intersections with queerness and disability; 2) It has shown how affect is presented in fat life writing; 3) It has deepened analysis of racism in anti-fatness; and 4) It has shown how to enrich existing theories of feminist subjectivity around fatness through the recognition of a complex, ambiguous fat subject not beholden to a 'thin' future. First, as fat studies continues to grow, tacit, embodied knowledge remains significant, particularly around the layered experiences of fatness. Each of the texts examined in this dissertation are expressions of the everyday life of fat being, an "inevitable space from which social, cultural, and political activity begins" (Cavalcante, Press, & Sender, 2017, p. 4). It is important to continue exploring "alternative institutional locations" (Collins, 2000, p. 17) for the expression of fat life, such as life writing and the expression of fat life from non-academics and academics alike, thereby challenging hierarchal modes of knowledge. Moreover, by understanding the strengths of humour as an affective mode, I have shown how authors like Samantha Irby (2013; 2017; 2020; 2023) and Lindy West (2016) discuss some of the ideas that raised in fat studies scholarship, such as critiques of diet culture, connections between patriarchy and fatphobia. Likewise, Gay (2017) blends her academic rigour with her position as a figure in popular culture, illustrating how knowledge can be shared across disciplines and across social locations. I hope I have contributed to fat feminist studies never

letting go of an interest in how fat is truly lived and expressed by fat people on their own terms. Fat epistemology should challenge the hierarchy of knowledge and who gets to be a knower about fat—especially regarding the ways that anti-fatness and anti-Blackness are mutually sustaining. Additionally, I showed how fatness interacts with disability and argued that fat feminist studies can, and should, move away from claims of “normality” to rebuke anti-fatness.

Second, highlighting the affective modes of each author, be it Gay’s (2017) discussions of hunger, rage, and envy; West’s (2016) killjoy and laughter; or Irby’s (2013; 2017; 2020; 2023), I contributed to the richness of affect in fat life writing, and showed how fat encounters are already shaped by the affective component of anti-fatness. I have demonstrated what Gay (2017), West (2016), and Irby (2013; 2017; 2020; 2023) have to offer the future of fat feminist studies at the intersection of affect and embodiment, and the many ways to embrace our fat obstinance. Third, I addressed the role of racism in the construction of anti-fatness in each chapter, thereby thickening the existing knowledge on this topic. I connected gender normativity and race to the oppression of fatness and reaffirmed how these forces sustain one another, while also demonstrating the importance of challenging “white civility” for white fat subjects.

Fourth, I challenged the notion that fat subjects should “remove [themselves] from the discourses that *constitute us as subjects*” (Murray, 2005, p. 159, emphasis in original). We should not have to encourage participation in ‘desire/ability’ and the structures of normativity to be considered the appropriate or legitimate subject of fat politics, nor should we have to be relegated to obesogenic narratives. The work of Gay, West, and Irby illustrate the power of a messy, ambiguous, and queerly negative fat subject who can embrace failure. Moreover, I have demonstrated the importance of continuing the dialogue between disability studies and fatness as the experience of the *misfit* (Garland-Thomson, 2011) is shared by fat subjects, disabled subjects,

and fat disabled subjects alike. Gay, West, and Irby have challenged the performance of ‘health’ required by ‘thinness’ and the structures of whiteness, offering examples of what it means to “disrupt normal” (Meleo-Erwin, 2012). Ultimately, I have shown how we might sit with the incongruities of our embodiment and our being in the world.

There are many places that fat feminist studies can go, including more work around fat affects, diverse gender experiences of fat, media research, and solidifying fat epistemological principles. Anger, rage, and envy are some of the “ugly feelings” (Ngai, 2005) that have political potential for fat subjects. It would be fruitful to continue exploring how a range of fat affects are presented and expressed, whether through media (e.g. books, film, music, art) analysis, other qualitative methods such as interviews or focus groups, or mixed methods approaches that combine media analysis with participatory action research. To expand on what I have argued in this dissertation, it would be pertinent to engage with more “feminist media audience research” (Cavalcante, Press, and Sender, 2017), which includes audience reception of media and how media is interpreted and felt. For example, fat feminist studies should incorporate more trans experiences of fat and how fatness and gender are connected. Further research could be done into how fat, trans people understand their subjectivity and what role media plays in that, if any. Projects that analyze participant reaction to, and engagement with, various types of media (textual or audiovisual) would be worth exploring in a fat, trans space. Although I am transgender and have employed theories by queer and trans scholars, this project centered around the work of three cisgender queer women. It would be worthwhile for future work, including my own, to address the specific intersection of bad fat trans feelings.

