

**Sticky representations of fatness on contemporary  
reality television:  
Envisioning fat presents and futures**

**by  
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Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the  
Requirements for the Degree of  
Doctor of Philosophy

in the  
School of Communication  
Faculty of Communication, Art and Technology

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SIMON FRASER UNIVERSITY  
Summer 2022

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## Abstract

Fat people are highly represented on reality television. Informed by dominant “obesity” discourses, these representations have framed fat people as inhabiting abject and unruly bodies (LeBesco, 2004) that require expert intervention and enforcement of disciplinary practices (Ouellette and Hay, 2008a). However, recent productions focused on fatness offer new ways of looking at and understanding fat bodies (Kyrölä, 2014; Zimdars, 2019). This project examines contemporary representations of fatness on reality television within competing discourses of the “obesity” epidemic and body positivity. It begins by outlining the construction of the “obesity epidemic”, as well as tensions between fat studies, body positivity, and debates on weight-loss. This serves as an entry point into three sites of analysis within which these tensions are identified: *My 600lb Life* (TLC, 2012-present), *My Big Fat Fabulous Life* (TLC, 2015-present), and *Hot and Heavy* (TLC, 2020). Informed by Foucault’s theoretical frameworks of governance (1988) and the abnormal (1999), I draw from queer theories to situate my affective readings (Koivunen, 2000) of these programs. In doing so, I identify how these new representations constitute as ‘sticky’ objects (Ahmed, 2010; Kavka, 2014). These affective readings contribute to the identification of new fat subjectivities (Moblely, 2014) that reaffirm, rub up against, and resist fat stigma. My goal is to contribute to literature in fat studies and intersectional feminist media studies by performing negotiated readings (Hall, 1973) of these texts that map the introduction of more complex understandings of fatness that diverge from traditional approaches rooted in “obesity” discourse. Drawing from feminist concepts such as abjection (Hennefeld and Sammond, 2019) and social capital (Bourdieu, 1986), some of the themes discussed in the study include: how weight-loss surgery and structural determinants of health destabilize dominant understandings of “obesity”; alternative readings of “trauma porn” (Telusma, 2019); negotiations of “good fatty” archetypes (Bias, 2014); intersections of race (Crenshaw, 1989), class (Wood and Skeggs, 2011), disability (Withers, 2012), and fatness (Friedman et al, 2020); desirability and the politics of mixed-weight couples; power in fetishization; competing discourses between media texts and viewers; and the usefulness of tropes such as the misfit (Garland-Thomson, 2017), freak (Dovey, 2000), and the grotesque (Bakhtin, 1994). Using this range of concepts and approaches, this research considers how the format of reality television can be used for fat liberationist aims, particularly the advancement of fat sensibilities that challenge fat stigma and offer new ways of looking at and understanding fat bodies in both the present and the future.

**Keywords:**

Reality television; fat studies; sticky objects; feminist media studies; affect theory; fat stigma

*To my parents. See you down by the river.*

## Acknowledgements

I would like to express my deepest appreciation to my senior supervisor, Dr. Zoë Druick, for her guidance and support, and for her willingness to embark on this journey with me after I discovered fat studies and pivoted the direction of my research. I am sincerely grateful for how Dr. Druick held space for my enthusiasm while continuing to gently guide me in the right direction and for the ways in which I have improved as a scholar because of her knowledge and expertise.

Thank you to my committee members, Dr. Milena Droumeva and Dr. Coleman Nye, for their involvement with this dissertation. I am deeply appreciative for the directions in which they both pushed this work.

Many thanks for the time and efforts of the remaining members of my defence committee: Dr. Victoria E. Thomas, Dr. Jayne Raisborough, and Dr. Cait McKinney.

Words cannot express my gratitude to Alysha Bains, an incredible colleague and dear friend. What a gift it has been to walk beside her throughout our time in this program.

I am grateful for the guidance and support I received from my colleagues in the School of Communication, particularly Zora Feren, Alicia Massie, Stacey Copeland, Dr. Courtney Szto, and the #LadyPhD Working Group. I am also thankful for the opportunity to work with and learn from Dr. Daniel Ahadi, Chris Jeselnik, Dr. David Murphy, Dr. Martin Laba, Manjeet Gill, and Jason Congdon.

Thank you to the fat studies community, particularly those involved with the Annual Weight Stigma Conference, the Fat Studies symposium and other related activities at Congress, and the fat studies listserv.

Special thanks to the ever-patient Menina Colangelo for ensuring that I survived the last stretch to the finish line. I was a houseplant that she didn't ask for, but she kept me watered and fed and loved me anyways.

Thank you to the following for their unwavering support: Kyla Dewey, Pat and Gord Cameron, Kate Paterson, Taelor Paterson, and Millie. Thank you to my family and friends outside of academia who celebrated every milestone and who kept me grounded throughout my studies.

Lastly, I'd like to acknowledge the following: (the super secret) Vancouver fat club; the US National Park system; Simone de BeauVan and Jolene; softball; Vyvanse; and Silver City, New Mexico.

Parts of this dissertation draws from published research, including my contributions in *Communication and Health: Media, Marketing and Risk* (Eds. J. Greenberg & C. Elliott), and in the journal *Fat Studies*.

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# Introduction

As a fat person who loves reality television, viewing its programs can often feel like a sadistic hobby. The stronghold of “obesity”<sup>1</sup> discourses pertaining to body size, as well as food, health care, the environment, national security and even conceptualizations of the future, has paired well with prevailing neoliberal attitudes that form the foundation of many western cultural institutions<sup>2</sup>. Within the past thirty years, countless industries, including reality television, have provided a surplus of texts that work to establish and maintain fatness as a threat to the vitality of oneself and the global population, positioning fat people as a problem to be fixed. Reality television has typically offered a limited selection of perspectives on fatness; most of the time, fat people are depicted as being at odds with their bodies and desiring a slimmer version of themselves that they will fight to achieve at all costs, including at the expense of their emotional, physical, and psychological health. This is a problematic and limited menu of offerings for an audience whose bodies are supposedly growing exponentially in size and at an alarming rate of “epidemic” proportions. The more I learn about the physical and symbolic violence towards marginalized bodies in the reality television genre, particularly towards fat bodies like my own, but also the exploitation of people with disabilities, the working class, and people of colour, as well as the various ethical dilemmas posed by the genre’s production practices, the more I align with Ahmed’s (2010) concept of affective alienation. I would go so far as to say that, at times, I employ affective and cognitive dissonance in order to enjoy watching my favourite shows (Chadwick, 2021; Hemmings,

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<sup>1</sup> As discussed in further detail at the end of this introduction, many fat studies scholars and fat activists reject the use of the word “obesity”, arguing that it is both an unnecessary categorization of naturally occurring diversity of body size, and that the medicalization of such difference incites harm towards fat people (Fox, 2019; Wann, 2009). To acknowledge this, all references to the term “obese” (as well as the phrase “obesity epidemic”) will be placed in quotation marks. Instead of using the term “obese” I make an effort to use the preferred adjective of “fat” where possible.

<sup>2</sup> Neoliberal conceptions of good citizenship are found in a range of cultural institutions, such as public health organizations, school systems, and media, and involve values such as individualism, freedom of choice, and self-improvement. To emphasize these values, neoliberalism rebrands oppressive forms of discipline, surveillance, and governance as empowering opportunities (Gill, 2007). This rebranding rewards those who are “good citizens”, meaning those who adopt suggested strategies for achieving and/or maintaining good health (defined in part as having a thin body), and condemns those who do not. For example, disciplining the body to achieve heteronormative and Eurocentric standards of beauty through extreme exercise and dieting measures is reframed within neoliberalism as a responsible approach to one’s body despite potential harms of these behaviours.

2012), in the sense that I *know* about the problematic and harmful aspects of reality television, and yet I still watch it and, at times, derive pleasure or happiness from it.

It is often this affective dissonance that encourages viewers to hide their “guilty pleasure” of watching reality television. Feeling troubled by this disassociation made me curious about which arguments are in favour of the genre; so often it is referred to as “trash TV” while fans whisper to each other about their affinity for it. Hemmings (2012) argues that affective dissonance can sometimes inspire action in the sense that an individual may undertake work to align their behaviour with their feelings. Indeed, I decided to search for reality television programs that offered positive representations of fatness so that I could reconcile my love for reality television with my politics. The recent popularization of body positive movements made this endeavour possible as it has informed the production of a handful of contemporary reality television shows that push forward new approaches towards fatness, including perspectives that challenge familiar narratives rooted in “obesity” discourses<sup>3</sup> (Hynnä & Kyrölä, 2019; Zimdars, 2019). The most familiar narrative regarding “obesity”, one that has dominated reality television programming across a variety of subgenres for decades, approaches fatness “as a liminal state that cannot be considered a permanent, valuable and identifiable part of or a base for subjectivity” (Kyrölä & Harjunen, 2017, p. 100). This attitude about fatness has only recently begun to experience criticism and, as such, there is little academic research on the nuances of media representations that diverge from this dominant perspective. This dissertation fills this gap by exploring contemporary fat subjectivities that interrogate “obesity” discourses and offer suggestions of what a fat present and fat future look like.

That is not to say that body positive programming exists completely in opposition to “obesity” discourse; the ways in which these programs rub up against dominant narratives of fatness is what makes these programs “sticky”. Regardless of these tensions, fat people often cling to media about fatness despite any problematic elements

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<sup>3</sup> “Obesity” discourses refers to the language, strategies, practices and institutions that pathologize fatness as a disease (Lupton, 2013). Regardless of discrepancies regarding the causes of “obesity”, these discourses, grounded in scientific and biomedical approaches, claim that fatness objectively poses a risk and/or threat to one’s health, vitality, and citizenship (Brookes and Baker, 2022). “Obesity” discourses dominate understandings of fatness despite significant concerns regarding the validity of these claims as well as the consequences of framing body diversity as a risk and moral crisis (Rich & Evans, 2005). Neoliberalism has intensified risk-related discourses (Lupton, 2013) and, consequently, “obesity” discourses result in the ongoing stigmatization of fat people who fail to mitigate presumed risks posed by fatness.

because these texts are all that we have; as Gay (2014) writes, there is immense pressure on these few programs to satisfy the hunger of audiences desperate to see themselves in ways that do not inflict harm. This is also difficult to achieve as pain or discomfort is already present for fat people who live in fatphobic societies. However, discomfort is also a motivating factor as Ahmed (2018) articulates, the “sore points” that make us fragile or vulnerable are often what encourage us to seek out these sites. Of course, these few programs cannot possibly satisfy every desire of every viewer, however, the messy web of emotions such as pleasure, disappointment, judgment, ridicule, shame, and curiosity are important to consider when discussing an industry that relies increasingly on affective economics (Hill, 2015; Jenkins, 2008). While Ahmed (2010) argues that we move away from the things we do not like, or “in rejecting the proximity of certain objects, we define the places that we know we do not wish to go” (p. 32), she later writes that “feelings might be how structures get under our skin” (2018, p. 62). Taken together, experiencing pleasure and discomfort simultaneously offers an opportunity to explore how feelings are generated and internalized in response to systemic forms of oppression, which arguably grants cultural industries such as reality television an affective quality that resonates even as we turn away from or challenge them. I suggest that this understanding is useful in approaching media that both confront and uphold oppressive attitudes, such as fat stigma.

The research question guiding this dissertation is: **how do representations of superfat people on reality television contribute to and challenge “obesity” discourse?** This dissertation approaches this question first with an analysis of *My 600-lb Life* (TLC, 2012-present), moving subsequently into analyses of the shows *My Big Fat Fabulous Life* (TLC, 2015-present) and *Hot and Heavy* (TLC, 2020). Ahmed argues that “we become alienated — out of line with an affective community — when we do not experience pleasure from proximity to objects that are already attributed as being good” (Ahmed, 2010, p. 37). Ahmed’s argument resonates with me in two ways: First, I can see how watching reality television shows that are invested in “obesity” discourse and are centered around weight loss made me incredibly uncomfortable even though these programs were, and are, wildly popular. Considering this, I see reality television programs that include weight loss narratives as an opportunity for disidentification, which I will elaborate on shortly. Second, arguments in favour of and against reality television position the genre as a sticky site of analysis that is simultaneously good and bad. For

example, its status as a “guilty pleasure” identifies how pleasure can be derived from “bad” objects. This dissertation locates the sites of analysis within these tensions, and I do this by using my affective responses (which are not completely pleasurable, but not completely painful, either) to theorize about their stickiness (Ahmed, 2010) in relation to broader social movements invested in fat liberation.

The increasing presence of neutral or pro-fat discourse in media, including body positive rhetoric as well as more radical conversations about fatness, are exciting for me as an academic working in queer feminist cultural studies, a documentary filmmaker, and as a fat person involved with fat activist communities. As new sites of study for reality television scholars and fat studies scholars alike, these programs offer a refreshing divergence from familiar formats, even as these sites simultaneously engage with “obesity” discourse that continues to inflict harm on fat people (Wann, 2009). Sharma and Tygstrup (2015) suggest that when studying affect, “we tend to miss those moments when new patterns of experience emerge, when people start to think differently, when new sensibilities arise, when habits swerve” (Sharma & Tygstrup, 2015, p. 4). As I watched these programs in real time as the episodes were released to the public, my affective responses are located in the same moment and not from the position of “looking back” at established and institutionalized frameworks. As Sharma and Tygstrup (2015) argue, the immediate and emergent are “serious social phenomena worthy of theorisation and indeed as significant components of the social fabric” (p. 5), despite not yet having been the focus of scholarly research. As will be further discussed throughout this dissertation, the high representation of superfat and infinifat people on reality television programs concerned with weight loss can contribute to the strength of “obesity” discourse, particularly the idea that fatness is a cause for concern of epidemic proportions and that the possibility of “obesity”, particularly “morbid obesity”, is a looming threat to both oneself as well as broader communities. Therefore, while enthusiastic and optimistic about emerging representations of fatness, I also approach these texts with caution. As such, this dissertation is concerned with how these differing approaches to larger bodies, while evoking varying degrees of care, can be simultaneously absorbed into cultural industries and dominant ideologies that often have conflicting interests.

The relationship between reality television and its producers, participants, and viewers are incredibly sticky, particularly in consideration of the genre’s various uses and gratifications. By narrowing my field of study to reality television specifically, I concern

my research with not only an industry that holds significant cultural capital as one of the most popular television genres, but also an industry whose success is predicated on its ability to be “authentic” and tell the “truth”. For many viewers, “getting to ‘know’ participants through seeing their lives and feelings played out on television often leads the audience to form a strong emotional connection with them, especially when the narratives and feelings shown on screen are believed to be “real” and reflective of one’s “true self” (Deller, 2019, p. 40). The cultural status of reality television as being a “mirror” to society upholds the genre as more authentically reflecting social truths than fictional texts, which arguably empowers representations and discourses within the genre to inform the audience about issues pertaining to marginalized groups that often dominate its themes. Therefore, while a primary function of reality television is to serve as entertainment, it does also have the capacity to inform audiences about various social groups and related topics. Importantly, Jones (2003) argues that viewers will draw truths or identify the “real” within a program, even with the knowledge that reality television is crafted in particular ways both during production as well as in the editing process and is, therefore, not an accurate portrayal of reality. Indeed, this is the paradox of reality-based media: representing the “real” is a mediated practice and as such, “authenticity” is a discursive formation. The view of reality television as “authentic” due to its centering of the “real” regardless of how depictions of reality may be manipulated is particularly useful in strengthening the potential of these sticky new fat subjectivities; these are not fictional characters but actual people moving through the world whose existence (or at least, how it is represented on television) present challenges to “obesity” discourse and the credibility of various systems of power that uphold it.

With this dissertation, I intervene in reality television studies as a communication studies scholar situated within the emerging discipline of fat studies. As with other disciplines rooted in identity-based social movements, such as gender studies, disability studies, or critical race studies, fat studies evolved in response to fat activism, a political movement whose foundations draw significantly from the civil rights and queer liberation movements of the 1970s onwards. Like the aforementioned disciplines, fat studies “hails from a critical tradition that has at its core an activist and interventionist agenda, and a questioning of the taken-for-granted, of what is often mundane and seamless, with a profound sense that what goes unquestioned can be dangerous, particularly for disenfranchised bodies” (Dubrofsky and Magnet, 2015, p. 3). Fat studies began as an

academic discipline in 2004 at a conference at Columbia University's Teachers College, which was accompanied by a fat-activist art show, illustrating early connections between the discipline and activist efforts, particularly arts-based methods. From these two events, fat studies expanded through panels at conferences and through an e-mail listserv (Wann, 2009). Fat studies was established more formally as an academic discipline with the publication of the *Fat Studies Reader* (Rothblum & Solovay, 2009), followed by the launch of the *Fat Studies Journal* in 2012. One of the only explicitly fat studies-focused academic conferences, The International Weight Stigma Conference (2013-present) is composed mainly of scholars and professionals from public health fields, emphasizing the need of public health organizations and practitioners to integrate fat liberationist efforts into their work. This is possibly because, as the roots of fat studies as an academic discipline occurred approximately ten years after the introduction and popularization of "obesity" discourse in health-related fields, much of the foundational research in fat studies is focused on critical interventions in public health literature and/or from a public health perspective to challenge the pathologization of fatness as a disease. Indeed, a large percentage of the published research in fat studies to date responds in some way to "obesity" discourses. This includes research focused on media texts, as much of the published fat studies literature on media, particularly film and television, is concerned with the various ways fatness is weaponized to support the ongoing fight against "obesity". This research identifies how reality television operates as part of a surveillant assemblage (Rich, 2011) in which various industries are mobilized as pedagogical tools that instruct audiences how to perform disciplinary practices, particularly how to reorient oneself in relation to a biopolitics of risk (Andrejevic, 2002). As Rich (2011) identifies, this pedagogical work occurs within "broader *assemblages* of obesity which have an affective quality" (p. 7). What has yet to be explored in similar capacities is the stickiness and affective possibilities of texts, particularly when negotiated readings identify instances of fat liberationist rhetoric and/or moments that challenge "obesity" discourse.

Much of the existing literature on reality television is concerned with its surveillant and disciplinary functions (Ouellette and Hay, 2008a). One component that has not been engaged with in a similar capacity is contemporary programs that offer new ways of looking at or engaging with fat bodies (Zimdars, 2019). An understudied aspect is the affective qualities of these programs, such as feelings of discomfort (Chadwick, 2021),

fat sympathy or fat sadness (Gordon, 2016), or fat ambiguity, which is defined by Zimdars (2021) as texts that “neither center weight-loss in their narratives nor overtly represent the possibilities of fat acceptance or engage with systemic issues of fat discrimination and bias” (p. 51). Harrison (2021) argues that texts which center insecurities or vulnerabilities such as fat sadness better contextualize fat stigma; indeed, vulnerability has emerged as a key concept in discussions of media, subjectivities, and power (Koivunen, Kyrölä, & Ryberg, 2018). This is an important consideration as discourses about the body are constantly evolving in increasingly complex ways, particularly on television which as a medium is one of the most popular cultural sites for fat stigma (Mobley, 2014). To reflect on this popularity, I include within my analysis examples of discourse on social media that responds to and critiques these programs in order to situate my perspectives within broader viewing communities. This is another key distinction of my contributions to feminist media studies because of my involvement in the “fatosphere” (Lupton, 2017; Pausé, 2016), meaning online spaces by and for fat people, as well as other online spaces built by viewers of these programs. These spaces and social media posts inform my reading of these programs and my thinking has been shaped by these communities. As Feuer (2018) argues, audiences are capable of both investment and detachment to text within popular culture, and yet many scholarly approaches do not acknowledge this duality.

This dissertation responds to the call for “future scholars to give further attention to media depictions of body non-conformists of all types and to turn a critical eye toward depictions that are allegedly progressive to allow for a more nuanced understanding of the role media plays” (Graves and Kwan, 2012, p. 58). Recent research produced on these nuanced representations includes *Watching Our Weights* (2019) by Melissa Zimdars, which uses both fictional and reality-based media to reveal how television fails its governmentality and disciplinary capabilities in regard to fatness. Zimdars (2019) suggests that body positive media texts resist dominant narratives about fatness in various ways; some programs do so by promoting positive approaches to small and mid fat sized people who “bridge the gap between the idealized, unrealistically thin bodies most often found throughout television’s history and the super morbidly obese bodies” (p. 125) that are highly represented on weight loss reality television shows. Others approach fat people as comical or undesirable while also emphasizing their humanity regardless of their body size. Katariina Kyrölä also analyzes media representations of

fatness from the 1990s and 2000s in the book *The Weight of Images* (2014). Similar to my approach, Kyrölä uses her affective responses to a range of media as part of her analysis. This dissertation builds on this research by exploring the affective possibilities of contemporary representations of fatness and body positivity within reality television specifically. Additionally, I analyze media texts that are informed by “obesity” discourse but are situated within the current cultural moment where body positive rhetoric is more prevalent in mainstream discourse.

Work that has focused on contradictions in media representations of fatness (i.e. Kyrölä, 2014; Zimdars, 2019) has been undertaken by scholars who do not identify as fat. As such, a notable gap in this literature is research produced by fat scholars, including how fat people view, understand, discuss and feel about representations of fatness. Indeed, an important distinction between this research and existing work is that non-fat scholars, such as Kyrola, who discusses how her relationship with her own body is informed by fat stigma through the development of behaviours such as disordered eating habits, identify *with* but not *as* fat (McRuer, 2006; Schalk, 2013). Kyrölä (2014) directly addresses this by advocating that scholars of all sizes should analyze representations of fat bodies, however, I am drawn to the emphasis within fat studies on first person approaches that center the perspectives of fat people. From this perspective, it is understood that fat people possess lived experience that provides insider reflexive knowledge (Heller, 2014) that adds a valuable additional element in my ability to affectively engage with these texts. Schalk (2013) writes that

to identify with could be understood as analogous to being an ally, I contend that there is something more personal, sustained, and affective about it. Identifying with is a careful, conscious joining—a standing/sitting among rather than by or behind a group—which seeks to reduce separation while acknowledging differences in privileges and oppression (n.p.).

Certainly, to identify *with* fat is a meaningful perspective and the solidarity of non-fat people benefits fat liberationist discourse. For example, academia is not exempt from the influence of “obesity” rhetoric and, as such, in some instances the alignment of a non-fat researcher with fat-positive attitudes strengthens the validity of this work by virtue of association with thin privilege. However, even in consideration of these benefits, identifying *with* fatness and the resulting analyses are not the same as work produced from the perspective of someone who *is* fat.

By positioning the reading of these texts from a fat viewer, a negotiated reading (Hall, 1973; 2007) of these sites of analysis allow for moments of identification, empathy, reflection, and speculation on the stickiness of these texts (Mobley, 2014). Similar to work from critical race and queer theory scholars who advocate for the prioritization of minoritarian voices on issues and topics centered on those identities and positionalities, this dissertation fills a gap in feminist media studies literature focused on fatness with the added component of my lived experience as a fat person. Sharma and Tygstrup (2015) argue that

Studying affectivity is to identify which bodies are being affected; individual bodies, collective bodies, and composite bodies. It is to chart the relations these bodies have to their surroundings, how they are immersed in dependencies and interactions, and it is eventually to examine how these bodies change and develop within the affective infrastructures in which they reside. It is to study the ways in which these bodies are capable of receiving and processing the affective impulses impinging on them, and how they eventually become different, for better or for worse, through being affected (p. 16).

Lived experience, then, arguably adds an additional layer to the study of affect and media, particularly due to how different bodies are subjected to “obesity” discourse. As Read (2021) writes, “for fat activists and fat people in general, these topics are deeply personal and often emotionally charged. Our passion for the topics of life in fat bodies are borne of how deeply we carry the societal assumptions about our fatness” (p. 197). Furthermore, like Dovey (2000), my research is uniquely situated within reality television studies because it is informed by my professional work in broadcast media, having directed and produced a short documentary film (Cameron, 2019) as well as having worked on television and film sets in a range of capacities. As media cannot be removed “from their wider political connections, nor the ways in which the various modes of subjectivity and values are negotiated in these spaces” (Rich, 2011, p. 17), I use my affective responses to three different programs to identify how different approaches to fatness and increasingly diverse representations of fat people rub up against lived fat experiences within the context of the ongoing “obesity epidemic”.

Considering this, I also acknowledge how my other positionalities influence my experiences as a fat person. I use disidentification in my analysis to draw connections between representations of fatness and attitudes about race, class, gender, and sexuality that expand beyond my own positionalities. Muñoz (1999) defines

disidentification as a strategy used by minoritarian subjects (meaning people with multiple intersecting marginal identities) to locate themselves amongst dominant ideologies, representations, and theories. Neither agreeing or disagreeing with dominant ideologies, disidentification requires negotiating and reinterpreting dominant ideologies, particularly oppressive values. This serves minoritarian subjects by identifying and/or creating ways marginalized groups can exist alongside and/or within oppressive dominant ideologies, while acknowledging that these same ideologies maintain their marginalized status. Therefore, disidentification is “a way to locate one's self within, take up and (re)use representations and theories in ways that were not originally intended” (Schalk, 2013, n.p.). The result of this is the creation of counterpublics that are neither assimilated nor in opposition to dominant ideologies, but instead exist as something on its own. My lived experiences of marginalization as a midfat, queer person, as well as the privileges I experience as a white, university-educated settler, enable me to use disidentification as a way to position myself as a viewer in relation to the superfat participants featured on the reality television programs used in this dissertation.

## **A note on language**

A common thread that connects many of the contributions to fat studies is the use of the word fat as opposed to terms such as “obese.” I employ a pedagogy of discomfort (Boler, 1999) in this research; one method being the use of the word “fat”. I use the word fat as a neutral descriptor, much like one would use the words “short” or “tall”, and I employ the fat studies tradition of putting words such as “obese”, “obesity”, or “obesity epidemic” in quotation marks. This is an intentional act to align my work with fat liberationist efforts, similar to efforts of queer and/or disabled communities to reclaim the use of words such as “queer” or “crip” (a derivative of “cripple”). By deliberately avoiding words such as “obese” I make an intentional effort to acknowledge the harm that pathologizing fatness as a disease and/or public health epidemic can have on fat people.

I use terms such as “fat”, “superfat”, and “infinifat” to acknowledge categorizations of bodies as opposed to terms such as “obese” and “morbidly obese” that rely on the Body Mass Index. The term “superfat” was first coined at a Nolose conference (Midnight and Airborne, 2020). The category of superfat falls at the larger end of the Fat Spectrum, which is a fluid categorization of fat folks according to their clothing size, weight, and/or the accessibility issues they face because of the size of

their bodies (Evans, 2019; Luna, 2019; Wann, 2009). People on the smaller end of the spectrum, known as small fats and mid fats, may experience medical discrimination or social discrimination because of their size, but are usually able to function within western societies based on the limited accommodations provided to people with larger bodies. It becomes increasingly more difficult to access adequate health care, public spaces, or clothing, the farther along the spectrum one is located. Additionally, those on the far end of the spectrum, such as large fats and superfat people, experience more adversity due to their size. For example, the design of physical public spaces (such as airplanes, restaurants, or public transportation) often exclude or punish larger bodies by lacking accessible seating options. As well, the increasingly normalized and collective cultural disgust directed towards what are considered to be abject bodies, situates superfat people as a heavily criticized spectacle. The participants within the three sites of analysis used in this dissertation can all be categorized as superfat. I fall into the category of mid fat on the Fat Spectrum and acknowledge that my size paired with my positionality as a white settler is also significant in relation to the research I conduct as I am afforded more privilege than those who occupy larger bodies than mine. To mitigate this, I do my best to center the voices and knowledge of scholars with lived experiences relative to the issues I identify and discuss, particularly when my own positionalities do not align with the topic at hand.

bell hooks (1994) argues that employing a pedagogy of discomfort can challenge the 'mind/body split' that positions academics primarily as an intellectual mind. My positionality as a fat, queer person offers "insights" (Van Dijk 2001, in Dame-Griff 2020) that guide my approach to this research, including valuable opportunities for identifying affective moments as a fat viewer of media representations of fat people. Furthermore, my physical figure as a fat scholar is not apolitical. For example, a study co-conducted by a researcher in the Beedie School of Business at Simon Fraser University, found that the increasing presence of plus-size models in the fashion industry might help advance the status of fat people. It was concluded in this study that the inclusion of plus-size models was detrimental, as this might encourage people to be fat (Lin & McFerran, 2016). I cannot separate research such as this from the space that my fat body, as well as my work supporting fat liberationist efforts, occupies on the same campus (Royce, 2016), including the 'stigma threat' posed by my body (Escalera, 2009) that statistically results in professional consequences due to fatphobic implicit biases held by employers

as well as students (Wann, 2009). While acknowledging that Senyonga (2020) is writing from her position as a Black, fat, queer femme academic, I resonate with her words through our shared identities as queer and fat: “In teaching through my embodiment I stand to do more in the pursuit of alternative realities than living in fear of how I will be read” (p. 228). The use of the word fat and/or of lived experiences of fat people, particularly in ways that support fat liberation, may be uncomfortable or challenging for some, but I feel that discomfort is useful in disrupting environments that simultaneously produce work that perpetuate fat stigma.

To identify this discomfort, as well as to name the nuances in media representations of fatness and discussions of fat subjectivities, I use the term “sticky”. As will be discussed further in the literature review, I use the word sticky to identify the affective qualities of the sites of analysis that reveal tensions between competing discourses. In her discussion of happy objects, Ahmed (2010) argues that “affect is what sticks, or what sustains or preserves the connection between ideas, values, and objects” (p. 29). Ahmed’s argument can also be applied to texts that incite a wide range of affective responses, as happy objects are defined and positioned in part through differentiation from “affect aliens”, or those who exist in opposition to that object. Affect, according to Ahmed (2010), is not a standalone concept, but generated from “the messiness of the experiential, the unfolding of bodies into worlds, and the drama of contingency, how we are touched by what we are near” (p. 30). The term sticky encompasses these characteristics.

Building from Ahmed’s (2004) work on orientation and the stickiness of objects, Gorton (2009) applies this approach to television and writes that “the way we orient ourselves towards what we watch and these moments that resonate with personal and cultural experience are intimately linked” (p. ix). Similarly, Kavka (2014) writes that the affective capacity of reality television is what maintains viewership despite obvious and significant issues within it:

They seem to operate beyond the systems of representation and signification to which we automatically turn when assessing the gravity of a textual or cultural formation. Nonetheless, as moments of affective transmission and nodes in a network of attachments, they do have a certain bearing, a weight of matter(ing) that sustains the appeal of these programs and makes them feel real. This is not to say that the affective register of reality television shows is strictly detachable from the symbolic registers of

ideology, narrative, and representation... I am, however, suggesting that there might be more going on, especially if we are to explain the sticky nature of reality television that keeps audiences watching, even as it increasingly gives over any claims to authenticity. (p. 473)

The malleability and ever-changing nature of the genre makes reality television sticky in the sense that it is difficult to define or categorize (Andrejevic, 2011). For the purposes of this research, I define reality television as media involving everyday people who are participating seemingly without scripts, in real time in a living or working environment that is later edited together to form a narrative (Tyree, 2011). The events are seemingly unplanned and the programs are primarily for viewer entertainment (Lundy et al., 2008). In this sense, reality television programs are texts that can be understood as authentic, but always contested, portrayals of everyday life; its programs often use personal testimony to guide the narrative and support claims of authenticity (Palmer, 2014). Furthermore, reality television programs are edited in a way that insinuates to the viewer that the events they are watching actually took place. To achieve this, production processes (such as editing, camera angles, or leading questions) are often hidden or removed to help construct provocative plotlines (Banet-Weiser & Portwood-Stacer, 2006). However, reality television participants and producers increasingly “break the fourth wall”, which advances the argument that audiences are likely well-aware of the presence of a production team and how this would influence the text itself. Importantly, the location of the reality television program is indicative of its aims, and the location of the audience is indicative of how a program will be received; in the Middle East, for example, reality television tends to rearticulate nationalist and religious ideology compared to American reality television which often emphasizes neoliberal values of self-governance and responsibility (Couldry, 2009). For the purposes of this research, I draw from reality television programs that feature participants from North America and are intended for a North American audience.

Mainstream reality television as we recognize it today has its roots in the early 1990s, due to a need to produce cheap television programs paired with a growing interest in niche lifestyle programming, as well as the development of specialty channels. The genre has rapidly transformed the television industry within the past thirty years, eventually garnering significant influence by establishing itself as one of the most prevalent forms of entertainment (Vanacker 2012). With a variety of shows across a growing number of subgenres (including makeover, competitive, and lifestyle programs),

contemporary reality television has been primarily concerned with “ordinariness, deviance, competition, and surveillance” as well as “lifestyles deemed risky and in need of intervention” (Raisborough, 2016, p. 80). It is significant to note, too, that reality television developed as an industry simultaneously to the emergence of the “obesity epidemic”; these two cultural phenomena quickly merged as various cultural sites mobilized responses to and intervened in the “war on obesity”.

The role of fatness and the perception of fatness in our society are certainly changing. Increasingly, many people are beginning to feel positively towards their fatness (Lupton, 2018). This is in part due to the current phenomenon of body positivity, in which there has been a dramatic increase in campaigns, websites, and social media pages that offer new ways of looking at one’s experiences in a larger body (Hynnä & Kyrölä, 2019). Because of this shift, fat people can – or are encouraged to – feel liberated, empowered and beautiful. From these viewpoints, inhabiting a larger body can make one feel strong both physically and in character. The sticky nature of reality television strongly applies to representations of fat people within the genre when we consider how an increasing number of programs use body positive discourse to frame the participants and complicate ideas about fatness. Indeed, the recent popularization of the body positive movement and fat activist efforts have pushed forward a new form of representing fat bodies, namely one that challenges those stemming from anti-“obesity” sentiments.

Body positivity is itself a sticky and contradictory concept as body positive rhetoric is not necessarily fat affirming. The self-love purported by body positivity remains limited, extended to those who satisfy other dominant beliefs (such as whiteness, or those related to class, gender, sexuality), and/or are able to “overcome” structural and institutionalized forms of oppression. Body positive rhetoric decontextualizes fat bodies by erasing systemic and institutional forms of oppression that impact one’s capability to develop self-esteem and self-respect (Cooper, 2016; Fritz, 2012); it does so by emphasizing the role of the individual in the development of self-love, often through an engagement with various forms of consumerism (Brady & Gingras, 2016). In doing so, “body positivity more closely mirrors than challenges a neoliberal paradigm of bodily compliance” by doing “little more than strategically align[ing] a postfeminist discourse with a corporate imperative” (Sastre, 2014, pp. 929-932). Slowly, fat people (mostly small fat and mid fat people) are being enveloped into

capitalism in ways that perpetuate the racist, sexist, ableist, homophobic, and other harmful ideologies upon which fat stigma is founded. Therefore, body positivity is afforded to those who may stray slightly from hegemonic standards of beauty, but only insofar as they continue to reflect and uphold recognizable social norms, particularly those that privilege whiteness, able-bodiedness, and heteronormativity. Body positivity is thus not extended to those who carry “an extreme amount of weight” (Stevens, 2020), as a line is drawn between bodies that are seen as acceptably larger and bodies that are seen as pathologically large (Mayes, 2016). Additionally, body positivity emphasizes and upholds normative conceptions of health as being critical to achieving self-love (i.e. that it doesn’t matter what one’s body looks like so long as one is healthy). It does so by advocating that a crucial part of self-love is to confront any issues with one’s self-esteem that may be impeding the ability to make socially acceptable choices, directing people towards “recalibration of the deviant body through active work” (Sastre, 2014, p. 939) and therefore maintaining non-normative bodies as a project, or work in progress. This attitude perpetuates healthist and ableist attitudes that contribute to the marginalization of people who, whether by choice or circumstance, are unable to attain such standards. These discrepancies are thus useful to this research to better understand media representations of superfat and infinifat people that are aligned with body positive movements.

Body positive cultural texts are sticky objects that incite mixed feelings for people invested in fat liberation. It is important to note the discrepancies between body positivity and fat positivity, as these issues underlie my reasoning for using language such as the word fat, in addition to why my sites of analysis are focused on superfat and infinifat people. As well, my work is situated from a fat studies perspective, thus it is important to elaborate on the discrepancies between these two related movements. The body positive movement is difficult to define as its messages are loosely collected and there are not any direct ties to any particular social justice initiative; fat activism may be the closest, however, body positivity would be a deviation from this movement. Importantly, body positivity manifests in various commercial forms, ranging from services such as mindfulness or life coaching, to the sale of products in extended sizes, to the increasingly profitable brands of body positive social media influencers (Sastre, 2014). Body positive movements often value increased representation in media as a gain for non-normative bodies without looking into whether these representations are also

meaningful. The sites of analysis in this research are not explicitly described as fat positive as arguably what is evoked in the marketing and production of these shows is body positive rhetoric. However, considering these fundamental differences, the intertwined discourses of body positivity and fat positivity are reflected in media through the creation of reality television shows that seemingly exist in opposition to, or complicate, “obesity” discourses.

Mobley (2014) argues that media and other consumer industries resist embracing fat positivity due to the potentially negative impact that could have on the health and beauty industries. Indeed, mainstream uses of body positivity often signify a neoliberal co-option of fat activist values, such as self-love, to maintain problematic industries that rely on fat stigma to maintain a profit (Cooper 2016; Inthorn and Boyce 2010). While self-actualization is thought of as a personal and unique journey, on reality television this process occurs in conjunction with capitalist endeavours that are not concerned with the individual (Sender 2012). Reality television continues to place consumerism ahead of the needs of the individual, therefore promoting governance of the self over happiness or freedom (Palmer 2014). The consequences of such governance are that fat people, especially fat women, are constructed as being in a state of crisis and requiring radical change before being allowed to revel in self-confidence or purpose. The commercial interests of reality television undoubtedly reflect social and cultural trends; as body positivity becomes more mainstream, and profitable, its values will become increasingly reflected in television. To be explored in this dissertation is how these shows play to fat positive values but may be confined by the limitations of body positive discourses.

Within body positivity is an emphasis on being confident, considering an ‘imperfect’ body and the feelings associated with it as hurdles to overcome (Sastre, 2014). This transfers “the cultural demand to change one’s body into a demand to change one’s affective relationship to one’s body” (Hynnä & Kyrölä, 2019, p. 2). Body positive rhetoric does not allow for the neutral or negative feelings that may arise in regards to one’s fatness, including feelings incited by experiencing systemic oppression and discrimination. As such, body positivity may not be useful for those invested in fat liberation (Kessel, 2018). From a fat positive perspective, instead of encouraging people to both admit to experiencing adversity in addition to then simply loving themselves, Dunham advocates that fat people can draw on “trans narratives of embodied

ambivalence” (in Cooper, 2016, p. 17) to advocate for themselves. In essence, this position argues that you do not have to love yourself in order to care for yourself and your body. In comparison, various fat activist approaches often advocate in favour of fat sadness or in facilitating space to discuss and explore contradictory feelings towards one’s body (Your Fat Friend, n.d.; Oliver & Cameron, 2021). Excitingly, the presence of complex, contradictory feelings that vacillate between self-love and insecurity on shows such as *My 600-lb Life*, *My Big Fat Fabulous Life*, and *Hot and Heavy*, reveal the potential of reality television to explore these complex and ambivalent narratives.

As there are limited representations of fat bodies beyond those that frame fatness as a site of concern and/or focus on weight loss, there is a lot of pressure on these shows to directly challenge anti-fat bias and satisfy the needs and wants of hopeful fat viewers. There can be a lot of excitement, optimism, and support for these few examples, because viewers may turn to a program in which they are emotionally invested to validate their feelings, learn about themselves as well as the ways in which they may be oppressed, and connect with others who have similar experiences. The presence of anti-fat sentiments in body positive reality television is why programs such as those analyzed in this research are not automatically celebrated by fat liberationists and are often approached with suspicion or hesitation. As Hemmings (2005) and Zimdars (2021) both argue, even positive and subversive depictions of non-normative bodies can perpetuate problematic ideologies. Gorton (2009) writes that this emotional investment and subsequent critical eye means that viewers “can have an emotional *and* critical position on a televisual text simultaneously, which contradicts the assumption that emotion disables a critical position” (p. 68). Rather, viewers critique all aspects of the production, including visual shots, sounds, as well as underlying ideologies within a show’s storyline or structure. Therefore, situating contemporary reality television programming focused on superfat people within current sociopolitical and cultural contexts, such as the ongoing “obesity epidemic”, allows for naming the ways in which these conflicting ideologies rub against one another, or stick to each other, in both explicit and ambiguous ways. This stickiness provides space for and informs the affective responses these shows elicits from viewers, especially those who are fat.

In reference to fat-positive zines, Snider (2009) argues that texts centering “culturally contested bodies... simultaneously use and reject conventional ideas and ideals of deviant bodies to reinvent marginalized fat and queer identities” (p. 223). A key

difference between zines and reality television programs is that zines are often a feminist method of self-representation, while reality television participants have less control by being subject to the editorial manipulation of producers. Regardless, representations of superfat people have much to offer in the ways of complicating fatphobic social discourses. Furthermore, in the current cultural moment, Zimdars (2021) argues that fat characters in mainstream fictional media “navigate a discursive terrain that increasingly encourages individual body positivity while not overtly pushing back against discourses of the ‘obesity epidemic’” (p. 50). Zimdars further suggests that the fat ambiguity (meaning programs that do not explicitly categorize fat as either good or bad) offered by such representations is less oppressive and more complex than other narratives involving fatness. While the concept of fat ambiguity, the ways Zimdars uses it, is used to identify programs that do not encourage either weight-loss or fat-positivity, I believe that my use of the term sticky evokes fat ambiguity in the sense that all three sites of analysis involve weight loss narratives but in increasingly ambivalent ways. As such, I apply the term sticky to programs that do engage in both weight-loss and fat-positivity, and that are not explicitly fat-positive.

Chapter 1, *Framing fatness on reality television*, provides an overview of existing literature on reality television to provide context for this shift in mainstream media towards fat ambiguity. Building on this, this chapter details the methodological approach I took in studying three sites of analysis. Before beginning my analysis, in Chapter 2, *Constructing the “obesity epidemic” and navigating tensions*, I provide historical and contemporary context of the pathologization of fatness as a life-threatening disease. This background information is critical to identifying and exploring in-depth the nuances and complexities of contemporary representations of fatness. In this chapter, I also address how these complexities are approached within fat studies and queer feminist cultural studies and locate my research within ongoing debates in these disciplines.

The following three chapters present my sites of analysis chronologically to locate these texts along a timeline of shifting sociocultural attitudes to show how reality television shows involving fat people have become increasingly stickier over time. Chapter 3, *Who’s to blame? Contradicting narratives and shifting approaches to superfat people and weight loss*, discusses the ways in which *My 600-lb Life* frames superfat bodies as abject spectacles in need of intervention. In conducting a close reading of this program, I argue that the contradictory reality of weight loss surgeries, discussions of

structural determinants of health, and the ways in which this program evokes trauma porn, evokes a realism and pathos that is central to many fat people's lived experiences. Considering this, there are moments in viewing this program where fat sympathy and fat ambiguity are possible, indicating a shift towards reimagining how fat people and their bodies should be treated. In Chapter 4, *Fat yet fabulous: Identifying body positive archetypes*, I use *My Big Fat Fabulous Life* as a site of analysis to address how reality television has drawn from increasingly popular body positive movements. In this chapter, I argue that the body positive archetypes used in producing a series about the life of a superfat person simultaneously destabilize and reaffirm dominant "obesity" discourses. The third site of analysis, *Hot and Heavy*, is discussed in Chapter 5, *"The bigger, the better": Loving superfat people*. In this chapter, I argue that positioning superfat women as desirable romantic and sexual partners situates them as the "beautiful abject", or "a new form of popular abjection made pleasurable as abject spectacle" (Cho, 2019, p. 45). Focusing on the pleasures derived from fatness is what makes this text inherently sticky, as it acknowledges dominant "obesity" discourse while exploring fat presents and possible futures. In organizing this chapter according to the themes of the program, namely the politics of mixed-weight couples and distribution of social capital, the fetishization of fatness, explorations of fat sadness, and contradictory approaches to fat fertility and reproduction, I conclude that reality television as a genre continues to move towards fat ambiguity as a lens with which fat participants can be framed. To situate these sites of analysis and illustrate this argument, I draw from the following theoretical frameworks.

# Chapter 1.

## Framing fatness on reality television

To locate this shift towards fat ambiguity within the genre of reality television, it is important to first establish how representations of fatness have been traditionally approached and understood by scholars. Much of the existing research has focused on how fat bodies have been disciplined according to dominant “obesity” logic within the context subgenres such as competitive, voyeuristic and lifestyle programming. However, the popularization of body positive and fat liberationist movements has influenced the demand for such programming and has contributed to the production of programs that approach fatness in increasingly ambiguous ways. I use Foucauldian theories of governmentality (1991) and surveillance (1988) as well as the abnormal (1999) to situate contemporary representations of fatness within the context these two competing discourses, namely “obesity” rhetoric and body positivity. More specifically, I utilize Foucault’s concepts of discipline and biopolitics to identify the ways “obesity” discourse and fat stigma is reinforced in these media texts. Simultaneously, I draw from Foucault’s lectures on the abnormal as well as feminist media studies’ interests in the affective and pleasurable qualities of media texts (particularly those engaging with abject bodies), to situate my responses to these programs and to identify moments that both reinforce and challenge “obesity” discourse. These two theoretical approaches complement each other within this analysis considering, as Foucault (1987) argues, where there is power there is also resistance. Furthermore, Abu-Lughod (2002) argues, “one cannot simply analyze the overt messages of the plot and character, just as one should not limit oneself to the study of reception” (p. 117). The cultural context of the “obesity epidemic” is significant in that it informs my own understanding of these programs, as well as dominant readings of these texts, as consumers of media “draw upon wider situated knowledge(s) and interpretations of health and obesity in their viewings” (Raisborough, 2016, p. 93). Viewers with vested interests in fat liberation do not exist outside of these influences, institutions, and dominant ideologies. As will be explored throughout the following chapters, reality television programs that engage with body positive discourse also navigate similar conflicting territories. I reflect on my affective responses as a fat viewer to help identify the stickiness of these texts and draw connections across polarizing perspectives (Ahmed, 2010; Kyrölä, 2014).

Much of the literature on reality television draw from the work of Foucault to identify the governmentality and surveillance aspects of the genre, particularly within a neoliberal context (Andrejevic, 2004; Couldry, 2009; Dovey, 2000; McMurria, 2008; Ouellette and Hay, 2008; Roberts, 2007; Sender, 2006). Foucault (1991) defines governmentality as efforts to guide the behaviours and choices of individuals in ways that are conducive to the welfare of a population and uses the concept of surveillance to illustrate how these efforts are enacted on behalf of authority figures and institutions (Foucault, 1988; 2007). The concept of the panopticon is used by Foucault (1979; 1988) to illustrate how surveillance constructs “a state of conscious and permanent visibility that assures the automatic functioning of power” (p. 201); it does so by producing “docile bodies” through the internalization and individualization of disciplinary measures emphasized by the state. In essence, docile bodies are those who obey regimens or engage with techniques enforced through mechanisms of power, and “behave as if they are always under surveillance, since they can never know whether or not they are being scrutinized” (Dubrofsky and Magnet, 2015, p. 2). This emphasis is reflected in reality television programs that emphasize viewers’ responsibility to monitor, regulate, govern, and care for themselves without support from public institutions. Drawing largely from Foucault’s framing of the discursive elements of power, reality television literature has analyzed extensively how the governing potential of the genre reaffirms that “the judges of normality are present everywhere” (Foucault, 1978, p. 304). This includes how the judgments of experts cast as authoritative figures on reality television shows seemingly decide the fate of participants (Couldry, 2009), as well as the reflexive capacity of audiences to judge both reality television participants as well as themselves by embodying disciplinary practices (Sender, 2012). Due to the large social reach of reality television, Ouellette and Hay (2008b) argue that the industry has exceeded all other attempts at government reform in neoliberal times, and so is the “quintessential technology of citizenship of our age” due to its emphasis on governing “through freedom, not control” (p. 472). These aspects of surveillance and governance have positioned the concept of citizenship and its related topics as one of the largest themes in reality television studies, with immense focus on self-improvement discourses that reflect existing power structures and social inequities (Deller, 2019).

In his work *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, Foucault (1979) argues that disciplinary methods are enacted to control the body in ways that maximize

its usefulness for specific goals. Many reality television scholars have argued that the genre operates as part of this political anatomy composed of various institutions or other forms of authority (Ouellette and Hay, 2008a). For example, the subgenres of makeover reality television (Pozner, 2010), home renovation television (Deery, 2012), or talk shows (Gamson, 1988), all engage participants in ways that emphasize participants' failures to achieve hegemonic ideals, which is usually followed by an evaluation from an expert or authority figure and/or an intervention of some kind.

As both the phenomenon of the "obesity epidemic" and reality television emphasize the importance of biocitizenship (Halse, 2009), such interventions are explicit on weight-loss programming where there is clear identification of a "problem" as well as its "solutions". Building upon Foucault's concept of biopower, biocitizenship manifests in disciplinary practices, or biopedagogies (Rail & Lafrance, 2009) which are "the loose collection of moralized information, advice, and instruction about bodies, minds, and health that works to control people by using praise and shame alongside 'expert knowledge' to urge conformity to physical and mental norms" (Rice et al., 2016, pp. 4-5). In *The Care of the Self*, Foucault identifies how medical science is upheld in western societies as the most credible authority on health and lifestyles. To decrease dependence on the state, this expertise is disseminated through a framework involving various institutions in ways that inform subjects of particular health practices which they are then encouraged to undertake. Furthermore, a plague, or epidemic (such as "obesity"), requires power to be "exercised to the full" (Foucault, 1999, p. 47). In this sense, the body is "a fragile entity in relation to its surroundings" (Foucault, 1988, p. 101). As such, the care of the self involves viewing the body as vulnerable to disease and in need of constant attention. This anxiety which has been emphasized and exploited by reality television, most commonly on weight-loss programming where participants serve as examples of how biocitizens should respond to increasing anxiety about the "obesity" epidemic by disciplining themselves oneself in ways that are believed to be conducive to the collective good, including achieving and maintaining a normative weight in accordance with the Body Mass Index (BMI). Those who fail to stay within the boundaries of a "normal" or "healthy" BMI are often chastised as bad citizens and are subsequently denied various social and economic privileges that are extended to those within the parameters of "normal" or "healthy" weight categories (Halse, 2009). In this

sense, reality television shows focused on weight-loss serve as a form of public pedagogy within broader discussions regarding “obesity” (Rich, 2011).

In many subgenres of reality television, various resources (such as experts, community organizations, and corporate partners, but also family members, community groups, and social circles) are mobilized to identify and fix a problem, or multiple problems, with the participant’s lifestyle and/or body. As Ouellette & Hay (2008b) argue, “the political rationality of the life intervention is to enact the reasoning that people who are floundering can and must be taught to develop and maximize their capacities for normalcy, happiness, material stability, and success rather than rely on a public ‘safety net’” (p. 476). Palmer (2011) identifies this “floundering” as the result of such an anxiety industry, arguing that reality television provides “temporary solutions to problems of identity and belonging” (p. 65). Foucault (1988) argues that the care of the self is “an intensification of social relations”, meaning that discourses regarding what constitutes a viable body or lifestyle are both reflective of and entangled with the sociopolitical context in which the subject resides. The ability of a subject to achieve these expectations is largely determined by structural determinants of health, however, these behaviours are depoliticized within a neoliberal context, positioning those who do not achieve these standards as failures and, therefore, generating anxiety within those who are unable to overcome their oppressive circumstances on their own.

Drawing from Foucault’s concepts of biopower and governmentality, where power is pervasive and decentred (Coudry, 2009), reality television scholars have examined at-length how the industry mobilizes technologies of the self to enforce neoliberal conceptions of citizenship and civic responsibilities by maintaining normative expectations of what is acceptable, meaningful, and pleasurable. The disciplinary practices needed to achieve these norms act as a tool of the governmentality framework, through which media emphasizes the use of everyday techniques, products or services that citizens can engage in, sometimes even as a necessary step to exercising citizenship rights such as access to health care or property rights (Ouellette & Hay, 2008; Roberts, 2007). Reality television does this in part by constructing these disciplinary practices as normative behaviours, and in part by exposing those who fail to embody or enact these ideals. In this sense, reality television participants act as model neoliberal citizens who respond to this call for individual responsibility and treat their bodies as entrepreneurial sites, additionally serving as an example to audiences on how,

or how not to, behave (McMurria, 2008). In depoliticizing bodies by concealing structural determinants of health, there is a powerful enforcement of neoliberal conceptions, including citizenship and civic responsibility. It is here where one is believed to achieve or maintain normative expectations of what is an acceptable body (Raisborough, 2016).

According to Foucault (1988), guidance for practicing care of the self is sought out from authority figures who may or may not have credentials or expertise, but who are forthcoming and have some sort of good reputation. This is reflected in the types of “experts” cast on reality television, who may or may not be professionally trained or well-versed in a particular subject matter, but still carry an air of authority, whether that be based on their career or simply a blind sense of trustworthiness. Often, these experts are positioned as heroes who provide support for reality television participants and viewers in achieving normative body and lifestyle standards (McMurria, 2008). The step-by-step instructional nature of these interactions inform the viewer on how they, too, can engage with grooming products, clothing, and food to move up in social class, in addition to how they can better contribute to their communities and manage their homes, while typically overlooking the impact of structural forms of injustice such as racial discrimination or poverty that may be contributing factors to one’s circumstances. Governance through media and employing technologies of the self is considerably more obvious in competitive or transformative reality television shows such as *The Biggest Loser* or *My 600lb Life* where there are clearly defined problems, solutions, and goals put in place by the expert interventionist. This enacts the responsibility of reality television “to resolve the dilemma of citizens who do not make the ‘right’ choices when assigned the rational responsibility of their own governance and self-care” (Ouellette & Hay, 2008, p. 87). In these shows, there is an emphasized reward for those who achieve these goals, particularly the psychological and physical privileges extended from the show’s experts to those who achieve and maintain normative body standards. Other programs, such as *My Big Fat Fabulous Life* and *Hot and Heavy*, offer a more nuanced or complex approach towards achieving a “better” lifestyle or “better” body, by engaging less frequently with experts and more implicitly defining what a ‘desirable’ body is and/or how to objectively achieve it. This nuance offers a messy web of contradictions and possibilities for fat viewers who, like the show’s participants, exist in fat bodies during a particular cultural moment in which fat stigma reigns and who may struggle with competing discourses surrounding topics such as “obesity” or self-love.