In order to continue building both a fat epistemology and a dynamic understanding of fat outside of assimilationist rhetorics, it would behoove us to keep fat experience at the forefront.

Additionally, it would be beneficial for fat epistemology to follow Patricia Hill Collins's (2000) approach to the four dimensions of "Black Feminist Epistemology" (p. 269). While a fat epistemology should also take seriously "lived experience as a criterion of meaning" (Collins, 2000, p. 275) and engage with "the use of dialogue" (Collins, 2000, p. 275), fat feminist studies should consider what the important dimensions of fat epistemology might be. A fattening—*thickening*—of theory means not simply "adding fat" but showing how "engaging even more thoroughly with questions of fat" (Kyrölä & Harjunen, 2017, p. 106) can enrich feminist studies. I have discussed both the discursive and theoretical constructions of fatness and fat subjects, the everyday encounters of fat life, and why our constructions of fat should stem from fat knowledge. As exemplars of fat life writing, each author illustrates moments of breakage, incoherence, ambiguity, and refuses tidy temporal journeys. They make plain the ways that the fat body ruptures boundaries of normativity (and the chair), and they each offer a way to disrupt the status quo of the 'good fat'. They are affectively alien (Ahmed, 2010) from fat assimilationist ideology that relies on a body/mind split, performing 'health' under a white supremacist framework, and positioning 'thinness' as a promise to happiness.

This project is non-exhaustive and is limited by the selection of a small number of authors, and each chapter is not a whole representation of each author's *oeuvre*. Although they are outstanding examples of fat life writing that challenge the "oppressive liberation" (Kotow, 2020) of 'positivity', the works by Gay (2017), West (2016), and Irby (2013; 2017; 2020; 2023) examined in this dissertation are not the only types of fat memoir. Moreover, the analysis presented in this thesis is not the ultimate word on fat memoir, but a sample of what can be found in contemporary fat life writing that plays with different affective modes, such as humour, anger, and ambiguity. The texts I chose offer robust contributions to fat feminist studies and are only

one part of a fat epistemic toolbox. Another limitation of this dissertation is my own “epistemic privilege” (Alcoff, 2007, p. 43) as a fat academic. Epistemic privilege depends upon what is being asked and what knowledge is being pursued and is not only tied to social location (Alcoff, 2007). I have pre-existing knowledge about fat life because of my position as fat (and trans/Queer), but this is only epistemic privilege insofar as the questions being asked involve fat inquiry. Hence, this epistemic privilege matters for this dissertation. Conversely, were this project carried out by a non-fat person, the results would be limited by that experience as it would not connect to the specific questions being asked; this is the inevitability of research.

By using a layered cultural analysis that involves life writing and popular culture, including the public image of each author, this thesis seeks to be an entry point to fat studies for those who may be unfamiliar. I have suggested that the interdisciplinary nature of fat studies means that those invested in feminist politics should “think about the fleshy materiality of fatness” (Orsini, 2020, p. 361) and maintain a dialogue with fat scholarship, disability studies, and queer theory. Moreover, this dissertation encourages the recognition of the ways that anti-fatness is fundamentally linked to anti-Blackness and the structures of white supremacy. I hope the reader takes from this thesis the idea that *Hunger* (Gay, 2017), *Shrill* (West, 2016) and Irby’s essay collections (2013; 2017; 2020; 2023) are not easy stories of fat, and that is precisely what makes them compelling, as an “all-around niceness actually hinders the potential political force of a representation” (Kyrölä, 2014, p. 176). If nothing “disturbs”, “sticks to [our] guts”, or “leaves a residue, then the representations can perhaps be easily forgotten, just a footnote that leaves a ‘nice’ feeling but does not give particular jolts to think or act” (Kyrölä, 2014, p. 176). These texts give us something to pad to our guts and they are valuable because they employ a complex fat subject who is neither entirely ‘positive’ or ‘negative’, but somewhere in the messy

middle. Throughout this dissertation I have criticized an assimilationist fat politic not because I believe that it is unimportant, but because “politics of pride that refuse disgust and allow only sanitized images to stand for liberation are eventually untenable” (Kyrölä, 2014, p. 168). We may be in the moment of untenability; fat politics must return to its critical roots and resist the urge to become palatable. Or, as Samantha Irby writes: “Fuck it, bitch. Stay fat” (2017, p. 142). Like the “artful, improbable” (Sedgwick, 1994, p. 35) markings of fat life, I hope this dissertation leaves an impression on you.

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