Reality television participants are often subjected to disciplinary measures enforced by an authoritative figure, however, as briefly described above, one of the functions of reality television as a site of public pedagogy is to simultaneously encourage self-discipline and self-surveillance within the viewer (Ouellette and Hay, 2008a). While reality television cannot necessarily be attributed with complete responsibility for the production of docile bodies, its programs contribute to the overall surveillant assemblage (Haggerty and Ericson, 2006; Puar, 2007) or “white supremacist capitalist heteropatriarchal surveillance” (Dubrofsky and Magnet, 2015, p. 7) that its viewers are subjected to. This instruction also happens in more covert or nuanced ways, such as through broadcasting conversations between fat people and other individuals about subjects such as body size, health, weight loss, and instances of discrimination because of one’s size, that may still incite anxiety within the audience about issues such as self-discipline and other pressures related to biocitizenship behaviours. Ultimately, “the final goal of all the practices of the self still belongs to an ethics of control” (Foucault, 1988, p. 65), in that the subject must also be their own master. In this regard, reality television circulates ideologies with a panoptic effect insofar as the bodies of both participants as well as viewers remain positioned as a project in constant need of attention and discipline.

Representations on reality television are significant because this genre frames participants “according to the ‘realist’ codes that have become standard in many television docusoaps, an aesthetic that uses direct-cinema-style shooting and editing techniques: talking head interviews; direct sound, sometimes requiring subtitles; location shots of private residential exteriors and public gathering places” (Heller, 2014, p. 126). These filming techniques insinuate to the viewer that what they are seeing is “raw, unmediated authenticity” (Heller, 2014, p. 132). The cultural status of reality television as simply reflecting or mirroring ‘reality’ to audiences incites concerns about how these representations are received, and the consequences of these assumptions on the lived realities of marginalized communities (Bunton, 2012). Overall reactions to reality television are changing, with many contributing factors such as the economic potentials of diversity and popularization of body positivity, constructing an environment in which viewers are exposed to more images and information, and in turn can become more informed, critical, and even afforded opportunities to speak out. However, as media literacy skills become more common in the general public and production practices

become more transparent, it does not seem to matter whether a reality television show is considered to use “raw and unmediated” material, or not; audiences consider both unedited footage and scripted material to be real when a program is categorized as reality television (Gonzalez, 2014). Furthermore, by focusing more on some populations over others, reality television contributes to the hypervisibility of disenfranchised bodies and the invisibility of normative bodies within this assemblage. The impact of positioning specific bodies as hypervisible emphasizes the differences or abject nature of such bodies, while those that are invisible or missing from these texts remain unquestioned or serve as a norm from which the visible deviate (Jiwani, 2006). Indeed, Foucault (1979) argues that it is a normalizing gaze from which a person is identified and judged: “in all the mechanisms of discipline, the examination is highly ritualized. In it are combined the ceremony of power and the form of the experiment, the deployment of force and the establishment of truth” (p. 184). The ritual of examining and judging bodies is a forthright component of reality television; many state that this capacity is the reason why they watch reality television in the first place (Feuer, 2018; Gorton, 2009; Skeggs and Wood, 2012). This can have significant consequences for disenfranchised and marginalized groups who are highly represented within this genre, including generating support for subjecting these groups to increased surveillance and enforcement of disciplinary measures.

Fat people, particularly super fat people, are hypervisible for two reasons: the size of their bodies, as well as the frequency with which they are cast on reality television programs. A key component of Foucault’s definition of discipline is the creation of an environment in which the bodies that fail to engage with disciplinary methods are identifiable and subsequently vulnerable to punishment for their deviancy (Foucault, 1979). Considering the increase in weight and body size among people in North America over the last few decades, as well as reality television’s primary focus on ordinary people, fat people are disproportionately cast and subjected to discipline on screen. This high representation of superfat and infinifat people provides multiple sites where fat people are positioned for examination, surveillance, and judgment due to their perceived failures (Foucault, 1979), which strengthens “obesity” or anti-fat discourse by providing numerous opportunities to judge fat people and reaffirm the supposed harms of “obesity”. This reveals how fat stigma and reality television can inform one another,

illustrating how systems of oppression and discrimination are embedded at an institutional level (Raisborough, 2014).

As Dubrofsky and Magnet (2015) argue, reality television amplifies the influence of surveillance by insisting that it is an authentic documentation of the “real”. For example, assumedly unedited surveillance footage of a reality television participant performing a particular behaviour, such as a fat person eating fast food, is inscribed with a sense of truth and laden with implicit biases based on and perpetuated by many factors. As will be discussed in the next chapter, there are numerous opportunities for fat stigma to be reinforced by the surveillance techniques reality television production requires due to the intersections of fat stigma with other issues, such as racism, classism, and misogyny; fatness is present and often emphasized within media representations of people of colour, the lower classes, and women to validate stereotypes about these groups. And yet, reality television also provides opportunities to complicate or challenge these “truths”. Indeed, Foucault (1994) identifies how “techniques of identification, classification, and intervention applied to abnormals; the setting-up of a complex institutional network that, within the limits of medicine and justice, serves as a ‘reception’ structure for abnormals and an instrument for society’s defense” (p. 55). Much of the work on reality television focuses on the disciplining of abnormal bodies that occurs within the genre. While chapter two of this dissertation explores the pathologization of fatness as an abnormal, diseased body, illustrating how the “obesity epidemic” situates the fat body as an example of Foucault’s abnormal, like Dovey (2000) and others who look at reality television as a site of (sometimes compromised) resistance, I draw from queer theories and concepts to conduct an analysis of the generative potential of the “abnormal”.

Dovey (2000) argues that focusing predominantly on the political and economic context of reality television production fails to address the subjectivities of the audience, particularly the compulsions and pleasures that drive audiences’ attention to reality TV. Dovey (2000) argues that particular historical junctures and socially located subjectivities inform how audiences are approached and understood. Indeed, Foucault (1979) argues that opportunities of resistance naturally occur within systems of power. Foucault pushes back on the idea that marginalized bodies are completely repressed by societal structures and insists they are not as vulnerable, “ignorant”, or “blind” as this understanding of normativity suggests. Rather, Foucault (1979) argues that because

inequality is an essential element of power, there is counter-power to be found amongst marginalized groups who are subjected to structural inequities. In *Discipline and Punish* (1979), Foucault argues that non-normative bodies can bond together over their experiences of marginalization and resist their subjugation under the “power of normalization” that effectively exerts control over abnormal people, including using similar methods or tools with which they have been oppressed. Furthermore, Foucault (1971) suggests that both bodies and pleasures are useful for achieving counter-power. This counter-power can be seen in affective moments within contemporary representations of fatness. For example, fat people eating for pleasure, seeking sexual and romantic partners, or refusing to engage in weight-loss programs, are weaponizing the same objects or tools that have been used or denied to them to discipline their bodies. Indeed, these sites of analysis are produced specifically to highlight the new fat subjectivities that are formed by practicing an aesthetics of the self (Foucault, 1984), which is composed of the behaviours fat people, both on and off screen, may employ to reject disciplinary practices and other attempts to construct their bodies as the “other”.

Foucault (1977) argues that challenging systems of power is possible when the knowledge and experiences of those categorized as the “other” are acknowledged and used as tools of resistance. While normalization has constructed an oppressive understanding of who is a “good” or “viable” person, social norms are potentially destabilized when individuals engage with “bad” behaviours. These “bad” behaviours are given power when the negative impacts of normative behaviours are exposed. For example, “obesity” discourse has and is questioned and destabilized by the work of body positive activists and fat liberationists who argue that intuitive eating is a much healthier approach to food than restrictive diets (Bacon, 2010). However, Foucault (1977) further argues that transgression of normative values or systems of power risks reinventing power structures. This is reflected in the body positive movement, which provides a limited expansion of beauty and size ideals, often expanding parameters of inclusion only so far as there is still a number of bodies who remain excluded. For example, while rejecting the pathologization of fatness as a disease, body positivity often utilizes healthist discourse (i.e. the idea that one can be fat and healthy), which maintains health as a moral imperative and marginalizes those who are not able and/or interested in achieving normative health standards. As Hennefeld and Sammond (2019) argue, attempts to reclaim, or redefine abject characteristics, or critique normative ideologies,

“though crucial, inevitably reach a political impasse in their attempts to subvert the effects of abjection, producing a model of sovereignty that clothes the normative sovereign subject with the markers of exceptional identity” (p. 15). The stickiness of the sites of analysis in this dissertation reflect how understandings of fatness are ever evolving and are becoming integrated in increasingly complex ways. Contemporary reality television thus involves nuanced representations of fatness that both challenge previous understandings of the body while contending with contemporary discourses that still reflect similarly oppressive values.

Abnormal bodies have been a primary focus of reality television since its inception, the majority of which has centered on exploiting these abnormalities to satisfy the voyeuristic curiosities of audiences (Deery, 2015). However, reality television has also focused on abnormal bodies that outwardly reject discipline and/or revel in their abnormal qualities. In *The History of Sexuality*, Foucault (1978) argues that abnormal bodies and the transgressive positions they hold in society are significant. In some ways, representations of superfat people on reality television are an example of this threat to policing, surveillance, and attempts to discipline the body. The superfat body itself is category busting: it is feminine and masculine, Black and white, healthy and unhealthy, rich and poor, pleasurable and sad. Understanding the transgressive potential of superfat bodies challenges the surveillance and governmentality readings of the programs that dominate reality television literature, and instead allows us to see opportunities of leakiness and resistance.

A queer reading of these programs challenges a governing and surveillant reading of reality television and is useful for identifying where power can be derived in the abnormal. Queer theory, particularly discourse on the queer politics of failure (Halberstam, 2011), provides a framework for analyzing the messiness and contradictions within these programs that challenge normative understandings of fatness. Halberstam (2011) identifies queer failure as instances of counter-power that challenge heteronormative, patriarchal and capitalist ideologies. In this work, Halberstam (2011) suggests that sites of resistance can be revealed in counterintuitive ways. Building from this perspective, fatness is a strong example of queer failure, particularly for women-identified folks, as larger bodies that have been categorized as female violate hegemonic gender norms rooted in patriarchal and heteronormative values and are therefore subjected to more intense policing. For example, fat bodies reject the

heteronormative gaze, and thus force fat people into new modes of existence. Much of the research on fat people have explored how this is a painful rejection, however, using an intersectional framework in this dissertation allows for an exploration of how the queer qualities of fat align with fat liberationist efforts as well as broader social justice goals, including challenging white supremacy and patriarchal systems of power. As Crawford (2017) argues, “*how we choose to see ambiguous flashes of agency within capitalism matters*” (p. 463). Lupton (2018) writes of the relationship of queer and fat:

‘Queer’ is now often defined more expansively as referring to all individuals or social groups who challenge normativity. In such analyses, to ‘queer’ a topic such as fat embodiment is to challenge dominant, taken-for-granted meanings around that topic and identify the power relations inherent within and perpetuated by these meanings, particularly those which seek to categorize some groups as ‘normal’ and others as ‘deviant.’ (p. 24)

Queer failure is also useful in situating representations of fat people who fail to lose weight through methods such as weight-loss surgery or other methods upheld as viable options for weight loss (Boero, 2012). As well, queer temporality, which situates the body as an ever-changing site (Halberstam, 2005), contextualizes the visual journey many of the participants in these sites of analysis take towards embracing a body positive perspective towards themselves and/or others. The opportunity that queer theory affords to this research is an exploration of the complexities and messy contradictions within contemporary reality television programs focused on fatness, rather than to simply understand such programs as only satisfying the surveillant and/or governing function of the genre.

It is important to note that this queer reading is not the same as necropolitics (Berlant, 2007; Mbembe, 2003). The concept of necropolitics is a radical critical race theory grounded in Foucault’s concept of biopower and the “subjugation of bodies” (1984, p. 140). Necropolitics identifies intersectional categories, such as gender, sexuality, race, disability, and class, to identify bodies that are allowed to live, those which are disposable, and others that exist in “death-worlds” where they are suspended between life and death (Mbembe, 2003). Bodies located in white, heteronormative, patriarchal and cisgender categories are given permission to live and afforded privileges to do so, whereas those which deviate from these categories are marked as disposable and/or confined to a death-world in which their lives are not invested in. Puar (2007) expands the concept of necropolitics to define a queer necropolitics in which there are

identifiable permissible exceptions to white, heteronormative, patriarchal and cisgender ideologies. For example, white queer people are extended more of a right to live compared to queer people of colour, due to their distancing from multiple marginalized identities. From this perspective, queer necropolitics is applicable to my identification and discussion of body positive archetypes and permissible forms of fatness within contemporary reality television programming, particularly through negotiations of understanding fat as an abject characteristic. Fat ambivalence is not the same as necropolitics; while “obesity” discourse does mark fat people for death, fat ambivalence involves troubling this narrative.

Representations of fat ambivalence include framing how fat people *live* and how the materiality of their bodies and existence creates and informs new fat subjectivities that exist outside of the death-world assigned to fat people. Berlant names fat as a “slow death” where higher weights physically represent the oppressive impact of capitalism. Berlant (2011), argues that fatness is a trauma response, where trauma results in over-eating, leading to weight gain. This perspective does not negate the positioning of fat as a bad or undesirable physical characteristic. Rather, it is viewed as an unfortunate by-product of horrible circumstances. Crawford (2017) argues that fat bodies are more often attributed causality and linear temporalities than non-fat bodies; “fat must be regarded as primarily a *result*, rather than a state of being or becoming with phenomenological characteristics that are not wholly self-evident” (p. 453). Furthermore, Berlant (2011) categorizes fatness and eating as a form of “lateral agency” in which the fat individual maintains or expands one’s large size in order to threaten one’s presence in the current moment and also write oneself out of the future, as a larger body threatens the vitality of one’s life. Over-eating and emotional eating are examples that Berlant provides to exemplify cruel optimism, where people engage in over-eating because it feels good in the moment, even if they know that doing so threatens their future. This supports an understanding of fat as a liminal identity, one that is a consequence of something requiring interrogation and mitigation, or as Yingling (2016) writes, “for fat people, to realize themselves is to defer and evolve from their flesh” (p. 28). This approach to representations of fatness dominates much of media studies scholarship in both reality television studies and fat studies, which identify how fatness is presented as an invalid form of embodiment. Crawford (2017) pushes back on this understanding, critiquing

Berlant's use of fatness by identifying how non-fat bodies could be similarly approached and understood:

Might not an eater with strict discipline and routine have made an equally or even more appropriate avatar of this temporality? When all bodies are archives that do not just remember their pasts but are built of these pasts, why are fat bodies given nearly mythical powers to signify traumatic experience? What dissimulated archives of eating, trauma, and construction lie behind the privileged position of the slender-normative body that is interpreted as inhabiting the present, unfettered by history? (p. 454)

Aligned with Crawford's perspectives, I draw from and challenge understandings of fatness by reflecting on how participants and their bodies struggle as well as survive in their stickiness, a perspective that has been granted to other positionalities such as queer sexualities, but not in the same degree to fatness. Useful to this perspective is considering how scholarly work has approached the concept of abjection.

Abjection theory has traditionally been conceptualized as characteristics that are a threat to life. From a sociological perspective, Bataille (1934; 1993) considers the abject to be the parts of society that must be expelled in order to align with dominant ideologies. In this sense, abject applies to marginalized groups, such as poor people, people of colour, and/or fat people. From a psychoanalytic perspective, Kristeva (1982) defines abjection as a disciplinary process of self-formation in which something is 'cast out' or removed from the body to reaffirm the self. Abjection is something that is inflicted on people in both approaches, and it can be identified in most reality television formats concerned with fatness. For example, weight-loss and makeover subgenres approach fatness as an abject characteristic that threatens the vitality of one's life, and, therefore, must be targeted and removed through methods ranging from changing one's clothing, to vigorous exercise, to removing it surgically. Jones (2010) identifies such use of abjection in an analysis of one season of *The Biggest Loser*, which aptly visualizes this definition of abjection by associating fatness with undesirable citizenship. In this season, one participant was chosen to represent each state, pledge their allegiance to both their community as well as weight loss, and then removed from their home and isolated within the production house to undergo significant transformation in the form of significant weight loss. The idea of this approach was that the participant would be reintroduced into their home state once they had shed the body fat that positioned them as an abject, or undesirable citizen. The show *My 600lb Life* is a similar example of this

conceptualization of fatness as abject, as its premise revolves around weight-loss surgeries and significantly reducing the size of super fat peoples' bodies. However, as a sticky text, the failure of some of its participants to lose weight lends itself to another competing conceptualization of abjection.

While abjection positions fat people as occupying unviable bodies, abjection can also be intentionally taken up by individuals or groups as a tool to feel "secure in its own sense of self" (Hennefeld & Sammond, 2019, p. 4). Abjection can be used by anyone regardless of politics to situate themselves in relation to mainstream values or hegemonic identities; it "has become central to the negotiation of social identity – both in one's difference from the Other and in one's estrangement from the self" (Hennefeld & Sammond, 2019, p. 3). While Hennefeld and Sammond (2019) identify such use of abjection within the alt-right, particularly white nationalists and men's rights activists, it can also apply to fat people who embrace the abject categorization of their fatness. In both instances, the subject weaponizes abjection as a political tool to generate security or social capital. Unlike the alt-right who appropriate abjection to incorrectly locate themselves alongside legitimately marginalized groups, fat people's reverence in their abjection has the potential to reclaim power and capital that has been taken from them.

However, as Tyler (2013) argues, weaponizing abjection as a political tool can lead to further ostracization or punishment. Hennefeld and Sammond (2019) argue that the abject is "legible only through its objects and practices" (p. 7); as the sites of analysis in this dissertation progress from one to the other – from medical approaches to fatness, to (limited) body positivity, to more fat positive rhetoric – it becomes visible how representations of fatness become stickier as social values and dominant understandings about bodies, neoliberal ideologies, and concepts such as health, happiness, and self-love, are confronted, rub against one another, and shift. In this sense, "the abject may be summoned and deployed as an *objection* – a means of preemptively producing exceptional difference to undermine the stability of normative discourse" (Hennefeld & Sammond, 2019, p. 19). Hennefeld and Sammond (2019) contend that this is because there is political value in the current cultural moment in naming the ways in which one has been oppressed. Similarly, I ask, what does abjection offer fat people? Instead of turning away from or resisting one's abjection, many of the participants in these sites of analysis turn towards it or make choices because of it. For

example, may participants oscillate between accepting their abject body and actively trying to expel their fatness. Or, particularly in *My Big Fat Fabulous Life* and *Hot and Heavy*, some participants are depicted as engaging with their fatness, or that of their loved ones, as something they live *with*, not something they want to live *without*.

From these perspectives, the abject nature or ugliness of one's body is something that holds immense power, and even sometimes rewards. Przybylo and Rodrigues (2018) argue that "ugliness or unsightliness is much more than a quality or property of an individual's appearance... it has long functioned as a social category that demarcates access to social, cultural, and political spaces and capital" (p. 1). Snider (2018) suggests that ugliness has political potential because "how ugliness is implemented in visual representations can work to decentralize health as a core concept upon which we base our understandings of the relationship between embodiment and morality associated with fatness and disability in contemporary Western culture" (Snider, 2018, p. 338). Indeed, "ugly feelings" are suspended between the aesthetic and the political (Ngai, 2004). Snider (2018) identifies a problematic preoccupation within fat activism, being an aim to expand beauty norms to include fat people. The issue here, Snider (2018) argues, is that ideologies of beauty will always leave some bodies out. Instead, Snider (2018) suggests that embracing ugliness is essential to the messy work that deconstructing oppressive societal ideals involves, particularly ideals that impact fat bodies, but also those that are disabled, racialized, older, and/or queer.

These ugly bodies appear in popular culture in ways that expose how the dominance of healthism places a proverbial glass ceiling that limits how counter-hegemonic opinions about body size can transcend dominant paradigms of fatness and viability. Snider (2018) argues that ugliness is identifiable in "numerous shapes and guises" (p. 346), and Bakhtin's (1994) discussion of the medieval carnival and concept of the grotesque are useful in understanding what specific characteristics of fatness position such an embodiment as ugly or excessive within the context of reality television. The carnival is a folk activity that involves the mass public, similar to how the framing of reality television as "trash TV" stems from its preoccupation with the lower classes and other marginalized groups (both in terms of the high representation of these populations, as well as assumptions as to who composes its general audience). Furthermore, Bakhtin (1994) argues that the carnival did not distinguish between actors and spectators (p. 198), much how reality television participants are selected from the public and often

framed as representative of particular social groups. In both the carnival and reality television, audiences are aware of the values and standards being presented because it reflects the values and ideologies of the society in which the viewer exists; as Bakhtin argues that “carnival is not a spectacle seen by the people; they live in it, and everyone participates because its very idea embraces all the people” (2004, p. 198). Bakhtin (1994) argues that the masses do not resist these oppressive attitudes. Rather, they embrace these attitudes. Bakhtin (1994) argues that the spectacle evokes grotesque realism focused on the body and its environment. For example, the spectacle includes exaggerated images of the body engaging in activities such as gorging or feasting. This “grotesque exaggeration of mouth, belly, and genitals affirm the physical body as open to the world, encompassing it and endlessly reproducing it and itself” (Bakhtin, 1994, p. 226). Traditional approaches to fatness on reality television often depict feasting, protrusion, or gorging, as proof of the abject nature of fat bodies. However, as previously described, these behaviours may be taken up in ways that challenge dominant discourses.

While the carnivalesque in many ways reinforced social norms through creating a spectacle of abject bodies, Bakhtin (1994) argues that degrading the body in such ways allowed for the prospect of new values to take hold, bringing the body back to nature and away from the ideals of the dominant class. Carnival was “the second life of the people, who for a time entered the utopian realm of community, freedom, equality and abundance... one might say that carnival celebrated temporary liberation from the prevailing truth and from the established order” (Bakhtin, 1994, p. 199). Carnival was a time of transformation and rebirth, but the site of transformation occurred in the cultural arena and not on the individual body. Laughter was also often evoked in folk humour to overcome fears of oppressive ideology. By existing outside of and in opposition to the official ruling class, an analysis of medieval times shows a “two-world condition” (Bakhtin, 1994, p. 197). Similarly, contemporary representations of fatness that evoke body positive discourse or are otherwise sticky in some way, challenge and destabilize dominant “obesity” discourses.

The stickiness of these representations is, in part, due to the dialectic between abjection and absurdism. The grotesque is arguably absurd in that it involves highly exaggerated behaviours. This absurdity is reflected in feasting imagery in particular, which depict the body as grotesque, broken free of any confines and elevated to a

higher, almost divine, status in their fatness. In some ways, this is an “endeavor to reverse abjection’s degrading charge into something more galvanizing – to channel onanistic compulsion into commandeering display, say, or to convert self-deprecating humor into absurdist flights of fancy” (King, 2019, p. 297). This monstration (Deleuze, 1969) transcends the signification of fatness as endemic abjection into something absurd. From this perspective, contemporary representations of fatness that directly engage with the materiality of fat bodies can be viewed as threatening dominant understandings of the body that rely on precarious and contradictory discourses. The stickiness of these representations include “a refutation of the possibilities of monstration that equally remains without signification” (King, 2019, p. 300). Viewed this way, the superfat bodies of participants from the sites of analysis used in this dissertation are misfitting and do not firmly rest among a singular category or approach to understanding fat bodies.

The intentional casting of fat people on reality television programs who are leaning into their abjection lends itself nicely to the concept of the misfit, which I use to identify many of the participants as well as the production and editing practices of these programs. Garland-Thomson (2017) argues that

fitting and misfitting denote an encounter in which two things come together in either harmony or disjunction... The problem with a misfit, then, inheres not in either of the two things but rather in their juxtaposition, the awkward attempt to fit them together. When the spatial and temporal context shifts, so does the fit, and with it meaning and consequences. (p. 592-593)

As such, the misfit both reveals the structural inequalities that mark and ostracize specific bodies, in addition to categorizing these bodies as “an ostracized and minoritized Other excluded from full cultural citizenship” (Cleary, 2016, n.p.). While Garland-Thomson’s theorization of misfitting is concerned with the material world, Cleary (2016) encourages the application of this theory to reality television by arguing that materiality and cultural representations inform one another; reality television as an industry is predicated on producing authentic stories of actual people, which are then consumed by viewers in their own lived environments.

Garland-Thomson (2017) suggests that those with “stareable bodies” on public platforms expand expectations of inclusion and contribute to human diversity by encouraging viewers to learn about other people and their differences, in turn expanding

understandings of ourselves and each other. Garland-Thomson (2009) argues that the misfit will speak back to attempts to silence or marginalize itself, particularly when there is an actively engaged audience. However, reality television programs tend to support neoliberal values of “whiteness, upward class mobility, and fulfillment of conventional gender and sexual norms” by juxtaposing “misfit” bodies against these norms (Cleary, 2016, n.p.). These bodies, while non-normative in some ways (such as being fat or living with a disability) adhere to – or strive to adhere to – these values. This contributes to the “freak value” of non-normative bodies, who are framed as seemingly out of place both in mainstream or dominant cultures, as well as alternative sites created specifically as spaces for exploring their unique experiences.

In the past, freak shows have displayed fat people as a public spectacle for a collective looking experience. These sideshows “used elaborate promotion schemes and a number of presentation strategies that crafted the freak’s public identity through imagery and symbols” (Backstrom, 2012, p. 683). Fatness is a particular spectacle that has stood independent from other non-normative identities; as Kotow (2020) illustrates, “fat people were so common in freak shows that eventually carnivals featured sideshows called ‘Congresses of Obesity,’ made up exclusively of fat people” (p. 151). Fat people have also been displayed as scientific objects of curiosity, the most famous historical example of this being Saartjie ‘Sara’ Baartman, a Khoikhoi woman who was put on display throughout Europe in the early 1800s as a veritable “ethnographic freak show” (Strings, 2019) in which her fatness was used to support scientific racism. Her large buttocks was of particular interest to both researchers as well as the public; following her death, parts of her body (particularly her genitals) were dissected and remained on display until 2002. These historical “rituals of humiliation”, such as traveling freak shows or anatomical medical displays, are not too far in the past and have been reinvented in popular culture in ways that continue to make a spectacle of fatness (Farrell 2011). For example, Bruce Snowdon, also known as Harold Huge, a man who weighed 600 pounds and who was considered the last fat sideshow, died in 2009 (Wade, 2011) – only three years before *My 600-lb Life* was created. This framing of fatness as “freakish” continues despite the decline of the traditional freakshow on moral grounds stemming from institutional and social changes (such as the advancement of the disability justice movement), as well as various developments in medicine that eradicated some of the conditions featured in freakshows (Backstrom, 2012).

Reality television has repeatedly been accused of being a modern-day freakshow (Dovey, 2000) that exploits its participants in a variety of ways. While such comparisons and criticisms are certainly valid, scholarship within disciplines such as disability studies have complicated this idea. For example, Eli Clare (2009) argues that while people attended freakshows “to have their ideas of normal and abnormal, superior and inferior, their sense of self, confirmed and strengthened (p. 86), it was the construction of the freakshow itself, and not any kind of biological or genetic truth, that established non-normative bodies as the Other. Freakshows offered an opportunity for those living within intersecting margins of society to take hold of “an exploitative situation in an exploitative world” and benefit from it (Clare, 2009, p. 94). As well, Clare (2009) identifies that freakshow performers exercised their autonomy when contributing to the construction of their freakshow act, with some taking the lead or even managing themselves independently. As Garland-Thomson (2011) has argued, freak show performers often used the freakshow as a platform to financially exploit their identity as well as reclaim their power by “gazing back” at the public. This perspective remains true today in the many examples from popular culture that force viewers to stare at abject bodies in ways that these subjects can reclaim power and control. Dovey (2000) suggests that neoliberal economies encourage reclaiming one’s “freakishness” through the creation of new opportunities for identity expression:

These spaces are filled by voices proclaiming and celebrating their own ‘freakishness’, articulating their most intimate fears and secrets, performing the ordinariness of their own extraordinary subjectivity. The performance and display of difference has become a driving force in our aspirations. We are all learning to live in the freakshow, it is our new public space (p. 4)

For example, there are many examples of fat comedians and actors who weaponize or capitalize on their fatness by drawing from “obesity” discourse in their professional work (although, it is important to note that the majority of these examples fall on the smaller end of the fat spectrum).

While the fat subject may reclaim a “freak” or “abject” status, the sense of superiority viewers may feel when looking at non-normative bodies troubles the issue of exploitation (Clare, 2009). Kotow (2020) attests that “like the freak show, these types of weight-focused media are like the proverbial train wreck – you can’t not look. But in looking, messages about fatness as grotesque, unhealthy, painful, and dirty are reinforced” (Kotow, 2020, p. 152). Clare (2015) asserts that the consideration of fat

people as freaks is a result not of their size, but of how their size is framed. Raisborough suggests “reality television as the main site where larger people are overrepresented and where confluences of health/weight are at their most normalized” (2016, p. 78). This over-representation frames such bodies as a spectacle and communicates that fat people (particularly superfat people) are more common than they actually are. It is possible that because the “obesity epidemic” has dominated public discourse about health and fatness for over two decades, the shock value and influence of its ideologies, as well as traditional reality television formats that reflect such discourses, has drastically decreased. Regardless, this framing of superfat people as a worrisome phenomenon persists across virtually all cultural industries.

Furthermore, much of “obesity” discourse and its governing potential centers around the idea that weight loss is possible. This is reflective of what Berlant (2011) refers to as “cruel optimism”, or a dedication to something that is impossible to obtain. The insidiousness of cruel optimism is not simply impossibility or fantasy, but rather what occurs in the tension of wanting an unobtainable object and how this impacts the desiring subject. Considering that the possibility of permanent weight loss is highly questionable (for example, research has shown that 95 percent of weight loss initiatives fail (Bernstein & St. John, 2009)), the power of “obesity” discourse has been significantly challenged as its contradictions become more widely known. Foucault (1979) argues that recidivism is a necessary component of the prison; industries focused on weight loss can be similarly framed because they, too, necessarily fail to achieve their goal. As such, these industries maintain their target audience of customers who are unhappy with their bodies. This failure is reaffirmed on shows such as *My 600-lb Life* as the majority of participants fail to achieve permanent substantial weight loss. However, stemming from this frustration with ‘reoffending’ the aims of diet culture and the inconsistencies of “obesity discourse”, fat people who reject weight loss initiatives and related industries are becoming more frequent and forthright in their opinions, as seen on shows such as *My Big Fat Fabulous Life* and *Hot and Heavy*, which focus on people who, instead of being remorseful for their fatness, reflect in some ways, the “mad joy that denied the punishment” (Foucault, 1979, p. 261) by outwardly rejecting cruel optimism in regards to weight loss and other sentiments grounded in fat stigma. Such media that draws from fat stigma and “obesity” discourses facilitate spaces for viewers to congregate and resist together, depending on their reading of the program and attitudes about fatness. These

sites of analysis, therefore, provide valuable insight as to the degree in which biopower remains a relevant framework for understanding the cultural status of fatness. The small increases in the visibility of non-normative bodies in recent reality television are encouraging; viewing more superfat folks, as well as people with disabilities, more people of colour, and a wider range of gender identities and queer sexualities, in media should certainly be celebrated. These changes are arguably, at least in part, due to sentiments circulating on social media in regards to how we view and criticize bodies, as well as in direct response to reality television content. As Wade (2011) suggests, changing consumption patterns through the introduction of the internet may have decreased the shock value of what was once considered “freakish” or spectacular.

Feminist theory, particularly on social capital (Bourdieu, 1986) and desirability politics (Bordo, 1993; Kyrölä, 2014; Wolf, 1991), is useful to help identify this shift. Feminist film theorists have explored how gendered subjectivities have been formed through affective engagement with media, illustrating the ways that “pleasure makes us unwittingly submit to power” (Koivunen, Kyrölä and Ryberg, 2018, p. 11). Building on these concepts, Kyrölä (2018) argues that instead of pleasure, it is discomfort, vulnerability, or anxiety that drive submission to dominant ideologies; the presence of pleasure in relation to fatness is thus significant. A large part of showing how superfat participants live in their stickiness requires drawing from established feminist concepts, such as various forms of gazing and social capital, to acknowledge that ways of looking are contextually situated cultural moments (Zimdars, 2019). Mulvey’s work (1975) explores the possible pleasures that viewing or gazing can offer subjects, while others suggest that the gaze of those consuming television is a “glance” (Ellis, 1982) or a “glaze” (Goldblatt, 2002). These overlapping modes of consuming media support “the psychoanalytic idea that the psyche is layered and thus capable of experiencing multiple affects simultaneously and without awareness of their logical contradictions... Not only does popular culture rely on these contradictory experiences, it demands them” (Feuer, 2018, p. 50). As media can possess both disciplining as well as pleasurable aspects, Kyrölä (2014) argues that positive images need to be similarly situated within a particular context to critically identify any affective possibilities; context is critical here as feelings and affects are the result of multiple actors, including historical factors, geographical locations, people, bodies, objects, and social discourses (Ahmed, 2014; Chadwick, 2021).

There has been some scholarly attention paid to instances of increased diversity on reality television. While diversifying the type of bodies cast on reality television, such as including people of colour, people with disabilities, or people from lower social classes, may be interpreted as a positive improvement, Gamson (1998) argues that this often reveals the paradox of visibility, or a superficial viewpoint on representation which simplifies the “conditions of visibility, the distortions of voice, and the restrictions on inclusion” (p. 14). Academic research focused on issues of diversity in reality television has been largely concerned with how the paradox of visibility applies to representations of gender, race, and/or class, but has yet to apply such analysis to representations of fat people. For example, the hypersexualization of the female body on reality television as synonymous with increased representations of female empowerment has been debated (Cato & Carpentier, 2010), as Banet-Weiser & Portwood-Stacer (2006) argue that the contemporary post-feminist environment inspires the creation of reality shows “where a ‘celebration’ of the body, the pleasure of transformation, and individual empowerment function as a justification for a renewed objectification of female bodies” (p. 257). The impact of increasingly diverse representations is also significant “given that racial identification is largely a visual matter and TV portrayals can influence notions of race without overt discussion” (Deery, 2015, p. 117). Both Krazewski (2009) and Bell-Jordan (2008) use *The Real World* (MTV 1992-2019) to exemplify how racial stereotypes are evoked through the casting and editing processes to highlight and sensationalize racial tensions in the United States. This exploitation occurs without explicitly acknowledging the use of these repeated and intentional production practices, which work to situate racialized urban Black people against rural, southern, conservative white people. While this research is important for understanding how stereotypes are actively embedded in media that may be superficially celebrated as a positive diversion from traditional approaches, Drew (2011) asserts that acknowledging issues such as racist production practices has had little impact on how racialized groups are represented in television. However, research also suggests that there is hope here; for example, Pullen (2004) suggests that the interactions between gay and straight housemates on *The Real World* can provide an opportunity for dialogue that may not be afforded elsewhere in the media landscape. Pullen (2004) also argues that it remains questionable whether these opportunities for dialogue or the increased presence of queer people have an impact on the lived experiences of queer people off-screen in the real world. Therefore, instances

of increased diversity, including those that are framed or received as celebratory, have been met with much hesitation from reality television scholars.

Research concerned with marginalized identities such as gender, race, and class can be used to situate much of the scholarly work on representations of fatness. Similar to Gamson (1998), Palmer (2012) has argued that reality television could be upheld as giving visibility to under-represented groups, such as fat people who are proud of their bodies, but that this visibility (especially considering the context within which visibility is granted) often highlights the “freak value” of these bodies (p. 84). However, these contradictions remain understudied as the majority of existing research on representations of fat people is situated within established frameworks concerned with surveillance and discipline. This is perhaps because of the dominance of representations of fatness within reality television formats that position the fat body as a site for transformation through punishment, social exclusion, and other harmful tactics, including scenarios where fat people are removed from their communities altogether and offering reintegration only when weight loss has occurred (Jones, 2010). Reality television programs that have a satisfactory amount of content that counters these dominant narratives, such as those discussed within this dissertation, are perhaps simply too recent to have been established as sites of analysis for researchers.

The concept of social capital is useful for understanding these diverse representations. Social capital is a fluid and complex term that refers to the resources or value attributes to a person or community because of their or its behaviours. From a sociological perspective, Bourdieu (1986) argues that social capital perpetuates social inequities by maintaining various hierarchies that reflect how well an individual is situated within their networks. For marginalized individuals, this means that the lower a person is located on a particular hierarchy (such as a class or racial hierarchy), the less social capital one would have, resulting in less social value and a poorer outcome for overall quality of life (Coleman, 1988; Putnam, 2000). There is a growing amount of research on the impact social capital may have on issues such as health, medical care, and mortality (Scheffler and Bahgat, 2011). As attitudes about fatness continue to shift or be influenced by body positive and fat liberationist discourses, social capital is beginning to be afforded to what have typically been viewed as abject bodies. Chen (2012) argues that the abject is embedded with an affective combination of pride and shame; this affective quality allows for identification or “affinity with the abjected”. In this

sense, social capital can be derived from abjection, offering new political possibilities suitable to an affective reading of these programs.

I identify through affective readings the messiness, contradictions, hesitations, discomfort, failures, and leakiness of contemporary representations of fatness. There are multiple definitions of affect and approaches to affect studies (Sharma & Tygstrup, 2015). Some scholars have argued that affect, or a physiological response, is distinct from emotion, meaning a cultural or social expression of feeling(s) (Kyrölä, 2014; Probyn, 2005). Others, such as Ahmed (2004), argue that this distinction is irrelevant in terms of understanding how people respond to particular objects; Ahmed's (2004b) approach to affectivity frames emotions as a form of capital in which affectivity is generated over time through emotional experiences. The stickiness of both these texts and my affective responses shift away from how Deleuze (1997) conceptualizes affect as the passage from one state to another and characterized by an increase or decrease in power; rather, this dissertation is concerned not just with how these sites of analysis are productive, but the messy web of approaches to fatness that often contradict one another. Drawing from Raymond Williams, Sharma & Tygstrup (2015) employ affectivity "as the delicate infrastructure regulating our propensities and modes of presence and participation in social situations" (p. 8). From this understanding, affect requires multiple approaches and theorizations while acknowledging historical foundations of power.

Similar to how Kyrölä (2014) embraces this understanding of affect, I use affect to identify "deeply felt, complex boundaries between and within the subjective and the social as well as bodies and images" (p. 18). More specifically, Mankekar (1999) argues that applying affect to analyses of media identifies how "affective economies articulate with prevailing social formations and axes of power" (p. 149). I am particularly interested in how affect locates subjective responses within sociopolitical and cultural contexts. Massumi (1987) defines affect as "a prepersonal intensity corresponding to the passage from one experiential state of the body to another and implying an augmentation or diminution in that body's capacity to act" (p. xvi). This is well-suited to the sites of analysis in this dissertation, which draw from vulnerable personal narratives to mobilize affect in ways that make visible the complexities of the fat experience, particularly the impact of fat stigma and "obesity" discourse.

The use of examples of social media discourse centered on these texts is useful in identifying the relationship between affective resonance and action, including how viewers' affective responses may inform or influence the production of reality television. Andrejevic (2004) argues that the Internet does not work along lines of reason; rather, its infrastructures rely on affective responses. This is evident in collective engagement on platforms such as Twitter, where audiences congregate to discuss reality television programs, particularly their frustrations or points of contention with specific shows that often reflect systems of oppression and broader social issues. Importantly, I am a part of a larger community of reception and my affective responses are informed by discourse on social media amongst other viewers. Therefore, drawing from social media further "thickens" (Friedman et al., 2020) my analysis as audience feedback and online interactions with reality television producers and participants are increasingly influencing production practices. These behaviours could be categorized as a form of fat activism as they demand fat-positive, meaningful, and complex representations of superfat people. Discourse on social media often evokes Ahmed's (2017) subject of the feminist killjoy; active commentators arguably fulfill the role of a voice demanding more – and better – from producers. As their own sites of analysis, online communities built around a common identity, in this instance viewers of a particular program, arguably influence the way a show is consumed. For example, Young (2012) writes that "one thing I love about watching TV these days is that I can watch it with Twitter. This takes the level of consumption to a 10 because while I am watching, I am receiving the open and honest opinions of the various people I follow" (n.p.). Gorton (2009) provides questions that would be beneficial to this research, including: "what does it mean to bond over a television programme? What is shared? The characters, the plot, the narrative? What draws us in so intensely and what are we emotionally attached to?" (p. 4). Online communities and the texts that they produce are just as important sites of analysis for research concerned with the behaviour and knowledge of audiences as those that exist in a more formal industry context (Banks, 2018).

Despite audience criticisms, particularly those generated in response to the tendency of the reality television industry to position marginalized bodies as uncivilized, unruly, and/or abject, the genre continues to resonate with audiences and to maintain its status as one of the most popular forms of entertainment (Deller, 2019). Some have theorized that this is because its characters are drawn from the same social groups as

the viewers themselves, positioning reality television programs as showcasing people who are “just like” the audience (Zimdars, 2018). This aspect of the genre makes it easier for audiences to connect with the experiences being played out on screen, emulating feminist consciousness-raising groups in that there is a sharing of “personal experiences, insights, strategies, and suggestions” (Ouellette & Hay, 2008, p. 84). The production practices used in reality television, such as first-person confessionals (Dovey, 2000) encourage an intimate yet mediated relationship between the participant and the viewer that is not readily found elsewhere. The emotional aspect of viewing reality television programming is, perhaps, what keeps its programs in high demand.

The affective components of reality television programming are, therefore, a critical and understudied aspect of this genre that has the potential to take analyses of reality television programs beyond established concerns with their governing functions. While viewers may recognize that there is a social stigma attached to watching reality television, the uses and gratifications from such viewing remain plentiful. For example, for viewers of reality television with limited social interactions, such programs may satisfy social and psychological voyeuristic and companionship needs (Papacharissi & Mendelson, 2007). Reiss and Wiltz (2004) suggest that some viewers watch reality television to elevate their sense of their own social status by perceiving themselves as superior to reality television participants. Feelings of escapism from society, social affiliation, and other components central to community-building have also been expressed by viewers (Lundy et al., 2008). The communal impacts of reality television and the potential feelings of solidarity inspired by identifying with on-screen characters may even allow viewers to relax from social pressures to be perfect (Bunton, 2012). The use of talking-head and confessional to-camera interviews maintains a reflexive element where it is possible to subvert dominant narratives, particularly through insider reflexive knowledge that may afford pleasurable opportunities for identification between participant and viewers that are “in the know” (Heller, 2014). Affect theory is useful to identify the more negative feelings associated with these representations; feeling such as anger, sadness, guilt, and disgust are some of the embodied affects of “obesity” discourse as well as the impact of historical and ongoing systems of oppression and discrimination. As Rich et al. (2011) write, on top of the influence of social values of specific disciplinary practices, bodies are inscribed with “affective, cognitive and somatically mediated meanings... including the geographies of space (occupation of

space of one's body), time (within the current obesity epidemic) and location (social location, e.g. gender)" (p. 157). However, Rich et al. (2011) expand on this argument to illustrate how the malleability of the body also lends itself to more flexible understandings of fatness and body size. Furthermore, these convoluted negotiations in cultural, social, and individual understandings of the body create an assemblage in which there are messy, contradictory, and sticky feelings. It is hard to categorize this concept as "assemblages often defy language and are felt, sensed, and they prompt uneasiness as their expression eludes explanation" (Bahra & Overboe, 2020, p. 204). But still, drawing from the theoretical frameworks of Ahmed (2004) and Skeggs (2010), Kotow (2020) suggests that it is "the affective experiences shared by fat people" that attract many of us to fat-affirming cultural sites. Indeed, "to be affected by something is to evaluate that thing. Evaluations are expressed in how bodies turn towards things" (Ahmed, 2010, p. 31). The affective dissonance produced in such sites is an example of Foucault's theorization of resistance to normative ideologies, allowing for destabilizations and questions around dominant "obesity" discourse. This is not to say that each fat person has the same experience of these texts, as affect is produced in response to something as well as based on an individual's past lived experiences, which is what renders this assemblage so complex and multifaceted.

Affect is also an important concept for producers of reality television. For example, production companies analyze the importance of affective expertise in creating a successful program. By drawing on what proves to be the most relatable, engaging and successful material on social media, reality television producers can create shows that already have a promising and engaged fan base. Production practices are also impacted by affective discourses on social media as the line between subject and producer becomes increasingly blurred as more and more participants are encouraged to turn the camera on themselves and document their own experiences. These behaviours can be identified in reality television programming, where, due to production constraints or more recently, because of the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, participants have become responsible for filming themselves, thereby deciding what to include in constructing their own narrative. This is seen on the most recent seasons of *My Big Fat Fabulous Life* and various other programs on TLC.

These affective components of reality television have been studied to an extent, although often in regard to depictions and understandings of social class. For example,

Wood and Skeggs (2010) explore the power of affect in reality television by identifying an economy of personhood, meaning that social capital is distributed according to the ability to achieve and maintain the particular neoliberal values that are presented in these programs, further arguing that “the performance of personhood has become central to both capitalism and governance” (p. 114). Tension also exists when viewers acknowledge the harmful behaviour, such as the weight-loss tactics enforced on *The Biggest Loser* or *My 600-lb Life*, but still engage with similar approaches to their own bodies. Scholars such as Sender (2012) have identified these contradictory behaviours within reflexive audiences who simultaneously criticize and internalize self-discipline discourses found in makeover reality television shows. This work contributes to this literature by focusing explicitly on tensions within affective responses to representations of fatness. Sharma and Tygstrup (2015) argue that

understanding affect, and particularly understanding the many innovative, intensified, and highly ramified ways in which contemporary networked, mediatised and interactive social and cultural life affect us, might prove an invaluable tool in eventually gaining a better insight into how subjectivity is produced nowadays - the structures of feeling we cultivate, the habits we form, in short, the deep underpinnings of ‘the way we live now’ (p. 16).

Considering that affectivity depends on the positionalities of the subject, this further underscores the emphasis in fat studies of centering the experiences and perspectives of fat people when discussing manifestations of fat stigma.

## Methodology

Feminist critical discourse analysis aims to identify how discourse, power, and social hierarchies, in relation to gender “are discursively produced, sustained, negotiated, and challenged in different contexts and communities” (Lazar, 2007, p. 142). While gender is certainly a critical component to understanding representations and discourses regarding fatness, I add the word “intersectional” (Crenshaw, 1989)<sup>4</sup> to feminist critical discourse analysis to acknowledge a contemporary understanding of feminism as being concerned with not only gender, but marginalized identities more

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<sup>4</sup> Crenshaw is often attributed with developing the concept of intersectionality. However, she has stated that her use of intersectionality draws from a history of Black feminist thought dating back to the 1850s that operated on the margins of feminist politics due to white supremacy and the erasure of Black feminist contributions.

broadly. While gender is but one component of my research, I continue to identify my research method as intersectional feminist critical discourse analysis because it remains most suitable to this work. Additionally, utilizing intersectional feminist critical discourse analysis through the lens of fatness, as discussed in depth in the next chapter, involves numerous, overlapping identity markers. Intersectional feminist critical discourse analysis is concerned with how these embedded ideologies perpetuate systems of power in ways that legitimize or incite particular social practices that maintain social inequalities (Van Dijk, 1993; Wodak & Meyer, 2009). In part, I use this methodology because of its emancipatory elements and emphasis on social justice, as my research is motivated by a concern with fat stigma and an interest in working towards fat liberation. Lazar (2007) argues that intersectional feminist critical discourse analysis aims to challenge existing power relations and hierarchies in ways that contribute to achieving “radical social transformation based on social justice that opens up unrestricted possibilities” (p. 153). I chose intersectional feminist critical discourse analysis because of its investment in the broader operations of power and justice, which supports the aims of fat studies, feminist media studies, and communications research concerned with media representations of marginalized groups.

Like the discipline of fat studies, intersectional feminist critical discourse analysis requires an interdisciplinary approach. Lazar (2007) writes that it is critical to distinguish a feminist perspective within critical discourse analysis to establish how gender acts as an overarching lens through which power and ideological structures move within. Taking from this, I use an intersectional framework (Crenshaw, 1989) while mobilizing fatness as a guiding lens, which includes assessing how fatness intersects with other marginalized positionalities such as gender, race, and class to both maintain and challenge ideological concerns about fat bodies within the context of dominant “obesity” epidemic discourse. As discussed, within this context the fat body is not only positioned below thin bodies on a hierarchy, but as such must be disciplined, surveilled, and contained for the betterment of society. To achieve this, the fat body is socially constructed within a matrix of influencing factors, such as racism, ableism, sexism and fat stigma are circulated, enacted, and resisted. An intersectional approach allows the resistant behaviours of people and social practices represented on reality television to be understood in ways that theorize both the possibilities and limitations afforded to these sites of analysis that occupy unique positionalities (Lazar, 2007). For example, this

allows for an analysis of how fat positive discourse can be taken up by reality television in ways that both benefit and detract from the fat positive movement.

Furthermore, as with many disciplines, there are many ideological differences amongst contributors to fat studies, with some scholars firmly rooted in more liberal stances, such as the Health At Every Size paradigm, while others occupy more radical positionalities. While the formal recognition of fat studies in academic contexts has occurred relatively recently, there is a rich fifty year recorded history of activism to draw from and base academic research off of (Cooper, 2010). Additionally, the foundational texts in fat studies are derived from a wide range of perspectives and work from other disciplines, including critical race studies (Shaw, 2006; Weismantel, 2005), disability studies (Davis, 2013; McRuer, 2013; Mollow, 2014; Siebers, 2008; Withers, 2012), feminist and gender studies (Bordo, 1993; Orbach, 1978; Orbach, 2009; Wolf, 1991), media studies and communications (Jones, 2010; Kent, 2001; Mosher, 2001; Palmer, 2014), history and cultural studies (Cooper, 2016; Farrell, 2011; Huff, 2001; LeBesco, 2004), sociology (Goffman, 1986; Wann, 2009) and anthropology (Bodley, 2012; Kulick & Meneley, 2005). As such, fat studies as a discipline has established that an intersectional approach (Crenshaw, 1989) is critical to derive and contextualize the fluid, complex, and overlapping elements (such as racism, classism, misogyny, and homophobia) that construct and maintain fat stigma; these influencing factors are further explored in the next chapter which identifies the historical and ongoing sociopolitical and cultural context of the “obesity epidemic.” As well, intersectionality is especially critical in working to ensure that efforts to combat fat stigma do not capitalize on other forms of oppression to advance fat liberation. Because of the significance of an intersectional framework to fat studies research in addition to the necessity of such an approach in feminist critical discourse analysis, intersectionality is a powerful theoretical framework for this work.

Mullet (2018) argues that it is the responsibility of a researcher using intersectional feminist critical discourse analysis to put forth numerous perspectives. Importantly, Foucault argues that resistance must be led by those who are most subjected to disciplinary power, as they possess subjugated or “popular knowledges” derived from their lived experiences (“Politics”, p. 223). While some thin scholars have detailed how their personal struggles with their bodies were caused by fat stigma, and, therefore, how this informs their analyses of representations of fatness (Kyrölä, 2014),

this is not the same as living as a fat person under the same oppressive conditions. Intersectional feminist critical discourse analysis allows for the use of ‘insider reflexive knowledge’ (Heller, 2014) afforded through my standpoint as the researcher conducting this work, which relies on the knowledge that I possess as a fat person working within fat politics and related forms of activism. This acknowledgment of my own standpoint avoids overlooking the “experiential and material aspects of identity and power relations” (Lazar, 2007, pp. 150-151) that exist between myself, the research, and the sites of analysis. My involvement in these communities and knowledge from personal and interpersonal experiences allows for an analysis of these programs that goes beyond a surface level reading of discourse within these texts and instead offers valuable insights into the possibilities and limitations these programs offer. Indeed, feminist critical discourse analysis requires a nuanced approach to the complexities of power and ideology embedded in discourse in overt and covert ways across a range of contexts and subjects, as opposed to traditional understandings of critical discourse analysis in which a text may be explained or interpreted without incorporating its subjective elements (Carvalho, 2008). To achieve this, feminist critical discourse analysis involves drawing from language as well as “other semiotic modalities like visual images, layouts, gestures, and sounds” (Lazar, 2007, p. 144) to enrich research findings. These elements of production are all critical to the creation of reality television programs which construct narratives and imagery to convey a particular reality, and these components can arguably be best identified by those ‘in the know’ (Heller, 2014).

I use intersectional feminist critical discourse analysis to identify affective moments in three sites of analysis: *My 600-lb Life* (TLC, 2012-present), *My Big Fat Fabulous Life* (TLC, 2015-present), and *Hot and Heavy* (TLC, 2020). Intersectional feminist critical discourse analysis applies a critical lens to media texts in ways that assess the production and maintenance of particular ideologies. This includes an analysis of dialogue in addition to context, which in the case of reality television programs includes analysis of production practices such as the choosing of images and sounds, or the intentional construction of specific narratives to tell a particular story (Mullet, 2018). Intersectional feminist critical discourse analysis is a research method that “involves questioning the role of discourse in the production and transformation of social representations of reality” (Carvalho, 2008, p. 161). It does so by situating media texts within institutional and sociocultural contexts to analyze how discourse perpetuates

the status quo (Wodak & Meyer, 2009). This includes both direct forms of communication that explicitly state the intention or meaning, and implicit expressions that can still influence the values of perceptions of those engaging with the text; such strategic expressions of discourse are evident through positioning social groups against one another in ways that imply either negative or positive associations (Van Dijk, 1993) or through the use of “latent or hidden beliefs that appear in language disguised as analogies, metaphors, or other conceptual expressions” (Mullet, 2018, p. 120). Intersectional feminist critical discourse analysis is useful to identify “the structure of social interaction manifested in conversation and interaction” (Graves and Kwan, 2012, p. 50), paying attention to both the dialogue and visuals within a text. The process of conducting intersectional feminist critical discourse analysis involves selecting the discourse as related to an injustice or social inequality (in this case, fat stigma), identifying data sources, providing historical and sociocultural contexts for these sources, coding and analysing both the external power dynamics (i.e. production practices and choices) and the internal relations (as represented in the text), to interpret the data in ways that allow for the identification of major themes and conclusions. These stages of analysis are not fixed, but instead can be moved between to establish a more critical understanding of these texts. This allows for nuance and the possibility of overlapping, contradictory findings that are perhaps more suitable for media texts that are subjectively produced and consumed.

In using affect theory to situate my responses, I aim “to map connections among affectively intense televisual moments rather than people, using such exemplary moments to stand in for the way that affective intimacies can be sparked across a range of bodies and beings at any node in the nexus” (Kavka, 2014, p. 470). To achieve this, I analyze three programs that are produced and broadcast by TLC, a popular lifestyle cable channel that has developed into “a ‘masterpiece exploitation theatre” (Phillips, 2019, p. 252). These practices and systems of power are not apolitical and affect theory supplements critical discourse analysis to consider the sticky elements as well as the ideological influences of media texts (Harvey, 2019). As this research is concerned with how the discourses regarding fatness are presented in TLC programs in ways that can reinforce and challenge fat stigma, the affective potential of discourse to “symbolically link communities together, particularly in the case of exclusionary discourses” (Harvey,

2019, p. 39) is significant and allows for an exploration of how audiences may interpret these texts.

The ongoing fascination and hyper-representation of super fat bodies requires a deep understanding of the history of fat stigma and the strong influence “obesity” rhetoric has on social discourse and cultural industries. It is critical to identify and understand social norms to situate acts of resistance; to avoid doing so leaves normative social discourses unchallenged and therefore still intact (Marling, 2010). While contemporary programs that possess elements of body positive and fat liberationist values may challenge some of this rhetoric, these programs are significantly less frequent. Their positioning within dominant narratives about fatness (especially as TLC simultaneously continues to broadcast shows that explicitly support the war on “obesity”) requires similar contextualization within broader “obesity” discourses to more fully assess its content. At the same time, intersectional feminist critical discourse analysis recognizes that while ideology can be embedded in a media text by the production practices, it is also possible that some ideological views are either implicit, covert, or absent from these texts. Building from this, intersectional feminist critical discourse analysis applies a spirit of scepticism (Carvalho, 2008) in that both the selection, composition, or absence of material reveals the discursive strategies used within the programs to frame fatness in particular ways. To be assessed within this dissertation is how the lived realities of superfat and infinifat people are (de)legitimated and/or (de)policitized within the selected texts, as these texts are produced simultaneously with the ongoing cultural war on “obesity” and subsequent reality television programs aimed at fighting fatness. Feminist critical discourse analysis is also strengthened by a comparative-synchronic analysis in which a subject is better understood through cross-referencing texts and comparing different depictions of this subject within media (Carvalho, 2008). In this sense, the sites of analysis act as “critical discourse moments” from which discussion can take place regarding the “discursive turns and/or continued lines of argumentation at particularly important times in the social construction of an issue” (Carvalho, 2008, p. 173). More specifically, the popularization of body positive movements within the context of the war on “obesity” era.

Originally titled the Appalachian Community Service Network, the network was renamed The Learning Channel during the 1990s and shifted its focus slightly to instructional and educational content (Brooks & Marsh, 2007). By the late 1990s, the

channel was more commonly known as its abbreviation TLC and had transferred most of its educational content to other channels operated by its owner, Discovery Communication, while heavily investing in the booming reality television industry. The Learning Channel (TLC) often broadcasts shows that push moral and ethical boundaries to increase the shock value of its programming. These programs arguably expand the parameters of acceptability politics by attempting to inspire conversations around fatness, as well as other identities such as disability, race and class. The numerical increase in representation of non-normative bodies is certainly accepted by many to be a step in the right direction, however, increasing the number of fat, disabled, or racialized people in the media is not necessarily synonymous with meaningful representation. If anything, the over-representation of non-normative bodies on reality television illustrates how “people with physical anomalies... are expected to account for their embodied histories to a degree that others are not” (Cleary, 2016, n.p.). Most TLC programs are focused on blurring boundaries between the ordinary and the extraordinary by focusing on everyday people with unique positionalities (Zimdars, 2018). There are many ethical debates and controversies pertaining to its shows; for example, programs focused on children, such as *Toddlers and Tiaras* draw concerns regarding consent and exploitation, while other programs, such as its numerous programs that feature people with dwarfism, inspire criticisms that liken the network to historical freak show traditions (Backstrom, 2012; Cleary, 2016). The popularity of its programs – it has an estimated 307 million international subscribers and 95 million subscribers in the United States – reveals another point of tension, being that viewers continue to consume these programs *with* the knowledge that the lives of people from marginalized groups are sensationalized and arguably exploited for entertainment purposes. However, some academics suggest that their programs disrupt normative understandings of issues such as family structures, romantic relationships, gender, and body size (Bailey, 2015; Cox, 2012; Zimdars, 2019).

Fat people are overly represented on TLC, with numerous programs focused on fatness (i.e. *Honey, We’re Killing the Kids*; *I Eat 33,000 Calories a Day*; *One Big Happy Family*; *650 Pound Virgin*; *Say Yes to the Dress: Big Bliss*; *Big Brooklyn Style*; *Curvy Brides*; *Obese and Expecting*; *Fat Chance*; *Too Fat to Transition*; *My Big Fat Fabulous Life*; *Too Hot to Handle*; *My 600-lb Life*; *Hot and Heavy*); some of which offer “a productive, body positive space for the copresence of obesity epidemic and fat

acceptance discourses” (Zimdars, 2018, p. 140). By hosting all of these shows on one network, TLC effectively “exposes the limits of individualism and its own ability to effectively govern at a distance, or transform our bodies and behaviors, while it simultaneously weaves together and creates space for alternative, competing, and copresent notions of health, fatness, and the body” (Zimdars, 2019, p. 13). As such, I have selected contemporary programs from the TLC roster that are explicitly focused on fat people as sites of analysis for this dissertation. These particular shows approach fatness outside of the predominant weight-loss narrative of extreme dieting and exercise and are observational in nature, with no competitive aspect (i.e. the stars are not in competition with any other characters). While Canada certainly has its own programming regarding fatness (such as *Weight of the World*, *Bulging Brides*, *The Last Ten Pounds Bootcamp*, *Taking it Off*, and *Village on a Diet*), I focus on mainstream American reality-based programming within a similar time period because of the popularity of this programming, the location of the roots of the “obesity” epidemic in the American lifestyle, and because the availability of TLC in both Canadian and American cable subscriptions contributes to the blurring of boundaries between national media consumption practices. The programs that I have chosen are all centered around the lives of superfat and infinifat people. I have chosen these case studies for two reasons: first, superfat and infinifat people are over-represented in reality television focused on fatness in order to exaggerate and emphasize the threats of “obesity”, and second, fat people within these categories are often left out of body positive discourses and as such are prioritized in fat positive spaces and research (Evans, 2019). Drawing from disability studies theory, I focus my research on those whose intersecting identities position them as the most marginalized.

Specifically, I have chosen *My 600-lb Life* (TLC, 2012-present), *My Big Fat Fabulous Life* (TLC, 2015-present) and *Hot and Heavy* (TLC, 2020), as sites of analysis for this research. All three of these programs are produced by TLC, which as previously described is a leading network in reality television programming. Because of the episodic format of *My 600-lb Life* in which a new participant is introduced every episode, this text is approached more broadly and the analysis focuses on the structure of each episode and common themes, using specific participants as examples. The program was originally produced as a five-part miniseries but has broadcast ten seasons to date. It is marketed as a show featuring “morbidly obese” people who would like to “save their own

lives” (TLC, n.d.) through accessing weight loss surgeries. Each episode follows one participant through the process of accessing weight loss surgery, with follow-up footage documenting events post surgery. The program both reaffirms and challenges existing “obesity” discourse by including content that echoes and problematizes neoliberal values about food, dieting, self-responsibility and the supposed success of weight loss surgeries. Importantly, the later seasons involve public health professionals other than weight-loss surgeons, such as psychologists, suggesting an evolving approach in regards to viewing and treating “obesity”. The program also produces “update” episodes, for a spinoff series titled *Where Are They Now?*, which reveal both the inconsistencies of weight loss rhetoric through the lived realities of patients featured on the show as well as affective investment in its participants. What remains to be seen is whether the affective investment in this program is more so in line with the concept of “hate-watching”, or “an anti-fan practice of taking pleasure in the failures, absurdities, absurdities, or annoying characteristics of a show or its characters” in which viewers are “predisposed to increase their enjoyment by focusing on a program’s shortcomings” (Cohen et al., 2021, p. 136). The first chapter identifies the most common approaches to fatness in reality television in which there are glimpses of opportunities for affective resonance. This chapter also lays the groundwork for subsequent analyses on more explicitly body positive programming that have been more recently produced.

The second and third sites of analysis used in this research are examples of the shift from traditional approaches to fatness as a public health “epidemic” towards more complex (and at times contradictory) body positive discourses. Both of these case studies are examples of reality television that “have ‘flown under the radar’ of critical attention because they seem the most resistant to textual, sociopolitical, and/or ideological interpretation” and instead “highlight bodies in the midst or on the verge of encounter but without any immediate payoff in the realm of signification” (Kavka, 2014, p. 462). The second chapter focuses on *My Big Fat Fabulous Life*, an ongoing TLC production with seven seasons to date. Whitney Way Thore, the star of the show, attracted the attention of TLC after a YouTube video she posted, entitled “A Fat Girl Dancing,” went viral. Building on the popularity of her YouTube video, Whitney started an online campaign called the #NoBodyShame Campaign, which aims to promote self-love and fight fat oppression. Now weighing almost four hundred pounds, the show documents Whitney’s pursuit of a professional career as a dancer in addition to her

personal growth, family dynamics, and social relationships. The show features her “one-of-a-kind family” while emphasizing that she is “just an average girl from small-town North Carolina trying to find her way in a world that judges people by their size” (TLC n.d.). *My Big Fat Fabulous Life* is often one of the highest-ranking shows during its time slot (Zimdars, 2019) and is a site of analysis well-suited for this research due to its framing as a celebration of Thore’s life as a superfat person. Drawing from Whitney’s presence on social media within this analysis further emphasizes the contradictions and stickiness at play regarding how she is framed on the show compared to how she expresses herself.

Chapter five is centered on *Hot and Heavy*, the most recent of the three sites of analysis. This program is a three-episode reality miniseries about three heterosexual, monogamous “mixed-weight couples” composed of men with normative body weights and women who are “morbidly obese.” This show is significant as superfat people are largely erased from reality television dating shows, an omission that has received criticism from the public, although usually in response to popular ongoing franchises such as *The Bachelor* (Le Vine, 2017; Rosa, 2019). Regardless, the visibility of superfat people as sexual beings capable of romantic relationships is vastly different from traditional understandings of fat people as asexual and/or undesirable (Blank, 2011; Kotow, 2020). While *Hot and Heavy* is significantly shorter in length than *My Big Fat Fabulous Life* and was canceled after one season, the length and format were not deterrent factors. Stylistically, the show is produced in the same way as the other two sites of analysis, and it is not uncommon for reality television shows to have shorter seasons with fewer episodes, or even one-off seasons as opposed to a recurring series. Additionally, the marketing of the show resembles other reality television shows on the network, such as *My Big Fat Fabulous Life*, in the sense that it engages with new fat subjectivities that exist outside of or in opposition to disciplinary practices. As will be discussed in the fifth chapter, discussions on social media about the program further reveal its sticky qualities, including the possibility that this show was not renewed due to changing social attitudes about fatness as reflected in public outcry and audience feedback on social media. An analysis of both the content on *Hot and Heavy* as well as how it was received by viewers provide valuable insights regarding the show’s affective potential.

Incorporating the affective potential of sticky reality television programs within critiques of its functions offers the possibility of a negotiated reading. A negotiated reading, as defined by Hall (1973), occurs when viewers accept only some of what is being presented to them. Hall argues that this is because communication is not a linear process, but a structure that is produced and sustained across a variety of sites and, therefore, subject to influence by specific contexts. For example, viewing fat people on reality television who have fat-positive, or even neutral, feelings towards their bodies, can encourage audience members to adopt similar viewpoints of themselves or can frustrate viewers who are invested in “obesity” rhetoric. Or, people with lived experiences of fatness may reject particular approaches to fatness, such as the positioning of fat bodies as diseased and in need of intervention, while affectively resonating with the fat participant on screen. Therefore, these sticky texts require negotiated readings due to the conflicting discourses within them and how this relates to the positionalities of the viewer.

It is impossible to accurately categorize all members of an audience as either passive or active viewers. Furthermore, attempts to theorize about audiences in reception studies are complicated by ever-changing consumption practices – from watching a program as a family unit, to watching television alone, to consuming programs through more contemporary means such as on-demand streaming services that can be used on mobile phones and computers as well as television sets. The diversity of consumption methods due to the convergence of media also complicates attempts to identify the governing potential of reality television programs; a viewer watching a program on their television set may receive media messaging very differently than someone engaging in second-screen viewing, or the more irrational patterns of a viewer who is scrolling through live Twitter feeds of other fans responses while simultaneously watching an episode of a show (Gorton, 2009). Gorton (2009) suggests that “it is perhaps most useful to think of the audience as active, but at times passive, and never completely knowable” (p. 4). Nelson (2007) argues that to study television, both textual analysis and affective dimensions must be explored; researchers must conduct “both textual analysis to bring out the qualities of television programmes and to engage in what John Corner calls ‘expanded criticism,’ That is to say the contingency of critical readings must be acknowledged through self-reflection and both texts and judgements of them should be located in the force-field of influences upon them” (p.

163). As our emotional responses are a vital part of the meaning-making process, the web of affective qualities offered by media representations of superfat people is a significant site of analysis in terms of identifying or understanding how fat people are situated within the current cultural moment. Therefore, feminist readings of mainstream media should involve locating pleasures within a text regardless of its overall goal or assumed impact. As such, I conduct negotiated readings of three programs and use my affective responses to identify how some audience members may respond, particularly those who identify as fat or who resonate with the experiences being played on screen.

Kavka (2008) argues that mediated intimacy afforded by reality television through the use of “real people” also supports the affective potential of these programs, as “viewers’ affective responses serve as proof that what plays out on screen is real while the fact that the people on screen are real justifies viewers’ affective responses” (p. 461). Building from Deleuze (1986), Kavka (2008) suggests that reality television is an excellent example of materialized affectivity. As Kavka (2008) further argues, to leave an analysis of affect and reality television as compartmentalized within the viewer would be inaccurate, as “affective forces mobilized by reality television resonate *between* participants and viewers and producers and even objects in an indeterminate space of possibility that enlivens and enlarges the formulaic mechanisms of television production” (p. 461). Furthermore, research on the governing and surveillant functions of reality television, while important, leave out the complex ways that audiences both conform to and resist such efforts; this is especially pertinent considering the growing influence (on both social discourse and cultural industries) of participatory culture through social media on the consumption practices of viewers, where more critical discourses often circulate in response to mainstream media texts. As such, this dissertation is concerned with drawing connections between sites of possibility and larger sociocultural contexts.

Skeggs and Wood (2010) refer to data collected during text-in-action viewing sessions as a “set of immediate affective moments” in which viewers “experience and locate themselves in the unfolding drama” (p. 104). Inspired by this approach from the social sciences, my methodological approach acknowledges that media texts are not simply consumed by viewers, but rather discursively engaged with. Employing a self-reflexive method familiar within queer feminist cultural studies, I took note of my responses to the three sites of analysis as I watched them. This close reading situates my lived experiences in relation to these programs but is not formally structured the way

text-in-action viewing sessions are. As such, I do not include any notes or viewing charts in this research.

As Foucault (1988) writes,

The control point will not be located in the origin or in the very object of the representation, but in the approval that one should or should not give to it... To keep constant watch over one's representations, or to verify their marks the way one authenticates a currency... it is not to try and decipher a meaning hidden beneath the visible representation; it is to assess the relationship between oneself and that which is represented, so as to accept in relation to the self only that which can depend on the subject's free and rational choice (p. 64)

To assess the relationship between fat lived experiences and fat subjectivities presented in these texts, I similarly draw from my own viewing experiences due to my positionality as a fat person. As Hill (2005) argues, consumers of reality television possess critical media literacy skills and are actively engaged both in their consumption of reality television programs, and in the further development and creation of the genre. For example, viewers may be empowered through the interactive components of reality television (or simply through the strength of viewer ratings alone) to influence the creation of mass media content (Papacharissi & Mendelson, 2007). Fans who comment on social media about reality television programs are thus not only viewers, but also producers of media as the creation of blog posts, TikTok videos, Instagram stories, and Twitter threads, in response to reality television programs, are all consumable media products. Indeed, Hill's recent work (2019) assesses how changing consumption habits within the digital age impact the (at times) overlapping experiences of producing and consuming both fictional and reality-based media. For Hill, broadcasters and production companies are now concerned with the audiences' affective investment in a particular program due to changing consumption practices that are caused in part by the popularization of on-demand digital platforms. This research is beneficial for both consumers as well as producers of reality television, as a better understanding of the affective investment viewers may have in a particular program is arguably more critical to the success and vitality of a production than other factors, such as live viewer ratings or participation numbers (such as the number of people voting by text for a particular contestant on a talent show), have been in the past.

In the digital age, social media and fan engagement plays a notable role in the success of a program, with growing examples of participatory culture (Jenkins et. al., 2015) in which fans have responded to content in ways that ultimately embed them in the production of a program (Macklem, 2014; Stein, 2015; Waggoner, 2018). Reality television has typically encouraged active viewership, largely through the use of multi-platform techniques such as texting in votes (as seen on shows such as *American Idol*), or encouraging the use of hashtags (as seen on shows like *RuPaul* (Pastel, 2019)) in order for the show to grow in popularity not only in ratings, but as viral or trending topics on social media. Today, programs that are most popular with viewers include those that can spread widely across digital technologies (Jenkins et. al., 2013). The relatively recent advancement of viewers' second-screen interactions has brought heightened attention to audience behaviours in feminist media studies, allowing for a deeper understanding of the social characteristics and impact of television consumption. This includes how audiences interact with televised content in ways that may influence production (Doughty et. al., 2012), including moral and ethical debates regarding production practices or narratives (Hernandez, 2015). Furthermore, the ability of audiences to engage in direct dialogue with reality television participants or producers as facilitated through social media platforms also poses new areas of study for feminist media scholars (Bury, 2017; Macklem, 2014). For example, an analysis of these communicative relationships draws connections with subsequent reality television programming due to the identification of "insider reflexive knowledge" (Heller, 2014; Macklem, 2014) that is generated from such conversations.

## **Conclusion**

Foucault (1988) argues that the goal of the care of the self is to take action to (re)join parts of the self in ways that achieve pleasure in oneself. Traditional approaches to fatness have positioned joy on the other side of weight loss. Within body positivity, pleasure and joy has been somewhat positioned within the self but is accessed through engagement with external objects. Fat liberation requires advocating for pleasure and joy within fatness and without external influences. Foucault (1988) argues that "the experience of self that forms itself in this possession is not simply that of a force overcome, or a rule exercised over a power that is on the point of rebelling; it is the experience of a pleasure that one takes in oneself. The individual who has finally

succeeded in gaining access to himself is, for himself, an object of pleasure” (p. 66). Affective readings of body positive programming can help locate instances of pleasure derived from fat subjectivities. While existing research on audiences and their investments in reality television is compelling, there is very little research explicitly focused on representations of fatness and the possibilities of affective investments by viewers of these programs. Considering the dominance of both “obesity” epidemic rhetoric and the high representation of superfat people in reality television, this dissertation fills this gap by addressing the sticky potential of this programming.

Throughout this dissertation, I identify how affective moments in my sites of analysis draw from body positive and fat positive movements in ways that break the “dangerous communications” (Foucault, 1979, p. 144) of dominant “obesity” discourses. While still rife with sticky contradictions, these programs offer new ways of thinking about fatness beyond its cultural status as an abject and undesirable characteristic. By considering my affective responses to these programs, both the subject on screen as well as the viewer is not automatically positioned as vulnerable to disciplinary methods. However, it is impossible to watch these shows without considering the cultural context in which they are produced. Therefore, in the next chapter I give an overview of the ongoing history of the “obesity epidemic”, how the positioning of fatness as a public health crisis has influenced cultural industries such as reality television, identify tensions in academic approaches to these topics, and further locate this research within these contexts.

## **Chapter 2.**

# **Constructing the “obesity epidemic” and navigating tensions**

## **Historical foundations**

To put forward my argument that contemporary representations of fatness complicate “obesity” discourses, it is important to identify the historical foundations and sociopolitical context of the “obesity epidemic” that informs the production of these programs (Backstrom, 2012). Foucault (1965) argues that madness is a socially constructed phenomenon that is subject to a particular context, including the cultural and social values of a particular time and place. Similarly, fatness as an example of the abnormal is highly contextualized as fatness has not always been pathologized as a medical condition (von Liebenstein, 2021). Historically, larger bodies have represented higher social classes, a sense of abundance, and even good health. At various points in history and in various cultures, fat bodies have been seen as beautiful, or as a sign of wealth and contentment (Boero, 2012; Farrell, 2011; Paradis, 2016). Like most cultural shifts, there is not one epicentre within which the origins of fat stigma in western cultures can be located. Rather, there are numerous overlapping factors that have worked together to construct and maintain body fat as an abject characteristic and fatness as an undesirable identity, leading to what is known as the “obesity epidemic”.

The industrialization period is perhaps the best starting point with which to ground the ongoing “obesity epidemic” in western cultures. As Farrell (2011) argues, industrialization and the shift from rural to urban life positioned the thin body as a beauty ideal against a backdrop of cultural anxieties regarding self-control in a time of growing abundance and excess. Beginning in the 1860s, as the general population began to move towards cities, shift from physically demanding agricultural labour to repetitive factory labour, and become introduced to leisure activities and disposable capital, fatness became a marker of the primitive, signifying a lack of self-control and an inability to adjust to modern times. As such, concerns about the physiological impact of a more sedentary environment emerged (Raisborough, 2016). This shift towards industrialization and consumer culture also created anxieties around gender, class, and

race, which were also projected onto those in larger bodies. Importantly, these anxieties simultaneously associated fatness with both the lower and upper classes; the poor were (and continue to be) believed to be fat due to a lack of access to healthy foods, laziness, and lack of education, while the upper classes were, and are, viewed as fat due to no longer having to perform physical labour as well as the ability to indulge in endless food and drink.

Using political cartoons from this time period to illustrate how fatness became weaponized by suffragettes, the wealthy, and the poor to poke fun at political and social disparities, Farrell (2011) illustrates how social anxieties about class, race, and gender became deflected onto fat bodies in ways that are familiar to current “obesity” discourse. Today, fatness continues to be positioned as a consequence of automatization, consumerism, changing work environments, and a loss of religious and traditional family values (Schorb, 2021), all of which impact people across social classes to varying degrees. For example, this is evident in the use of fatness to differentiate between lower-class and middle to upper-class white people through its association with geographically poor areas, rural America (particularly the rural southern United States), and other markers (such as domestic disarray) that create a hierarchy of whiteness, so much so that the bottom of this hierarchy (largely considered to be “rednecks”) could constitute as the racialized ‘Other’ (Phillips, 2019). Such embodiments often evoke racialized forms of behaviour, such as the use of certain linguistic deliveries including the use of African American Vernacular English (AAVE), which often mimic racialized tropes such as the ‘sassy Black woman’ (Shaw, 2006), all of which are visualized in part by larger bodies. In these instances, fatness signifies racialized and/or lower class bodies. Moreover, fatness is also weaponized against those in higher classes to suggest some type of moral failing, attributing less social capital to fat wealthy bodies. This is seen through public mockery of wealthy fat political figures, such as Donald Trump, whose body size is used as an easy target to criticize other behaviours – a continuation of a tradition that Farrell (2011) identifies in the political cartoons of the 19th and early 20th centuries. Raisborough (2016) also suggests that these factors contribute to the fascination and overrepresentation of fat people and issues pertaining to body size within the reality television genre, particularly the use of fatness as a signifier of other identity markers as described above.

Simultaneous with these social shifts that transpired due to industrialization were shifts in social attitudes about fat people grounded in developments in medical science. Indeed, these attitudes gained momentum from the supposed objective differences revealed by scientific and technological developments that began around this same time period and continue today. As Rich and Evans (2005) write, this biomedical approach is based on questionable evidence and excludes important considerations, such as moral and ethical concerns within this approach. Rich and Evans (2005) continue:

This omission constitutes an 'exclusion fallacy' (Schuftan, 2003), where what we 'choose' not to discuss is assumed to have no bearing on the issue. In other words, the stereotyping of fat, the feelings of guilt and shame that are produced through this discourse, and the tendencies towards a culture of healthism and individualism, are regarded as secondary to the primary concern to develop concrete scientific evidence to understand the causes of and treatment for the obesity epidemic (p. 344).

Such exclusion of sociopolitical and cultural considerations is further revealed in the numerous attempts throughout history to provide "objective evidence" for the natural inferiority of people of colour, women, and the lower classes, many of which were located in medical beliefs about body fat. For example, excess fat tissue has been used to identify potentials for criminality (Farrell, 2011), and was used to identify the "primitive" nature of Black bodies; indeed, the presence of excess body fat has been used as justification for racist and misogynistic attitudes (Strings, 2019), insinuating that bigger, Black bodies were inferior to thin, white counterparts. Forth (2012, 2015) argues that European colonizers' view of Black and Indigenous people of colour as uncivilized savages draws in part from how these communities seemingly appreciated (and at times sought out) fatness. Similarly, Shaw (2006) illustrates how colonial institutions hypersexualize and fetishize fat and/or Black bodies in ways that dehumanize them and position these bodies as a threat to social order. Juxtaposed with this imagery is the use of fatness to signify a greedy, white colonial figure in much of the imaginary of non-western societies who have been consistently subjected to various forms of violence by white people. In these instances fatness is often used to describe fears about global capitalism (Weismantel, 2005). Similarly, Hennefeld and Sammond (2019) identify how "abjected bodies often serve as allegorical figures during tumultuous moments of national struggle" (p. 22). Fat stigma is, therefore, deeply interconnected with racist cultural, religious, political, and scientific ideologies regarding civilization, nationalism, and evolution (Strings, 2019).

## Ongoing approaches towards “obesity”

Just as the roots of fat stigma can be located in the historical development of whiteness and industrial societies (Farrell, 2011), how we feel about fatness continues to reveal much about the sociocultural, economic, and spiritual values and concerns of a society or culture at a particular point in time (LeBesco, 2004; Orbach, 2009). Crawford (2017) argues that health is a "supervalue" that dominates populations living within neoliberal societies. Building from this, King (2020) suggests that the "obesity epidemic" is arguably one of the most prominent examples of the discursive connection between health and virtuous citizenship within a neoliberal context. King (2020) articulates that

the fashioning of healthy identities, like other aspects of the preoccupation with the fit body, is molded by and generative of moral judgments that reflect the dominant politics norms of contemporary neoliberal capitalism... Although the ability of individuals to act upon health discourses is acutely shaped by their access to material and cultural capital with class, race, and gender resonances, such constraints become largely invisible under the normalizing logic of health as a supervalue. Ill health thus comes to be seen as a choice, as a reflection of a lack of hard work and bodily dedication (p. 202).

Such contradictions illustrate the strategic approaches within neoliberal governmentality to shift from a welfare state in which there is public and collective responsibility for the well-being of a population, towards a society in which such responsibility is placed onto the individual.

While many of the historical and ongoing racist, misogynistic, and classist attitudes reside in a conservative politic, progressives also weaponize fatness today by using larger bodies as symbols of the ills of corporate greed, social inequities, globalization, the pitfalls of the modern food industry, and concerns with various neoliberal policies (Schorb, 2021). For example, fatphobic discourses are often evoked in contemporary rhetoric about the economy or the environment. From these perspectives, fat people are positioned as having a greater impact on the environment by supposedly using more fuel for transportation or by consuming greater quantities of food, or are seen as requiring more than their fair share of healthcare resources by failing to adhere to neoliberal lifestyle standards. Fatphobic discourse is also echoed in food justice and animal welfare movements, such as efforts by the People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (PETA), who use fat shame to advance their causes by insinuating

that dietary changes, such as eating a vegan diet, would solve both the problem of animal cruelty within the food industry and the problem of “obesity”.

Fatness has and continues to be weaponized in response to various cultural anxieties throughout the last two centuries. Today, these interlocking factors that involve politics around food, class, race and gender, have contributed to viewing the contemporary American lifestyle as the epicenter of the “obesity epidemic” – despite the fact that the United States does not have the highest rates of “obesity” in the world (Zimdars, 2019). Echoing concerns from the industrialization era, this attitude suggests that the “obesogenic” environment in North America, largely defined by a sedentary and modernized lifestyle, has allowed people to overindulge in unhealthy food choices and has resulted in lower engagement with physical activities, thereby resulting in a fatter population (Halse, 2009; LeBesco, 2004). The global dominance of American values has encouraged the mobilization of national and international organizations to develop efforts to combat this ‘disease’ that seemingly stems from when the modern American lifestyle is taken too far.

As such, the World Health Organization (WHO) has warned of “obesity” as a threat to global health since 1997 (Mayes, 2016), and “obesity” has been framed as a public health “epidemic”. The term “epidemic” has been “increasingly used as a stand-in for undesirable social phenomena that are characterized by their – supposed – rapid growth and spread” (Schorb, 2021, p. 2). With this usage, medical evidence no longer serves as the basis for establishing something as an “epidemic”, and as such there are numerous social issues framed in similar ways, including gun violence or violence towards Indigenous peoples. The establishment of higher body weights as an “epidemic” is “deliberately alarmist, suggesting imminent danger and sure catastrophe if not addressed” (Farrell, 2011, p. 9). Foucault (1979) argues that disciplinary methods are developed in response to a particular context, such as an “outbreak of certain epidemic diseases” (p. 138); as Foucault argues, “behind the disciplinary mechanisms can be read the haunting memory of ‘contagions’” (p. 198). As such, numerous public institutions and private industries have mobilized to offer supposed ‘solutions’ despite inconsistencies in “obesity” research.

As previously mentioned, medical evidence is no longer necessary to label something as an “epidemic”, although the stronghold that public health literature on

“obesity” (the black box of “obesity”) allows for common understandings of fatness and health to remain unquestioned. For example, a weight-based paradigm reliant on Body Mass Index (BMI) calculations provides the framework for many public health initiatives despite many scholars disagreeing with the effectiveness of such an approach, particularly the validity of the BMI scale. The BMI calculation involving one’s height and weight, was created over two hundred years ago by a Belgian, Adolphe Quetelet, who was not a health professional, but a mathematician, astronomer and statistician. While there is no physiological reason to square a person’s height, the formula had to be altered to match other population data. The BMI was originally created to help governments allocate resources to their populations and was never intended to be a measurement of overall health. Many have argued that the BMI is a scientifically nonsensical, physiologically incorrect measurement that does not consider contributing factors such as gender, race, location, class, ability, or age (Andres, 1980; Flegal et al., 2005). It also makes no allowance for the relative proportions of bone, muscle and fat in the body, even though bone is denser than muscle and twice as dense as fat, so a person with strong bones, good muscle tone, and low fat will have a high BMI measurement. Furthermore, how bodies are categorized as “obese” is susceptible to change and is often debated because of the scale of measurement used; for example, the parameters differentiating different BMI categories have been arbitrarily changed, causing thousands of people previously categorized as having a health weight to become “obese” overnight (Wann, 2009). The International Journal of “Obesity” has reported that “nearly 75 million adults in the United States are misclassified” according to the BMI scale. There is much research questioning or denying the validity of the BMI scale as a measurement of health, such as Anderson (2012) who argues that using the BMI scale “poses serious threats to the health of our bodies and the body politic” (p. 205), and Satinsky and Ingraham (2014) who advocate for abandoning the BMI scale in favour of a “social justice-oriented means of documenting body diversity” (p. 143). While there are more scientifically sound methods to measure various health indicators, such as blood pressure, because these measures are often more costly, the BMI remains the most common tool for measuring individual health and to (rather arbitrarily) grant or deny access to health care services and the resulting measurements of population weights according to this scale are what position fatness as an “epidemic”.

The dominance and prevalence of the BMI scale maintains assumptions regarding weight and health, namely that as weight increases, overall health status decreases. This assumption maintains a strong cultural devotion to weight-loss efforts and weight management systems despite numerous interventions suggesting their irrelevance, harm, and inconsistencies (i.e. Bacon, 2010). This includes fad diets, intense exercise regimes, and weight loss surgeries, which are often the focus of reality television programs concerned with fatness. Rothblum (2018) suggests that public health practitioners continue to advocate that permanent weight loss is possible through the aforementioned methods regardless of scientific research that has shown that long-term weight loss solutions may have up to a 95% failure rate (Chastain, 2011). Rothblum further argues that this is because the calorie-counting component of most diets appears logical, and that researchers hold implicit biases about fatness that impact the credibility of their methods and findings. Additionally, weight loss programs have the support of a multibillion dollar industry that markets weight-loss programs as able to achieve unrealistic claims, exaggerated successes, and temporary weight-loss, all of which maintain thinness as a major criterion of attractiveness, worthiness, and social value. The BMI and resulting health paradigms both support dominant discourses that suggest fat is a significant health concern and that weight-loss is attainable through diet and exercise (Bhagat and Jette, 2016). This paradigm upholds anti-fat rhetoric as unquestionable, apolitical facts (Boero, 2012; Cooper, 2016). The BMI thus acts as a tool of measurement to support industries invested in weight loss, primarily by upholding false narratives of weight loss to health outcomes (particularly in regards to illnesses purported to be related to “obesity”) (Zimdars, 2019). Studies have revealed numerous inconsistencies when fatness is pathologized as a medical condition; often, research contradicts these assumptions, providing a more nuanced view of the impact of weight on one’s health (Wann, 2009). Recent scholarly efforts to interject in dominant understandings of fatness include questioning whether being fat is a “disease” (Gaesser, 2003; Oliver, 2006) and the status of higher population weights as an ‘epidemic’ (Campos et al., 2006), in addition to critiquing the methodologies of research used to support “obesity” discourse (Chastain, 2011; Wann, 2009). For example, the toll of “obesity” is staggeringly suggested to be the second leading cause of preventable death in the US, without the numbers to back it up. The most popular estimate for “obesity” related deaths was 350,000 deaths per year, credited to a 2004 study. The study was criticized for its poor methodological approach, and the same journal published a re-

analysis that put this number closer to 25,000 deaths – which is a 94% difference. The popularization of standardizing health and body size is concerning, considering that this ignores contributing factors such as structural determinants of health like poverty, geographic location, gender and/or race. As such, efforts to classify fat bodies as “obese” is an unnecessary categorization of naturally occurring and/or socially influenced body diversity (McPhail and Mazur, 2020); some people, for a variety of reasons, have larger bodies than others. The categorization of fat people as “obese” often encourages physical and symbolic violence towards those deemed by the observer to be “overweight” or “obese” (Fox, 2019). This violence occurs at any age throughout one’s lifetime. For example, fat children and adolescents experience ostracism, bullying, and physical violence in school due to their size and are more likely to experience mental health issues or develop disordered eating habits due to public humiliation or shaming experiences. Fat adults can be barred from adopting children or undergoing fertility treatments, experience ridicule from authority figures (particularly in their places of work), are denied health insurance benefits, and are more likely to experience many forms of medical neglect that can result in death (Wann, 2009).

“Obesity” research often neglects to acknowledge the social inequities that underlie many of its findings, such as the influence of racism, poverty, and gendered division of labour on weight, food justice, and health outcomes (Rich, 2011). Some scholars also argue that “obesity” is overly researched, contributing to the moral panic regarding fatness as a public health crisis (Paradis, 2016). Many others argue that it is weight stigma, and not “obesity”, that has significant health consequences (Alberga & Russell-Mayhew, 2016; Boero, 2012; Farrell, 2011; Mayes, 2016; Wann, 2009). Inhabiting a fat body thus serves as a discrediting attribute. Physical stigma (Farrell, 2011) renders fat people as targets for interventions despite there being no clear evidence that fat on its own is a health concern (Oliver, 2006). Indeed, because there is not yet a definitive cause for the “obesity” epidemic, this “crisis” can be seen as largely due to a lack of control on behalf of “obese” people. This shift in perception of body size as being biologically determined to an understanding of size as culturally determined and requiring intervention, has resulted in the widespread acceptance of the idea that “obesity” can be cured with surgery and/or environmental changes that encourage fat people to make the “right” choices, such as physical activity, which “is often promoted as a way to manage, control, or manipulate body weight” (Alberga and

Russell-Mayhew, 2016, p. 151). Simultaneous to the hugely profitable diet and fitness industries, the demand for medical interventions continues to grow: weight-loss surgeries are an increasingly profitable surgical procedure that involve exploiting vulnerable and desperate patients (Bacon, 2010). This surgical growth occurs despite numerous concerns, including the onslaught of medical issues (such as ‘blood clots, internal bleeding, hernias, infections, ulcers, anemia, constipation, hair loss, compromised digestion, vomiting’ as well as psychological repercussions [Whitesel & Shuman, 2016, p. 35]) that arise post-surgery. Furthermore, the side effects of these surgeries are permanent, whereas weight loss is statistically only temporary. Arguments in favour of the BMI include the idea that better surgical outcomes have come from surgeries done on people with lower BMIs. But, if more surgeries are being done on people with lower BMIs and not even attempted on people in higher BMI categories, that would make sense that more positive outcomes and data are available just due to sample size. The BMI does not necessarily determine who is fit for surgery because there is no data to prove this (therefore, these judgements are reliant on assumptions made by health care providers), and importantly, the BMI does not seem to be a limiting factor when it comes to other surgeries, such as gastric bypass procedures. Beyond surgical interventions, research continues to search for a medical ‘cure’ for fatness, including the quest to secure a “flab jab” that could inoculate the population from the potential of becoming fat (LeBesco, 2009).

These factors, paired with cultural industries such as reality television, work together to contribute to the overarching narrative that it is people, and not diets, that are failures, maintaining the power of biopolitical strategies that aim to discipline and govern entire populations. Because of the role subjectivities in media play in the identity formation process (Harvey, 2019), if it is true that the majority of the population is fat (or becoming fat, or at the risk of becoming fat), then media that frames fatness as a negative characteristic and/or life-threatening condition pose a great risk to viewers’ sense of self and can contribute to generations of people who are incited to be at war with their bodies. Importantly, reality television as we understand the genre today developed along the same timeline as the “obesity epidemic”. Since the early 1990s, reality television has drawn its subjects from the extremely wealthy, super poor, white people, people of colour, and to some extent a plethora of gender expressions, sexual identities, and relationship and family structures. As a genre built around documenting

the “real”, reality television often frames itself around current social and cultural tensions. As the “war on obesity” rages on, so too has reality television’s preoccupation with topics related to this “epidemic”.

The “problems” posed by fatness have typically been approached by reality television producers from two overlapping, inconsistent approaches: first, fatness is viewed as a condition requiring clinical interventions that surgically and medicinally attempt to force the body to lose weight, often at the expense of otherwise healthy and functioning biological systems. The panic regarding “obesity” is often used to justify such an intrusive approach to combatting fatness. For example, in the United States, fatness has recently been considered a plague comparable to terrorism in its impact on national security, with some discourses emerging to suggest that a fat population is incapable of protecting the state and embodying other civil responsibilities (Halse, 2009; Farrell, 2011). Similar sentiments also exist in Canada (Ellison et al., 2016; Jennings, 2009). In a neoliberal environment in which populations are encouraged to manage risk and govern themselves, anxieties about things like national security and climate change are placed on individual bodies, just as cultural fears regarding industrialization were, because physical bodies are a manageable site where we feel able to contain and destroy anything considered unruly or excessive, and which we can mobilize in times of crisis or war. Thus, weight loss surgeries and other medical procedures are showcased in reality television as a response to these concerns.

A second approach to the “obesity epidemic” in reality television involves lifestyle changes to one’s diet and exercise levels. Attention to lifestyle behaviours dominates public health messaging as the theoretical burden that fat people place on the population is believed to be significant enough “that governments should deploy ‘coercive public health measures’ to pressure overweight and obese people to make healthy choices” (Mayes, 2016, p. 1). For example, attempts to control such choices are evident in consumer-targeted policies, such as placing additional taxes on “unhealthy” foods, such as soft drinks (World Health Organization, 2017). Similarly, reality television emphasizes lifestyle changes by casting “experts” who identify the physical and social costs of “unhealthy” foods and lifestyles in addition to remodelling participants’ eating habits, fashion choices, and physical behaviours. When fat people fail to lose weight through medical procedures and/or lifestyle changes, they are positioned as failures.

This concept of failing contributes to the perception of fatness as a character stigma and oppression of fat people on social, economic, and political levels (Farrell, 2011).

## **Employing fatness as a guiding lens**

I use fatness as a lens to guide this research because, as outlined above, fatness serves as a common denominator among various interlocking oppressions (Razack, 1998). As such, this lens is helpful in approaching the nuanced and complex body politics in media texts. Furthermore, using fatness as a guiding lens thickens queer theorization and alternative readings of media representations. The limitations and possibilities of the few representations of fat people that have begun to shift away from a medical model of “obesity” are an exciting site of analysis as they challenge the liminality of fat by exploring fat presents and futures that queer dominant ideologies.

As a discipline, fat studies is explicit in the need for an intersectional approach for research within this field. However, some scholars argue that fat stigma is more socially and culturally permissible than other oppressive attitudes. For example, Schorb (2021) articulates that because fat stigma is intimately connected to other oppressive attitudes, such as racism, sexism, and classism, these attitudes “reinforce each other and sometimes serve as proxies where the open articulation of racial and gender prejudices seems to be inappropriate” (p. 10) while fatphobic attitudes are less challenged. I disagree with the common sentiment that fat stigma remains the last ‘socially acceptable form of discrimination’ (Gordon, 2017; Mobley, 2014) because this perspective negates the intersections of fat stigma with racist, ableist, classist and misogynistic attitudes that maintain a strong presence and in many ways are deemed socially acceptable. However, I do think that fatness can be weaponized in ways that, at times, are less forthright about other related oppressive attitudes, and perhaps this is the insidious nature that is indicated in the above sentiment. Because of this complexity, fatness serves as a unique and valuable lens for research concerned with representations of the body, and for media studies scholarship more broadly.

Fatness, too, is applied to virtually every social group by operating as a looming threat in the sense that anyone can theoretically at any moment become fat (Farrell, 2011). This idea helps maintain the power of diet and wellness industries by suggesting that dedication to a particular lifestyle will help stave off the possibility of becoming fat.

Unlike other fixed visible identity markers, such as race, fatness is believed to be a positionality that one can move in and out of. And while gender has historically been perceived in binary terms, an understanding of gender as fluid and as a malleable presentation has in very recent history been brought into mainstream conversations. Additionally, fatness can be used as a tool to discuss hierarchies of power within gender non-conforming spaces (Taylor, 2020a), illustrating the dominance and influence of fatphobic discourses in other marginalized communities. This by no means suggests that trans, genderfluid, nonbinary, and woman-identified folks have achieved any sense of equity or equality. What I suggest is that fatness or fat-positive discourses have yet to be received by western societies in similar ways.

As explored in depth in chapter five, fatness is also a gendered characteristic in the ways that it underscores patriarchal and heteronormative ideologies. For example, fatness feminizes the body due to its prevalence in areas such as the hips, chest, or buttocks. Gender can dictate or inform disciplinary practices regarding food consumption, beauty or aesthetics, and fitness in relation to body size. Sexism and misogyny are also central to understanding the abject body, or what is considered ugly, grotesque, and in need of discipline, as Palmer (2010) argues, “the bad body is fat, slack, uncared for: it demonstrates a lazy and undisciplined self.’ A failure to stay in (the correct) shape seems like a rejection of the discipline the rest of us are supposed to be enduring... excess is un-feminine, greedy and not lady-like” (p. 70). Fat participants on reality television are required to fall into a “culture of suffering” (Sender, 2012, p. 155) in which they struggle to align their inner true selves and outer failed bodies with neoliberal expectations – even when they purport to love themselves as they are. Women make up the majority of participants in transformative lifestyle media, and “are constantly reminded that their bodies need improvement, with the overweight body, in particular, constructed as deviant. The potential ideological implications of such discourses are serious as women may internalize these discourses and regard themselves as deviant and feel shame” (Inthorn and Boyce, 2010, p. 91). Fat stigma is also gendered in the sense that it impacts feminine-presented and/or female-identifying people differently than masculine-presenting or male-identified people. For example, western cultures favour bigger male and/or masculine bodies by attributing power and strength to them, compared assigning weakness and vulnerability to female-identified and/or feminine-presenting bodies, and even moreso to fat ones.

A critical approach to understanding both fatness and reality television reveals the ways both sites can operate as mechanisms of white nationalism and western imperialism, further perpetuating the systems of discrimination and oppression on which these dominant ideologies rest. As described earlier, fat stigma has deep roots in racist attitudes, specifically anti-Blackness, and is deeply invested in maintaining whiteness as a cultural ideal. The technologies used to monitor a population (both in real life circumstances, such as state surveillance, and in reality television production practices such as the use of hidden cameras) reinforce whiteness as the status quo by whitewashing the technologies themselves (i.e. the white aesthetic of technologies, use of white voices and names, and coding artificial intelligence to recognize white features), in addition to positioning people of colour as the targets of such technologies (i.e. using visuals of people of colour to represent a potential threat). In these ways, technologies that are upheld and promoted as tools to measure authenticity reinforce harmful social attitudes by targeting specific populations and emphasizing undesirable characteristics, such as being a criminal or unlovable (Siddiquee, 2020). This is similar to western iterations of fatphobic attitudes that position a white, thin ideal as superior to fat, racialized bodies through various techniques, including surveillance tactics believed to reveal the “true” behaviours of fat or thin people. In many ways, the behaviours “revealed” by surveillance footage to support anti-Black attitudes are also anti-fat, such as emphasizing particular eating habits and ways of dressing that enlarge the silhouette of the body.

This research incorporates race as a key component of its intersectional framework. My analysis can be situated within critical whiteness studies due to the lack of people of colour cast on these programs, particularly in the second and third sites of analysis, and in recognition of my positionality as a white settler living and working on stolen land. As Matias and Boucher (2021) state, critical whiteness studies was founded on articulating how people of colour, particularly Black people, are impacted by white privilege. They argue “that whiteness and its impact on people of Colour cannot be separated continues to be paramount, precisely because the manifestation of one (whiteness) then produces what Said conceptualizes as (literally) ‘the Other’” (Matias and Boucher, 2021, p. 2). To integrate race, particularly anti-Blackness, into this analysis in a meaningful way, I connect the overwhelming whiteness of the participants in these programs in ways to broader discussions regarding the interlocking relationship between

fat stigma and anti-Black racism. The absence of Black people in these programs, particularly the second and third sites of analysis, *My Big Fat Fabulous Life* and *Hot and Heavy*, speaks to how fatness is a highly racialized characteristic and allows for theorization and discussion as to how distancing participants from racialized groups produces narratives about fatness that simultaneously maintain hierarchies of whiteness while distancing participants from racialized groups. As Matias and Boucher (2021) argue, “this whites-centred approach helps whites gain better understanding of their own positionality in a racist society” (p. 2) These narratives are explored in my analysis of how desirability politics, social capital and inclusion are produced within these texts. Considering this, critical whiteness studies has been critiqued by scholars for perpetuating “the very problem it seeks to solve” (Leonardo, 2013, p. 97). Indeed, centering and analyzing representations of whiteness is not the same as an analysis of racialized representations. While the second and third sites of analysis are predominantly composed of white participants, there is increased racial diversity on *My 600lb Life*. As such, in chapter three I discuss how representations of people of colour are used to approach structural determinants of health in ways that construct fatness as a racialized identity. While I draw from critical race theorists and fat studies scholars of colour to construct this analysis, I am limited in my ability to speak to the nuances and depth of the intersections of fatness and race because of my white privilege.

Like fatness, disability has also been positioned as a looming threat or unfortunate by-product of circumstance. Disability studies literature and disability justice movements offer significant frameworks with which to situate representations of fatness as there are many similarities in ableist and fatphobic rhetoric. Both fatness and disability are dependent on their sociocultural context but in general are considered undesirable identities (Withers, 2012). In each of the sites of analysis in this dissertation, fatness can be viewed as a disabling characteristic and, therefore, disability is a critical component of an analysis concerned with superfat and infinifat bodies within the context of the “obesity” epidemic. Furthermore, thinking through fatness from disability studies theory and the work of disability justice advocates offers vital frameworks, concepts, and approaches towards rearticulating and/or affirming an undesirable, object, or freakish body. As Bahra and Overboe (2020) write, “creating a space for fatness and impairments” allow for “expressions of life” (p. 202). Blurring the boundaries between

disability and fatness, rather than attempting to draw lines between them, is useful for addressing the stickiness of fat subjectivities that often rub up against ableist rhetoric.

## **Tensions within fat studies and debates about weight loss**

The above summary of the discursive construction of the “obesity epidemic” and related social anxieties serves as a necessary overview of a biomedical phenomenon within which the sites of analysis used in this research are situated. Much of the work in fat studies is concerned with challenging “obesity” discourse in ways that suggest negative understandings of fatness are socially constructed, similar to how feminist approaches to understanding heteronormative ideologies reveal the social constructions of gender. The focus of this approach errs towards identity-formation, and away from biologically or genetic factors. There are some scholars who critique this approach, arguing that such work positions people as “blank-slate bodies” that are then, drawing from the work of Foucault and concepts such as biopower, governance, and surveillance influenced by their environments. Warin (2015) suggests that such hostile rejections of “obesity” research and discourse “privilege the social and negate the materiality of bodies” (p. 51), arguing that this detracts from fully understanding embodiment because the biological and social influence each other in significant ways. Building from this, Warin (2015) suggests that turning towards the biological “holds immense value for rethinking how materiality and trans corporeal relations are embodied, reproduced and theorized in critical fat studies” (p. 52). In some ways, this feels like a critique which suggests that fat studies scholars are denying “truths” about fatness by advocating for fat liberation within social, political, and legal contexts. It is true that “obesity skepticism has become the default position” (Warin, 2015, p. 55) for the majority of fat studies scholars, myself included. I contribute to critical approaches in fat studies that oppose, or skeptically approach, the pathologization of fatness as “obesity”.

Warin further suggests that “obesity” scientists are often critiqued, but rarely directly engaged with. Considering that fat scholars are subjected to significant forms of weight-based oppression within academic and research institutions, in ways that range from not fitting into the seating available, to being positioned as less credible than their thin counterparts, publicly discredited or questioned, receiving less funding for their work due to their challenging of “obesity” discourse, possessing less job marketability, and receiving less job security (Cameron, 2016), it is not a simple task to take up the type of

engagement that scholars such as Warin (2015) call for. Cameron (2016) writes that fat scholars feel that they need “to be careful about how they framed fatness in higher education, particularly those who were in the sciences. Many felt a tension between wanting to be critical and also needing to fit into university agendas that promote dominant discourses” (p. 119). Furthermore, research on “obesity” is arguably conducted through the lens of fatphobia; therefore, it would be inaccurate to completely divest the biological from the social and cultural.

Of course, as a feminist media studies scholar, Warin’s call for engagement with the materiality of bodies is not necessarily directed towards this research. However, because the sites of analysis in this dissertation significantly focus on issues regarding health, medicalization, and “obesity”, it is necessary to acknowledge this broader tension between and within these disciplines. I do not deny that there are structural determinants of health which impact bodies on a biological level; Yoshizawa (2012) articulates how interactions between the social (such as gender and/or class) and the biological continuously influence each other in ways that differ depending on the context in which the interaction occurs. This is illustrated, for example, within a “shadow epidemic” (Cameron, 2016) in which fat stigma contributes to issues such as weight cycling, which negatively impacts the physical and mental health of fat people (Chrisler & Barney, 2016; Puhl & Brownell, 2006; Wann, 2009). I think that this dynamic where bodies are physiologically impacted by their environment, is part of what makes representations of fat people ‘sticky’, as McPhail and Mazur (2020) articulate, “the new materialist contention that bodies – the material – can serve as a conduit for resistance in that they demonstrate the ways in which practices of dominance are never complete” (p. 133). This is also related to the stickiness of my feelings about these sites of analysis and the themes within these shows, for I, too, have navigated similarly tumultuous terrains, such as trying to lose weight through diet and exercise or navigating health concerns that may or may not have been related to the size of my body. Fat people do not exist in a black hole from which they are immune from cultural influence, nor are they unaware of the materiality of their bodies; this fact is powerful as acknowledging insecurities allows for identification as to how these insecurities have informed our politics (Harrison, 2021). Both of these perspectives – the sociopolitical as well as the biological materiality of fatness – are touched on throughout my analysis from my positionalities as a fat person and fat media studies scholar.

Informed by my lived experiences as a fat person, I engage with this stickiness in ways that prioritize care for fat people. Part of that approach involves my alignment with the call from disability theorists that argues there is no moral imperative to be healthy (Rich, 2011), as well as scholars working at the intersections of fatness and disability who argue that affirming the materiality of both fat and/or disabled bodies – including aspects or experiences that are painful or disruptive – reconceptualize attitudes about different forms of life (Bahra and Overboe, 2020). Considering the significant overlap between fat studies and fat activism, as well as the prioritizing of fat scholars within the field, it is problematic to insist that such scholars engage with a field of research that inflicts physical and symbolic violence on fat people. Furthermore, as Vivian Mayer writes in what is widely recognized as the first fat studies anthology *Shadow on a Tightrope*, “there is something grotesque about having to quote from medical sources to defend a liberation movement” (p. 5). I approach this research from a similar line of thought, where regardless of any truths regarding life-threatening or otherwise negative aspects of the biological materiality of fatness, I believe there is still much to be learned from sticky media representations of fatness that go beyond debates concerning the validity of “obesity” discourse and research.

Warin (2015) asks: “How can you understand the ‘fraught standpoint’ expressed by some feminist scholars who critique the discursive language of obesity, yet grapple with their own experiences of fatness and write of their own experiences of bariatric surgery, weight loss and dieting?” (p. 55). Because all three chapters involve media texts that, to varying degrees, consist of narratives that include weight-loss, it is important to acknowledge a central debate within fat studies and fat activism: do weight-loss narratives inherently contradict fat-positivity? When social figures undergo weight-loss surgeries, there is much debate amongst fat activists and fat studies scholars as to whether or not these behaviours are problematic. For many who may have identified with these public figures, this loss constitutes a “quiet heartbreak” (Your Fat Friend, 2017, n.p.) as weight loss surgeries are often “thought of as the ultimate betrayal because it engages with the medicalized narrative that fatness is a disease for which surgery is the cure” (Brown & Herndon, 2020, p. 143). The celebrities who undergo these procedures are well aware of these tensions, as Roxane Gay (2018) writes about the desire for weight loss stemming from a desire to please others more than herself, and that her secrecy surrounding having undergone the procedure was in part because

of shame and a fear that some fans would feel betrayed. Gay writes: “I had to face the extent of my unhappiness and how much of that unhappiness was connected to my body. I had to accept that I could change my fat body faster than this culture will change how it views, treats, and accommodates fat bodies” (2018, n.p.). Often, this debate boils down to opinions regarding health, with some suggesting that fat-positivity is ignorant of potential health issues and others arguing that weight has no impact on health (Ellin, 2020). In late 2020, when Lizzo announced in a sponsored social media post that she had undergone a juice detox, many people in the fat-positive and body positive communities were quick to point out how harmful these detoxes can be on the body, and how disappointed they were in a fat icon engaging with a weight-loss fad; others expressed that as a fat Black woman who has never officially accepted the title as a fat positive advocate, Lizzo should not be the target of judgment from a largely white audience.

Within fat-positive circles, it is debatable whether intentional weight-loss is contradictory to fat-positivity. Drawing from Foucault’s definitions of self-care, some feminist opinions might argue that dieting and other weight-loss methods are behaviours that empower one to ‘become a subject’ by actively deciding how to transform one’s body to meet one’s bodily ideals (Longhurst, 2011, p. 874). On the other hand, stepping on a scale is a primary example of how weighing oneself is a “manifestation of the movement towards the quantified self” (Goldberg 2014, p. 118), and some might argue that the aesthetics by which one’s bodily ideals are formed stem from oppressive social values and problematic biases. In particular, the rhetoric surrounding weight-loss surgeries often suggest that there is a “new” person born out of the procedure; the insinuation of this being that the new person is an improved version of the former self due to its adherence to hegemonic beauty standards such as thinness. For some, aesthetics are a matter of personal choice, however, Murray (2008) questions “the degree to which we are free to choose our investment in aesthetic ideals” (p. 127). Murray continues that fat-affirming representations occupy the opposing side of the hegemonic beauty ideal binary and, therefore, these counter-aesthetics do not supersede mainstream beauty ideals, but rather reinforce them.

Some fat studies scholars have experienced weight loss and as such have commented on their place in the field. Longhurst (2011) writes of her paradoxical feelings regarding weight loss because of discrepancies between her professional work

and personal experiences and feelings; her dieting practices made her feel both in control and also disordered. Murray (2010) also felt that her experiences with weight loss surgeries compromised her fat politics, and Farrell (2011) points out that her positionality as a food activist and as a fat activist have at times been contradictory. At times, healthism has interjected fat positive discourse in ways that were difficult to navigate (see Cameron 2019; Oliver & Cameron, 2021). Brown and Herndon (2020) argue that fat studies and fat positive spaces need to include the perspectives of people who have lost weight, particularly through weight loss surgeries.

I approach these topics with interpretive hesitancy (Chadwick, 2021). Interpretive hesitancy avoids efforts to identify and subsequently categorize complex experiences and narratives, including static definitions for what does and does not count as fatphobic or fat positive. Rather, this approach involves “a commitment to ‘epistemic uncertainty’” that “works against the reproduction of easy truths, violent normative structures and epistemological comfort zones. Instead, the aim is to dwell on the discomfiting, the unsettling and the dislocating in efforts to open up spaces for transformative praxis” (Chadwick, 2021, p. 566). To confront these tensions, I embrace a “soft opposition” in that, regardless of my personal opinions on various approaches to weight loss, particularly through surgical means, I enact a tolerant approach to others with different experiences or opinions (Whitesel & Shuman, 2016). I want to acknowledge here that my intention is not to enact the “will to innocence” (LeBesco, 2004), in which I deny any individual responsibility for one’s weight or an individual’s right to feel and treat their bodies in ways that they deem fit. Rather, I argue that the impact of broadcasting weight-loss rhetoric on reality television programs, whether that be advocating for weight-loss surgeries or other tools of diet culture, has the potential to stir up many complicated feelings about fatness. As such, it is important that we critically discuss how fat people are positioned in popular programming that not only guides our understanding of other peoples’ bodies, but also of our own. As Zimdars (2019) argues, the way the medical and public health institutions approach fatness

parallel understandings of television, especially reality television, as a disciplinary apparatus by which forms of knowledge about health, fatness, and weight loss are disseminated to large populations around the world while participants on TV are surveilled and disciplined into specific bodily comportment. The information gathering and practices of entities like WHO provide content for television creators and foster a sense of significance and seriousness. (p. 64)

Regardless of weak spots in public health discourse pertaining to fatness, the fat body remains a spectacle consisting of bodies that seemingly tempt death. As such, in both medical and lifestyle approaches, fatness is positioned as a problem to be solved in ways that reveal significant contradictions in that fatness is all at once a problem that an individual cannot solve on their own and also a problem that is a direct result of their choices. These contradictions – perhaps unintentionally – makes room for alternative approaches to fatness and discourses regarding weight, health, and self-worth. For example, the contradictions between these two approaches allow for conversations about structural determinants of health, or body positivity. As will be discussed in the next chapter, even within reality television shows whose premise is grounded in the idea that surgical interventions are needed to fight the war on “obesity”, there are glimpses of affective moments that destabilize or reject “obesity” discourse.

## Chapter 3.

### Who's to blame? Contradicting narratives and shifting approaches to superfat people and weight loss

The strength of healthism and the association of higher weights with poor health outcomes continues to dominate public opinion across a variety of industries (Cain et al., 2017). Because weight and health are believed to be connected, fat people are continuously vilified across many cultural sites, even despite critical engagement from the public (Ellison, 2020) or the recent popularization of body positive rhetoric (Cwynar-Horta, 2016; Darwin and Miller, 2020; Lupton, 2018). The confidence that anti-fat sentiments are objectively true is strong, and the collective disgust towards body fat (and by association, fat people) is a deeply ingrained social activity that reveals itself across cultural industries. Reality television is a prime example of this, as numerous shows often subject fat people to medicalization and pathologization in ways that frame their bodies and/or themselves as abnormal. Using *My 600-lb Life* as a site of analysis, this chapter explores how superfat people are framed in ways that simultaneously reaffirm the cultural disgust towards fatness as well as contradict this messaging. While this program is emblematic, and quite possibly a leader, of the most common approach to fatness within reality television, being a web of condescension, disgust and violent intervention in which achieving a normative body size is prioritized above all else, what has yet to be explored in the same capacity are the moments of stickiness within this texts (Ahmed, 2004; Kyrola, 2014). Perhaps unintentionally, the affective capacity of this stickiness challenges “obesity” discourse in meaningful ways.

In hour-long episodes, *My 600-lb Life* documents a year or so in the life of people who weigh more than 600 pounds and are seeking gastric bypass surgery. Each episode features a single individual, or “case”, which operates both as a unique site of analysis as well as an example of a broader social issue (Foucault, 1979). Like many of the programs on TLC, *My 600-lb Life* blends the spectacular (in this case, being people over 600 pounds), with relatable content (such as struggling with one’s weight, living in poverty, living in a food desert, possessing a history of trauma or abuse, and having disordered eating behaviours, including food addictions). Each episode features a series

of medical appointments and procedures that identify the impact of fat on the body, relying on “historical traditions of displaying and dissecting ‘different’ bodies to reinforce hierarchies of superior and inferior bodies, and, by extension, people” (Fox, 2019, p. 2). These scenes encourage the viewing of the fat body as pathological and respond with offers of possible “cures.” Due to the format of this program, in which there is a new subject almost every episode, this chapter pays particular attention to the structure and format of the series as a whole, rather than particular participants and individual storylines, although some examples of specific participants are included. By assessing the framing of the superfat body as freakish; the role of medical professionals as expert voices; the contradictions regarding fatness, weight-loss and surgical “solutions”; the identification of structural determinants of health, including disability, race, ethnicity and class; and the exploitation of trauma, this chapter teases apart one of the longest running weight-loss reality television shows on TLC to acknowledge how this text simultaneously reaffirms and contradicts mainstream understandings of fatness. To conclude this chapter, I discuss structural changes to the show, notably the introduction of psychologists, as well as the creation of a spinoff show, titled *Where Are They Now?*, as examples of changing social attitudes pertaining to fatness that allow for further affective investment in the show’s participants and superfat people in general.

It is important to note here that as a researcher invested in fat liberation, I am not necessarily representative of the average viewer. More specifically, the way I may “hate-watch” (Cohen et al., 2021) *My 600-lb Life* is different from how other viewers may watch the show. For some, hate-watching may involve judgment or criticism directed at the superfat participants. For others, *My 600-lb Life* may be “unwatchable” (Baer et al, 2019) due to the graphic nature of documenting weight loss surgery, as well as its visualization of abject qualities, such as oozing sores and infections, or the presumed grotesque nature of filthy bodies and homes. I do not see the superfat participants on this program as grotesque or as failures. Rather, judgments stemming from my hate-watching of *My 600-lb Life* is most often in response to medical professionals that promote and profit from dangerous and ineffective weight-loss surgeries, as well as the show’s producers who, as will be explored, employ a number of tactics, such as exploiting personal trauma or socioeconomic circumstances, to frame superfat people as occupying a death-world. While these factors at times make the program unwatchable, my affective responses

generated through a negotiated reading reveal moments that challenge these aspects of the show.

## Reinventing the sideshow

The distinction between those who are “folded into life” (Puar, 2007, p. 10), or who achieve societal norms, and those who exist in death-worlds, is determined on *My 600-lb Life* within its title; the program identifies six hundred pounds as the boundary that divides those whose bodies are viable, and those whose bodies are obscene and on the brink of death. On this show, bodies that have been deemed abject, being those weighing six hundred pounds or more, are subject to medical and surgical interventions to “rehabilitate” their bodies in accordance with normative Eurocentric conceptions of beauty, health, and social class (Farrell, 2011; Fox, 2019; Jiwani, 2006). Many of the participants are positioned as failing to achieve these standards because they fall outside of these parameters mostly due to their weight, but also due to other (sometimes related) factors such as living in poverty, being unable to work, or as having experienced significant trauma or abuse.

There are many programs that perform public dissections and surgeries on fat bodies in an attempt to reveal underlying objective truths about “obesity” as grounded in medical science. Fox (2019) argues that the BBC program *Obesity: The Post Mortem*, whose plotline is exactly as the title suggests, operates as a biopedagogical tool in that it reinforces through vilifying fatness “how to be a good citizen by conforming to hegemonic ideas of health and thinness” (p. 2). Fox further argues that reality television programs that visualize violence on fat bodies are reviving brutal and violent historical traditions that reinforce hierarchies of normalcy and perpetuate fatphobia – some even going so far as to rely on illegal behaviours, such as performing public dissections on human bodies. Programs such as *My 600-lb Life* similarly document traumatic medical procedures – this time performed on live bodies – to emphasize the horrors of the “obesity epidemic.” Its episodes emphasize negative or difficult experiences of superfat people, such as mobility issues caused by their size, in ways that justify the “war on obesity” on scientific, educational, and public health grounds.

In its first episode, producers claim that the participants on *My 600-lb Life* are the “heaviest patients in medical history.” The visual components of *My 600-lb Life* greatly

contribute to the construction of fatness as an abject spectacle. For example, one method is to rely on the “carnavalesque focus on the ‘lower stratum’” of its participants (Phillips, 2019, p. 252) in which the camera “frequently emphasizes the materiality of their fat bodies, trying to elicit disgust in the viewers” (Moblely, 2014, p. 163). This is a tactic used in every single episode of *My 600-lb Life*, usually manifesting as visuals of the participants’ stomach, legs, or genitals, as many of these people live with some form of lipedema, or accumulation of body fat in the lower part of the body. Many shots are taken from the viewpoint of the ground looking up to exaggerate the size of the lower half of their bodies and document the participant attempting to wash their bodies in the shower, get out of bed, or sprawl on a couch. Other visual cues that position the superfat participant as a freak include emphasizing how the participants body fits or moves within a space. Adding to the freak value of these people is that many of the participants are housebound due to a combination of agoraphobia as well as limited mobility, their homes serving as a proverbial cage. Within this cage, participants discuss accessibility issues such as not being able to use the bathroom or walk between rooms. When filmed outside of the home, the accessibility issues participants experience in their communities – such as not fitting into a car or chair – further emphasizes the freakishness or misfit nature of their bodies. Many participants’ attest in their interviews that they experience harassment from the public when they leave their homes. The freakishness of their bodies is not usually a source of pride for the participant; many, if not all, express that they wish to escape from their physical form. The format of each episode of *My 600-lb Life* follows a similar narrative arc that begins with the subject testifying as to how and why they became so fat; often, the subject will detail how the size of their bodies impacts their quality of life and physical capabilities, labeling themselves as “objects of concern” (McPhail & Mazur 2020, p. 130).

As described by Gordon (2016), fat sympathy is not usually an empowering perspective to hold about fatness and fat peoples lived experiences as it tends to devalue fat bodies and contribute to the understanding of fatness as a liminal identity that must be worked through or overcome. However, interrogating the sympathies I felt while watching *My 600-lb Life*, I locate a large part of my frustrations with how the built environment does not consider superfat people and their needs. It becomes clear as participants struggle to fit into cars, public spaces, and even within their own homes, that their needs and comfort have not been thought of, or have been outright denied, placing

responsibility on participants to lose weight in order to be included in the physical world. Sandahl (2003) argues that the term “crip” involves twisting “mainstream representations or practices to reveal able-bodied assumptions and exclusionary effects [... to] expose the arbitrary delineation between normal and defective and the negative social ramifications of attempts to homogenize humanity” (p. 37). Disidentifying with this concept from disability studies theory by replacing “able-bodied” with “thin”, I view the misfitting nature of participants on *My 600lb Life*, particularly their testimonies that are played over footage of their bodies struggling to move through physical spaces, as crippling representations of daily life.

A surveillant assemblage is employed in *My 600-lb Life* as the participants are weighed and their dietary choices and physical activities are documented by the production crew (Rich, 2011). This corporeal information framed as data is collected in this surveillance and frequently made explicit to the viewer through close-up shots of the scale measuring the participants’ weight or utensils piled with food entering their mouths. These visuals, as “abject stratifications” (Malins, 2004, p. 101), situate “the complexity and chaos of an ever-changing multiplicity of bodily flux to discrete categories of meaning and constancy” (Malins, 2004, p. 86). After establishing the participant as a site of concern (which usually takes up the first 20-30 minutes of each hour-long episode), this prompts the participant to embark on a journey to access weight-loss surgery.

Weight loss surgeries have become the most popular, dramatic and expensive “treatment” for “obesity”, largely because of the visibility of celebrity weight-loss surgeries, the sense of urgency regarding the “obesity epidemic”, and a strong social trust in the legitimacy and efficacy of surgical and medication interventions. These “increasingly violent and invasive surgeries that cut through flesh and vital organs, shed blood, and place foreign objects under the flesh and skin to cybernetically regulate the body’s access to nourishment” (Blanchette, 2020, p. 85), and involve reducing the size of the stomach and bypassing part of the digestive system to reduce food intake and/or absorption (Boero, 2012). Superfat people are framed as unhealthy freaks due to the amount of adipose tissue inside their bodies as well as their “abnormally” large stomachs that have seemingly been stretched out over time due to the overconsumption of unhealthy foods. And yet, participants are also unhealthy freaks both before and after surgery; once the stomach has been reduced to approximately the size of a thumb, participants can only eat obscenely small amounts of food, rendering them malnourished

and reliant on various supplements and medications for the rest of their lives. Regardless, participants believe that they will be “normal” after having surgery. This further constructs the superfat body as pathological and abnormal, and the post-surgery body as morally good, despite health concerns that arise as a consequence of surgery.

There are a few notorious examples of participants on *My 600-lb Life* who seemingly embrace their status as a freak as they revel in their fatness, including some who seemingly antagonize Dr. Nowzaradan (commonly referred to as Dr. Now), and the other healthcare practitioners on the show. These participants express instances of joy in behaviours that have been criticized by Dr. Now, such as consuming “unhealthy” foods, as well as in their rebellion against his orders and advice. In these scenarios, participants seem to experience pleasure by being difficult, which challenges most of the storylines throughout the series in which the majority of participants abide by Dr. Now’s requests in an effort to please him, and thereby please themselves. This can be confusing for the viewer, as it is questionable why one would participate on this show if one was not dedicated to following Dr. Now’s orders to undergo weight loss surgery. However, these narratives also reveal that the participants may have other motivations for being on the show, or that they may have changed their minds about weight loss surgery and acted accordingly.

Fat bodies that violate physical or behavioural boundaries incite conflict (Moblely, 2014). In an analysis of stage theatre productions, Mobley (2014) identifies characters who contradict normative readings of the fat body and understandings of fat subjectivities by inverting “obesity” discourse through behaviours such as over-eating, speaking back to authority, and relishing in the vastness of their bodies. In such texts, “the audience is meant to be on their side and to be disturbed when they are physically or emotionally brutalized” (Moblely, 2014, p. 85). These challenges to dominant understandings of fatness do not exist outside of the reality of the materiality of their bodies. Rather, attention is focused specifically on their physicality and their subjectivities are produced through this aspect. Perhaps the most notorious example of such challenging behaviour is Steven Assanti, who, along with his brother, is featured in season five episode 13. The episode begins with ominous classical music that is overlaid with audio from news footage. The news footage tells the story of a man, Steven, who weighs over 800 pounds and has been kicked out of a hospital for violating the care plan of his providers and ordering a pizza to his room. Dr. Now alerts producers

that Steven has severe psychological issues which can make it hard to treat him as a patient. The episode immediately cuts to home video footage of Steven sticking his face in a pie tin filled with whipped cream and rubbing it all over his topless body. It is soon revealed that he has been removed from a second hospital as it was not set up to care for someone of his size. As Steven shifts in his hospital bed, his legs covered in sores, he is shown yelling at hospital staff. Some of his concerns reflect structural issues, such as inadequate public health care resources that result in neglecting patients' needs, which in some ways cripple the framing of medical institutions in ways that shift blame away from Steven. Nonetheless, home videos of Steven's outbursts add credibility to the framing of Steven as particularly difficult and even relishing in conflict, as he is well aware that he was being filmed and yet still submitted this footage to be used in the show.

Within these first few scenes of the episode, Steven is framed as a delinquent (Foucault, 1979). As the episode progresses into Steven's background story, it is revealed that he and his brother were raised by an absent, alcoholic mother who eventually abandoned them both when Steven was 15 years old. It becomes clear that Steven is desperate to feel that people care about him; he is shown feeling quite comfortable, perhaps even amused, as he navigates various hospitals, has staff bathe him, and continuously demands food and other forms of care. Steven is certainly antagonizing and calculating; he repeatedly asks Dr. Now for handshakes and hugs, even though Dr. Now is visibly uncomfortable and gently rejects his requests. Eventually, Dr. Now is forced to remove Steven from the hospital because of the verbal abuse and harassment Steven has inflicted on hospital staff. Later in the episode, Steven moves into an apartment and has a nurse who cares for him at home. Steven spirals into further crises, developing a tick in which he pulls out almost all of his hair. Dr. Now comments in an interview that this is a nervous tick common in children, and that there must be some part of Steven that acts like a child because he does not want to face difficult adult responsibilities. A close-up shot of a pile of Steven's hair on the ground is shocking as it reveals how significant this tick has become; it looks like a wig on the floor, and a shot of Steven reveals that he is almost entirely bald. By the end of the episode, Steven has gained almost one hundred pounds and his apartment is strewn with pizza boxes. He has also developed an addiction to pain medication and is filmed manipulating various hospitals and clinics to fill multiple prescriptions. He tells producers that while he wants

to change his behaviour, it is difficult for him to do so because it feels like something takes over him that encourages him to do whatever he wants.

While a preferred reading of episodes such as Steven's, particularly scenes where participants detail how food is emotionally satiating or pleasurable, frame superfat people as grotesque or abnormal, through negotiated reading of these scenes I identify a realism and pathos that is central to many fat peoples' lived experiences. Crawford (2017) argues that Berlant's concept of cruel optimism (relevant here, in Steven's consumption of food and growing body size as a trauma response) positions fat as "not able to *signify* much", however, "it is fat that makes the queer affect of the scene possible" (p. 456). For example, turning to food for pleasure or comfort is not unique to fat people as food has many different purposes besides providing nutrition, including social, emotional, and cultural considerations. When viewed from the perspective of a fat person, the visualization of this tension and negotiation of disciplinary measures in which such measures are sometimes violated, provides an opportunity for identification and compassion. Furthermore, while Steven's ill treatment of healthcare providers is certainly inappropriate, there is room for negotiation in two ways. First, providing this background context provides understanding and compassion for someone navigating mental illnesses and addiction that are the result of childhood neglect and abuse. Second, the satisfaction that Steven feels when he antagonizes and manipulates people into caring for him is in some ways quite humourous. This is not laughing *at* Steven, as Steven himself is shown smirking as he makes himself into a spectacle. Indeed, my affective response to these scenes was sticky in that I was saddened by his traumatic past, but viewed his misfitting, freakish behaviours as humourous and sometimes thrilling. Steven's insistence on being waited on hand and food and forcing people to show his body care by looking at him, speaking to him, and touching him, reaffirmed his physical presence as well as the needs of his body as it was in those moments. From my perspective, the scenes in which Steven is causing a spectacle by demanding that the comfort and needs of his superfat body be met at its current size, and not after his body had undergone weight loss, emphasizes his humanity in the present moment.

However, there are many elements of *My 600-lb Life* that work together to frame the participants as an abject spectacle and the majority of the participants appear to accept poor treatment from others because of this framing. For example, season six episode 7 features Lisa, a woman who weighs over 700 pounds. Lisa discloses that she

decided to participate on the show after finding maggots in the folds of her skin. While living in Dr. Now's clinic, her partner, Herbert, says that he is worried about some back pain she is experiencing. When Dr. Now goes to examine Lisa's back, he identifies that the folds in her back have fungus growing on them. The grotesque nature of these two discoveries frames Lisa's body as occupying a death-world in which disease is visualized as entering the body and subsequently threatening her life. While examining Lisa, Dr. Now also pulls a chip bag out from under her and begins to chastise both Lisa and Herbert. This reaffirms that her choice in food, especially that which is consumed in private and whose evidence is hidden away (in this case, literally tucked away behind her body), is a contributing factor to her size, and the confrontation forces Lisa to confess her unruly behaviour to Dr. Now, as well as the viewer. This scenario is most common where the majority of participants reaffirm neoliberal logic regarding how fat bodies fail to undertake self-responsibility and self-discipline; it is the divergence from this familiar narrative that underscores my pleasant surprise in how Steven advocates for himself.

Like the historical freakshow, multiple forms of gazing are enacted in *My 600-lb Life* to produce the fat subject as a spectacle. The construction of this spectacle allows and encourages viewers to adopt various ways of looking at fat bodies: the clinical gaze, in which a body is observed and diagnosed; the forensic gaze, revealing scientific or medical "truths"; the voyeuristic gaze, which provides a view into private spaces, including the homes of the subjects and the operating rooms where their procedures take place; and the abject gaze, which emphasizes feelings of repulsion towards the shameful eating habits, poor living conditions, and large body parts (such as the legs or stomachs) of the subjects, in addition to supplementary footage of the subject's body fat and internal organs during surgery (Fox 2019). Graves and Kwan (2012) argue that "under the clinical gaze that separates that body from the self... the BMI allegedly distinguishes potentially problematic bodies (those at greater risk) in the population from those that are less problematic (those at lower risk). This identification occurs in the name of intervention, whether imposed by authorities such as doctors, parents, or teachers or through individuals themselves in the form of self-surveillance" (p. 45). The premise of *My 600-lb Life* is based around the intervention that happens approximately halfway through each episode, in which the participant is introduced to a surgeon who

acts as the gatekeeper between them and weight loss surgery. If *My 600-lb Life* could be considered a modern-day freakshow, then the interventionist and ringmaster is Dr. Now.

## **The role of authority and medical expertise**

Dr. Now is the recurring medical expert on *My 600-lb Life*. The show centers around superfat patients of his clinic (or people who desire to become patients of his clinic) in Houston, Texas, where he performs weight-loss surgical procedures. Medical professionals are commonly cast in the role of an “expert” on reality television programs concerned with fatness. In this role, medical professionals function as the “benevolent father and gatekeeper” of knowledge regarding how to best handle body fat, and their expertise is supported by the sociocultural trust in their institutional credentials (Glenn et al., 2013, p. 639). The phenomenon of expert intervention is not a new concept; expert intervention has been a social control tactic since the early 1900s, when social workers attempting to “improve” the lives of immigrants and the working class in the United States encouraged “positive” lifestyle changes that aligned with western values (Ouellette and Hay, 2008a). Reality television has greatly aided the growth of this social and cultural practice by employing experts to act as public pedagogues (Rich 2011), or moral entrepreneurs (Boero 2012) who work to identify a crisis through interest-based claims-making. Dr. Now’s financial interests are certainly relevant here, as are those of his son, Jonathan Nowzaradan, who is the executive producer of the show. Weight loss surgeons arguably perpetuate the logic of “obesity” as an epidemic requiring surgical intervention in an effort to increase demand for their services. While the television program itself acts as an “amplifier/moralizer” of the “obesity epidemic” as a public health crisis, Dr. Nowzaradan, acts as the “enforcer/administrator” who responds to this crisis by offering a “solution” to the “problem” (Monaghan et al., 2010). Dovey (2000) also argues that the anxiety and vulnerability people experience within neoliberalism is part of what drives consumption of reality TV, particularly programs that involve state agents whose job it is to protect the population from harm. In this sense, it becomes clear how “expert” opinions take up so much space in these programs, and their air of authority feels particularly miserable for those who are subjected to their scrutiny. I immediately feel defensive when “experts” whose work is grounded in “obesity” discourse are framed as authority on fatness, particularly when no other perspective is present.

Drawing from the work of Foucault, Mayes (2016) argues that medical experts on reality television serve as “biopolitical pastors who hear confessions, circulate knowledge and deploy techniques to shape subjects in the lifestyle network” (p. 94). Oksanen (2014) argues that confession is an integral part of the affective qualities of reality television as it facilitates mediated intimacy. Mayes (2016) illustrates the relationship between the subject and medical expert as “requiring ‘the presence (or virtual presence) of a partner who is not simply the interlocutor but the authority who requires the confession, prescribes and appreciates it, and intervenes in order to judge, punish, forgive, console, and reconcile’” (2016, p. 98). The confession is a tool used in every episode of *My 600-lb Life*, however, Dr. Now is hardly an empathetic pastor. Dr. Now’s dry and monotone skepticism and sarcasm patronizes the participants as they beg for his help. He often states that he does not believe what participants disclose to him, and accuses both participants and their loved ones of lying about their lifestyle habits, making bad choices and lacking self-discipline. This attitude also underlies the titles of his two books: *Last Chance to Live* (2017) and *Scales Do Not Lie, People Do* (2019).

Dr. Now may not believe the participants’ confessions, but what they say to him nevertheless serve an important purpose in the show. First, providing a confession is a necessary step to receive health care services, as Dr. Now decides whether the subject is a viable candidate for surgery based on what they tell him about their diet and lifestyle. Second, the producers and editors allow the viewer to “read” or “see” the lifestyle choices of participants, and in doing so frame health and specific lifestyle choices within a moral framework (Mayes, 2016). Arguably, what this offers to viewers (particularly fat viewers) is the opportunity to take this information and “discipline their own body and choices to avoid a similar future” (Mayes, 2016, p. 80). Patients confess in interviews with producers what they think has caused or contributed to their fatness, in addition to confessing to various behaviours (such as eating “unhealthy” foods) while pleading their case in appointments with Dr. Now. In this sense, both the producers and editors of the show, as well as Dr. Now, act as biopolitical pastors by receiving these confessions and then crafting a response and enacting judgment. Dr. Now remains largely unchallenged by his patients and is rendered even more powerful because his patients are framed as being at his mercy. In this regard, Dr. Now’s judgments of the participants are sticky as they act as a barrier to the self-determination of the participants (Cooper, 2016), which is

often already restricted due to structural determinants of health and/or their other marginalized positionalities.

## **Fat failures: Structural determinants of health and contradictions of weight loss surgery**

And yet, the confessions of participants on *My 600-lb Life* are perhaps the most effective opportunities to challenge “obesity” logic and develop more complex understandings of fatness. Ironically, most of the subjects on *My 600-lb Life* are told to lose weight through diet and exercise before allowing them to undergo weight-loss surgery. This insistence occurs even though almost every subject has proclaimed that they have tried and failed to lose weight with such traditional methods. Regardless, Dr. Now often repeats that patients need to prove that they can commit to a particular lifestyle in order to improve the long-term efficacy of the surgery. This insistence contradicts the main premise of the show, being that superfat people are presumably so impaired by their fatness that adherence to an exercise regime is too difficult, thus surgery remains their only option to achieve weight-loss. As “bariatric surgery itself is stigmatised and often viewed as less moral than traditional weight loss” (Stevens, 2020, p. 909), participants are presumably seeking Dr. Now’s services as a last resort. Indeed, many participants lament that they see undergoing surgery with Dr. Now as their last chance to achieve thinness and that they feel they do not have other options.

I found that discussions regarding previous attempts to lose weight, as well as following participants’ journey throughout the episode to meet Dr. Now’s standards for surgery, were one of the most significant sites for affective resonance. First, fat viewers such as myself may empathize with the participants’ struggles or frustrations with trying to lose weight through diet and exercise due to their own experiences. Second, asking participants to lose weight through diet and exercise highlights the contradictory nature of offering weight loss surgery as a solution to fatness (Boero, 2012; Zimdars, 2019). Most often, Dr. Now requires that participants lose approximately ten per cent of their body weight before he will approve them for weight loss surgery. Many participants struggle to lose this large amount of weight in such a short period of time and express highly emotional frustrations about this inability. The complex and overlapping contributing factors to one’s body size, the amount of control one has regarding one’s

weight, and how one feels about themselves, are indeed familiar sticky territories for many fat people.

In most episodes, participants breach the question of whether their fatness has passed some sort of pathological limit. Meanwhile, structural determinants of health are revealed on the show as underlying causes of participants' fatness and/or struggles to lose weight. This includes discussions of socioeconomic, cultural and environmental factors, such as disability, race, ethnicity, poverty, family dynamics, and experiences of trauma. The intersections between fatness and disability are emphasized throughout each episode, as *My 600-lb Life* frames fatness as disabling and, consequently, life-threatening. To assess these intersections and commonalities, I draw from various models within disability studies. Both the eugenics and medical models situate disability and fatness as identities that need to be fixed or cured, regardless of the desires or consent of the person in question and the potential negative health consequences of these interventions (Schalk, 2013). Within the medical model there is much effort dedicated to looking for biological or genetic causes of fatness and disability, as is similar with efforts to identify any genetic causes of racial differences and sexuality. Both the medical model and eugenics model support evolutionary theory that some bodies are genetically superior to others, and thus subordinate identities must be obliterated through tools such as forced sterilization and selective abortion, or, fixed to better conform with biomedical ideals of embodiment and health, such as in this case, weight loss surgeries such as gastric bypass procedures. Considering this, reality television programs such as *My 600-lb Life* are framed as bestowing acts of charity upon those who cannot help themselves, providing access to medical services whose aim is to construct a physically acceptable citizen who can then move on to engage in independent acts of self-care, including the maintenance of a new, smaller body.

These interventions never fully separate fatness from disability, as weight loss surgery changes the digestive system so radically that new impairments (such as medication rituals and physical symptoms including internal bleeding, vitamin deficiencies, ulcers, and chronic pain) emerge, arguably constituting these procedures as disabling as well (Stevens, 2020). Building from this, both Mollow (2015) and Withers (2012) argue that the definitions of disability and fatness, and the modes by which fat people are oppressed, are often indistinguishable from one another. Under the charity model (Withers, 2012), "rituals of conspicuous concern" (Mollow, 2015, p. 202) are

conducted for both disabled and fat bodies. These rituals are evident in the concern expressed by the participant and/or their family and friends, as well as by Dr. Now's insistence that the participant's fatness is life-threatening; the concept of the show itself arguably relies on its function as a ritual of conspicuous concern. This ritual supports what Mollow (2015) refers to as the pity model of fat, which evokes emotional responses towards superfat bodies and works to maintain normative conceptions of the body as an ideal that all people should be actively working towards achieving (Withers, 2012).

In some instances, disability is a topic that is framed like a chicken-or-the-egg scenario in which it is possible that some form of disability caused a participant to become superfat by restricting their ability to exercise. Or, the participant's body is viewed as having become so fat that the body is now disabled. This is illustrated by the opening scenes of each episode in which participants are depicted having difficulty showering or caring for their body. These connections between fatness and physical disabilities are made quite obvious on the show, and associations between fatness and cognitive disabilities are present but less overt. In both scenarios, both superfat people and people with disabilities are encouraged to "overcome" their positionalities at all costs; Schalk (2013) compares fat people who engage in weight loss tactics that ultimately cause harm to their bodies (such as the negative consequences of gastric bypass surgery, such as vitamin deficiencies, ulcers, and organ failure) with the pressure placed on people with disabilities to "perform as much able-ness as possible" (p. 9) even if this performance ultimately causes physical harm.

Class and race are also positionalities that are significant to the context of this program. The participants on *My 600-lb Life* are from the lower classes, and a significant number are identifiable as ethnic and/or racial minorities. This representation is emblematic of larger demographic statistics; rates of "obesity" are disproportionately experienced by racial and ethnic minorities; in the United States, Black people have the highest rates of "obesity", followed by Mexican Americans, and Hispanic people. People of colour are also less likely to see themselves as "obese", and as such, are positioned as 'problem' populations in the "war on obesity". The consequence of this is that racial and ethnic minorities "may be placed under greater surveillance... potentially subjecting vulnerable populations to increased biopower" (Graves and Kwan, 2012, p. 68). Surveillance in this regard is certainly enacted by the production through casting participants from these social groups, as well as by Dr. Now, who identifies food

preferences or other culturally reflective behaviours in his interrogations of participants. White superfat people – particularly those from states in the rural south – are sometimes subjected to racial Othering through their compromised whiteness. In this regard, low class status as well as fatness marks participants as “not quite white” (Wray, 2006, p. 97) by emphasizing “the cultural difference between progressive white individuals and those thought to be ‘yesterday’s people’” (Catté, 2016, n.p.). As discussed in the last chapter, the roots of fat stigma in a western context can be located in the historical foundations of whiteness and white supremacy. There are also significant socioeconomic disparities reflected in demographic statistics about body size: higher class women are less likely to be fat than lower-income women, while higher income men of colour are more likely to be fat than lower-income men of colour. Some have argued that these statistics are the result of geographic circumstances, such as living in a food desert, and lacking access to safe public recreational spaces.

The subject’s dietary habits are a primary focus on *My 600-lb Life*, perhaps because the foodscape in North America is often cited as a leading cause of today’s “obesity epidemic”. Fatness is believed to be the result of living in an “obesogenic” environment, or one in which food is abundant and cheap, there is little regulation or information for consumers about the nutritional quality of food, and urban design seemingly encourages unhealthy forms of consumption (Guthman, 2009). Fat people, particularly in North America, are believed to suffer from overconsumption malnutrition, a health problem stemming from the “nutrition transition” in which more nutritional diets have been switched out in favour of highly processed foods that are high in fat and sugar and depleted of other nutrients. A foodscape is an example of biopolitics that disciplines bodies and produces greater social anxieties about citizenship and the nation (Guthman, 2009). Understanding “obesity” as a consequence of racism, a poor foodscape, food desert, or nutrition transition “provides an alternative to rhetorics of personal responsibility and genetic determinism and... ostensibly draws attention to broader political, economic, and cultural forces in understanding the constitution of contemporary bodies” (Guthman, 2009, p. 187). Viewing these foods as addictive paired with criticisms of modern lifestyles and foodscapes certainly complicates the notion of individual responsibility and agency in regards to maintaining a normative weight (Bodley, 2012; Cain et al., 2017), the over-representation of racial and/or ethnic minorities as well as lower class white people are deeply connected to these ongoing histories but lack the

context to situate these representations in a way that makes these histories obvious to the viewer.

While highlighting structural determinants of health has the potential to complicate dominant understandings of fatness as an individual moral failing, the overarching perspectives emphasized on *My 600-lb Life* aligns with dominant “obesity” discourse which frames fatness is an unfortunate byproduct of one’s circumstances that the person is responsible for “fixing”. As Backstrom (2012) writes, “the move to more sympathetic representations offsets some of the more mocking and sensational portrayals, yet weight as a problem is still central to the storyline” (p. 692). The narrative surrounding food on *My 600-lb Life* is often that the participant overconsumes unhealthy foods, and that the people around them (who are often in caregiving roles) enable them to indulge in an unhealthy lifestyle by providing these foods. Across many episodes Dr. Now often asks the subjects where they get their food from. He proceeds to chastise the caregivers in attendance at the pre-surgery consultations about their enabling habits, even going so far as to suggest that they are “killing” their loved one. This insinuates that regardless of the precarity of a poor foodscape or systemic forms of oppression, such as racism and classism, individuals still have a responsibility to make the “right” choices.

There are a handful of instances in which the participants’ caregivers, particularly their romantic partners, leave their partner in protest of their desire for weight loss. These instances can be read one of two ways. The partner can be understood as fetishizing superfat people, effectively dehumanizing their partner by placing conditions on their love for them. Or, their partner could be rejecting attempts to discipline a body that they do not feel needs to be subjected to punishment. I was much more intrigued as a viewer when the participants’ caregivers expressed hesitation, disdain, or outright rejection of the pursuit of weight loss, as this is an unfamiliar narrative and approach towards fatness. In some instances, I admired the moments in which they advocated for themselves, their partner, and their relationship. As will be discussed in further detail in chapter five, these representations are even more transgressive when the partner in question occupies a thin body.

## Affective possibilities of “trauma porn”

In addition to locating blame within participants’ caregivers, *My 600-lb Life* explores some of the other underlying circumstances that may be causing participants to indulge in “unhealthy” foods, live inactive lifestyles, and/or hide themselves within their homes, by identifying the traumatic histories of its participants. Trauma porn can be summarized as the glorification and mass consumption of trauma that is presented with little context or sensitivity (Preston, 2020), or as “any type of media – be it written, photographed or filmed – which exploits traumatic moments of adversity to generate buzz, notoriety or social media attention” (Telusma, 2019). Trauma porn is also highly emotional, involving expressions of emotion that can be both verbal and physical as well as voluntary or involuntary displays of emotions such as fear, anger, or responses to physical pain (Hirdman, 2010; Mobley, 2014). Trauma porn is not specific to broadcast media and can be applied to numerous social activities throughout history, such as traveling freak shows or public lynchings of Black people (Taylor, 2020b). Many advocate that trauma porn is inappropriate, describing it as “the exploitive sharing of the darkest, creepiest, most jarring parts of our trauma specifically for the purpose of shocking others” (Zipursky, 2018). Zipursky (2018) further argues that, while the shock value of trauma porn can be useful to communicate with those who are unaffected by the subject matter, those with similar lived experiences can be harmed by it. The most sensational, significant, and jarring aspect of *My 600-lb Life* is the discussions of personal trauma where participants are framed as excessive emotionally as well as physically, which is heightened by their extreme circumstances. This might be what underscores the success and longevity of *My 600-lb Life* as a reality television series, as well as the source of much of its criticisms; as Gorton (2009) attests, emotion makes for good television and is exploited as such.

For example, a 36-year-old woman named Lacey is the person featured in season 10 episode 5. In this episode, Lacey discloses significant childhood trauma as a reason for her fatness; she reveals that she was sexually, emotionally, and physically abused, and that she turned to food for comfort. After becoming isolated as a young adult, Lacey discovered feederism on the Internet, a phenomenon where people can pay a fat person to record themselves eating. Eventually, Lacey met her boyfriend, Ricky, and entered a monogamous relationship. Rather than introduce her boyfriend in a

romantic context, Ricky is introduced as the person who helps Lacey to wipe herself after she uses the bathroom. This frames Lacey as grotesque, and she defends herself by saying in an interview with producers that she was honest with him about her physical state and thus he was aware of her needs. Even though she has a partner who attests to loving Lacey for who she is, Lacey is still framed as failing to encompass desirable qualities due to her childhood trauma. When Lacey decides to go to Texas to seek weight loss surgery from Dr. Now, her boyfriend's sister offers to help them move to Houston by driving them from their home in southeast Washington. While Lacey continues to be framed as a failure and burden, as well as a misfit in the sense that she has difficulty quite literally fitting into the car, the verbal abuse she suffers during this trip from her boyfriend's sister remains quite upsetting to watch. The trio go through numerous fast-food drive-throughs on their road trip and all three eat the same food, yet Lacey is subjected to criticism for her food choices. Towards the end of the episode, Lacey and her boyfriend (now fiancé) decide to end their relationship, and Lacey finds out the next day that all of her belongings have been donated to a charity shop. By the end of the episode, Lacey is pictured crying in an empty apartment with no belongings and still not having been approved for weight loss surgery. Lacey has failed in every aspect: she no longer has a partner or a home, and her body has failed to become any smaller.

Participants' involuntary and thus primary emotional responses to their extreme circumstances make shows such as *My 600-lb Life* even more authentic and compelling to audiences (Hirdman, 2010). The marketing materials of *My 600-lb Life* state that this program "follows medical journeys of morbidly obese people as they attempt to save their own lives" ("About My 600-lb Life" n.d.). In each episode, the superfat participants are required to fall into a "culture of suffering" (Sender, 2012, p. 155) in which they struggle to align their inner true selves and outer failed bodies. This involves testimonies from the subject lamenting about their poor quality of life, or inability to "live", that is often the result of significant trauma and abuse, such as experiencing sexual violence, child molestation, deaths of loved ones, or domestic abuse. To some, this rhetorical device may imply that there is a smaller (or authentic or true) person inside the fat body in need of escape; indeed, many subjects testify that they became "trapped" in their bodies following a traumatic event. While this background information attempts to identify connections between trauma, abuse, and body weight, weight-loss surgery remains

offered as the “cure” to their struggles, locating responsibility within the participant to fix this problem and “free” the person inside. Furthermore, while expressions of emotion, such as crying, are used in reality television to establish authenticity, this tactic is effective because it locates “truth” within the body of participants (Hirdman, 2010). This has two possible outcomes, being that viewers may feel empathy or compassion for the participant because audiences are coming to view participants as complex human beings, or, expressing negative emotions about things such as food or exercise may reaffirm cultural beliefs about the causes (and thus the solutions) of “obesity.”

Food consumption habits are sometimes loosely connected to the trauma background of the subject, often suggesting that food addiction or disordered eating habits are the result of trauma. There is research that explores this potential in great depth and a growing amount of literature about how disordered eating and food addiction manifests specifically in fat bodies (Brown-Bowers et al., 2017; Gay, 2017; LaMarre et al., 2020; Lebow et al., 2015). This is an important conversation to have as fat people are often excluded from discourse regarding eating disorders or are celebrated when they do have eating disorders because the idea of being fat is considered to be more threatening or unhealthy. The diets prescribed by Dr. Now are arguably ones that are only possible with severe food restrictions as the daily caloric intake he suggests (usually around 1200 calories per day) are insufficient for adults. Watching participants undertake such diets is distressing as it sets participants up for failure considering that such low caloric intake is arguably unsustainable.

This distress and shock is not directed at Dr. Now within the program, but is framed in such a way as to emphasize the failures of the participants. This psychological and physical violence that Dr. Now inflicts on participants creates metaphorical and visual wounds on their bodies. Okasanen (2014) identifies that “the visual image of a physical wound becomes a sign referring to addiction” (p. 143). Similarly, footage of the physical traumas participants experience (including that caused by weight loss surgery) and their disclosure of past traumas are used on *My 600-lb Life* to emphasize the harms of body fat. While individually violent in terms of the participants, as gastric bypass surgery involves mutilating a healthy organ, the show also subjects viewers to violent images and narratives in order to elicit shock, disgust, pity, or horror. It is these devices that draw on culturally familiar narratives of fat, or the “aesthetic dispositions” (Bourdieu,

1984) that underscore the hysteria surrounding the “obesity epidemic”, to align with or encourage a dominant reading (Hall, 1973) of *My 600-lb Life*. Kavka (2014) writes

in opposition to critics who claim that the production context of reality television dissolves its capacity to make claims on or about reality, I would insist that the production situation does not block affective transmissions or feelings of intimate proximity. Rather, televisual transmission enhances the capacity of bodies to enter into intimacies through affect, closing the distance between them like joining together the ends of a string. (p. 471)

The authenticity and intimacy afforded by reality television is what makes the genre so successful, even if it is understood by the viewer to be a manufactured authenticity (Deller, 2019). The framing of the superfat person as a spectacular failure does not negate the possibility of various forms of affective resonance, as it is quite possible that the spectacle becomes more authentic when someone fails. For example, every episode ultimately concludes with an assessment of whether the participant was able to lose weight and maintain a lower weight, and the majority of participants remain fat. Considering the insidious nature of diet culture and body shame, while the average viewer may not identify as a superfat person, there is still a high possibility for the experience of failing to achieve any kind of weight loss (particularly through dramatic and unsustainable measures) to resonate with the viewer. A sense of authenticity and intimacy is heightened if the viewer can say that they too have felt that way, and/or that they have also failed such disciplinary practices.

While disturbing, the emotional expressions that explore histories of trauma offer opportunity for fat sympathy and fat ambiguity. The psychological torture of trying to allocate blame for one’s hardship is arguably a familiar experience for fat people; the vehement collective hatred towards fatness can make one desperate to identify the cause of one’s fatness so that, theoretically, one can identify a solution. In particular, the idea of the source of your hardship being something that was *done* to you, or as something that was out of your control, is a difficult theoretical concept to navigate; arguably, it is a process that must be delicately handled with care and the help of licensed professionals – two things that are lacking in the majority of *My 600-lb Life* seasons. The “fat talk” on *My 600-lb Life* is arguably traumatic for participants and viewers alike as discussions of issues such as sexual violence, domestic abuse, grief, death, abandonment, and child abuse are undoubtedly upsetting and potentially triggering. To engage in dialogue on these topics without offering the support of

psychologists, social workers, or other mental health professionals is extremely dangerous. Reality television producers have been criticized by scholars for failing to meet this need or capitalizing on this need (Wyatt and Bunton, 2012), and, for the most part, *My 600-lb Life* is no exception. However, three years into production, the show begins facilitating counseling sessions with a psychologist to complement Dr. Now's services. While this occurs in only a handful of episodes, this change to the format of the show in later seasons shifts the framing of fatness within these instances towards viewing the body as a site where numerous factors overlap and connect to one another, and therefore, offers a slightly more holistic approach to working with its participants. This shift humanizes participants and shows a slight investment from the show in their psychological well-being while simultaneously adding another expert to the surveillant assemblage.

## **Spinoffs, lawsuits, and the limitations of affective investment**

From its inception, *My 600-lb Life* has included a title card at the beginning of each episode that states, in reference to patients undergoing weight loss surgeries, that “their chances of long term success are less than five percent”. It is unclear whether viewers are cheering on participants in the hopes that they become thin, or if viewers feel some sort of compassion or satisfaction if – or, statistically speaking, when – participants fail to do so. However, the use of this title slide complicates any sort of optimism in their chances of losing a significant amount of weight and reaffirms to the viewer that fatness and weight loss are complex subjects for which there is statistically no “cure”. The depictions of participants post-surgery slowly starts to destabilize confidence in the efficacy of weight loss surgeries as many experience significant complications and/or fail to lose a significant amount of weight.

In January 2015, TLC premiered *My 600-lb Life: Where Are They Now?*, a spinoff series that followed up with participants to assess if they had achieved weight-loss. There have been seven seasons so far. Most participants are still fat. What we can learn, then, is that weight-loss surgery is not an effective procedure. Achieving permanent weight-loss (regardless of method) has proven to be nearly impossible; as referenced in the program's title cards, 95% of people who lose weight regain what they may have lost within one to five years (Bernstein and St. John, 2009). What is not made

transparent on the show is that even those who opt for weight-loss surgeries that permanently alter various organs will adjust to their new caloric intake two years post-operation. Therefore, harmful and restrictive dieting measures are required to continue weight loss or maintain a particular weight. Despite such high failure rates as well as serious complications that arise post-surgery (including “blood clots, internal bleeding, hernias, infections, ulcers, anemia, constipation, hair loss, compromised digestion, vomiting, or dumping syndrome” in addition to psychological repercussions (Whitesel and Shuman, 2016, p. 35), it is the patient who is often blamed for this failure. Many of the subjects on *My 600-lb Life* are constructed as difficult to work with, lazy, or lacking self-control. This is particularly highlighted when the participant either rejects some of the suggestions put forth by Dr. Now, or is otherwise unable to achieve significant weight loss. Boero (2012) aptly summarizes this conundrum by illustrating how when patients are “told by surgeons that their weight is a medical condition beyond their individual control, they come to see surgery as a valid option. However, when surgeries fail or patients regain lost weight, individual explanations for fatness are drawn on to explain these failures” (2012, p. 6). Boero (2012) uses this to emphasize how this process is demoralizing for people who turned to weight-loss surgeries precisely because traditional dieting methods did not work; one research participant summarized this frustration as feeling like she failed – a sentiment that “gets to the heart of the individualizing and normative nature of disciplinary power” (p. 119).

Dr. Now says repeatedly in almost every episode to his patients that they will die if they don't lose weight. Over the nine full seasons of *My 600-lb Life* that have aired to date (for a total of 115 participants), 11 have actually died: Henry Foots (age 54), Ashley Randall (age 40), Sean Milliken (age 29), James King (age 49), James Bonner (age 30), Lisa Fleming (age 50), Robert Buchel (age 41), Renee Biran (age 56), Kelly Mason (age 41), Gina Krasley (age 30), and Coliesa McMillian (age 41). Both the insistence within “obesity” discourse that superfat people are on the brink of death paired with the actual deaths of a small percentage of the show's participants, illustrate “fat envelopment, persistence, and the painful refusal of all bodies to persist infinitely” (Crawford, 2017, p. 461). Many participants did not die, and many continued to live their lives as fat people. It is also not clear that any of these participants died because of their fatness, but it can be deduced that some died from weight loss surgery: one participant (Coliesa McMillian) passed away from complications of the weight-loss surgery, while another (Henry Foots)

died on the operating table and was resuscitated, only to die approximately one year later of unspecified cause. Two died from responses to trauma: Robert Buchel was addicted to painkillers and suffered a heart attack, and James Bonner died by suicide. Gina Krasley expressed in a YouTube video posted from her hospital room right before her death that she was suffering from an eating disorder as well as a possible infection; Krasley was hospitalized after suing the production company for “emotional distress”. Considering these examples, it becomes more difficult to assert that fat on its own is a life-threatening characteristic. Rather, the consequences of the fear of fat, including support for weight loss surgeries despite significant concerns with the efficacy and side effects of such procedures, counterintuitively threaten the mortality of fat people.

A handful of participants have brought legal challenges against the actions and behaviours of those, such as Dr. Now, who profit from managing the “risks” posed by “obesity”. In 2018, numerous lawsuits were filed against Megalomeia, the production company responsible for *My 600-lb Life*. First, James Bonner’s family argued that the show was responsible for James’ suicide, including that the company conducted unethical production practices such as pressuring James to participate as well as failing to provide mental health resources. Following this, David Bolton, Nicole Lewis, Destinee Lashae, Alicia Kirgan, Annjeanette Whaley, Maja Radanovic, Gina Krasley and Jeanne Covey all filed lawsuits revolving around claims that their health had been jeopardized by the production company, particularly due to the lack of mental health care provisions and support post-production, as well as failing to pay for their medical procedures.

Belling (1998) argues that in televised non-fiction media focused on medical, biological, or scientific issues, it is assumed that the information presented is authentic and not compromised for the sake of a dramatic narrative, which gives these programs a particular epistemological authority. The authenticity of *My 600-lb Life* is questionable given that many of the lawsuits filed against the production company argue that participants were forced to do things, such as eat large amounts of food on camera, to provide footage that supported a particular storyline. Belling (1998) further argues that the use of realism in medical television is not most measurable through how accurate the information is, but rather the impact this visualization has on the relationship between the viewer/patient and their doctors. Of course, the visualization of fatness as “obesity”, as already described, has had a significantly negative impact on the relationship fat people have with health care providers by serving as a “pedagogy of

disgust” (Lupton, 2014) that reinforces negative attitudes towards fat people. Most importantly, when these attitudes are held by medical professionals, the health care services provided to fat people can be significantly compromised. For example, surgeons operating on fat patients are more likely to be negligent; a result of this includes that fat patients are more likely to have a surgical tool left inside their body (Wann, 2009). Dr. Now has been the subject of multiple malpractice lawsuits, the most recent of which was filed in 2017 after he allegedly left a stainless steel connector and twenty-nine centimeters of tubing inside a patient. Medical neglect is a horrific but not rare occurrence for fat patients, as “medical professionals may be so focused on weight and oriented to prescribing weight loss strategies that they do not recognize markers of diagnosis or distress in their patients” (LaMarre et al., 2020, p. 68). Indeed, many of the lawsuits previously mentioned cite instances of exploiting and/or overlooking mental health concerns for production purposes. These examples illustrate how valid health concerns that require medical treatment are often overlooked in favour of pushing for weight-loss above all else – a sentiment that, as discussed in the literature review, underscores mainstream understandings of fatness and health and as discussed in this chapter, underscores each episode of *My 600-lb Life*.

Upsettingly, fat people are not granted dignity even in death. Discussions on social media of fat participants on *My 600-lb Life* who have passed away are abhorrent and draw significantly from “obesity” rhetoric as justification for offensive attitudes. And yet, these attitudes further reveal the insidious and counter-productive reality of “obesity” discourse: if the goal of “obesity” discourse, and weight loss procedures and television programs such as *My 600-lb Life* which build off of this discourse, is to reduce the number of fat people in the world thereby theoretically improving the health of the overall population, its mission will be unsuccessful due to its approach. Fat stigma has a significant impact on the quality of life and overall health of an individual, including serving as a contributing factor to mental health issues, such as depression and stress, that increase the likelihood of conditions such as coronary artery disease and some cancers (Glenn et al., 2013). Fat stigma also does not cure “obesity”, as it is also a contributing factor to weight gain (Goldberg, 2014). Therefore, fat stigma does nothing to decrease the number of fat people in the world. If anything, it helps the number grow.

## Conclusion

Przybylo and Rodrigues (2018) argue that when conceptualizing an abject body, we must consider not the abject characteristic itself, but how we react to it and how these reactions maintain social hierarchies. *My 600-lb Life* may generate affective investment towards its subjects, especially as every participant on *My 600-lb Life* is framed in a way that emphasizes that they are suffering due to a running tally of factors, including their socioeconomic status, race, ethnicity, geographic location, or childhood trauma. And yet, many participants are framed according to “obesity” logic and thus do not necessarily challenge anti-fat sentiments or other problematic social attitudes towards social groups such as those who are poor, live in rural or underserved communities, or who are part of a racial or ethnic minority.

However, affective investment does not need to be positive. Many of the caregivers on *My 600-lb Life* identify the overwhelm and despair that the participant feels about themselves, often emphasizing that they don’t want their loved one to continue living a “difficult” life. This sentiment shines light on the fact that it is not easy to move through the world as a fat person, particularly for those on the larger end of the fat spectrum. Often, these testaments humanize the participant as someone worthy of living a happy life. As a viewer, the affective intimacy facilitated through telling stories that involve histories of collective and individual trauma, oppressive social structures, and experiences of classism, racism, and ableism, in some ways made me feel like I could understand some of the participants on an intimate level while remaining very angry at interlocking systems of oppression. While I am not a superfat person, I can empathize with expressions of experiences of fat sadness (Gordon, 2016), of not having easy access to things like clothing or event seating, being subjected to public humiliation, or the feeling of loving yourself but hating your body. Additionally, many fat people have dreamed of losing weight, and one does not have to occupy the larger end of the Fat Spectrum to acknowledge that the fantasy of weight loss surgery (even with its high failure rates and other risks) can be a comforting thought when traditional weight loss methods, namely diet and exercise, as well as surgical interventions fail. This is because it alleviates part of the heaviness that comes with assuming responsibility for one’s size.

In discussing the use of historical sideshow traditions that frame the superfat body as a spectacle; the use of medical authority and expertise and related challenges;

negotiated readings of superfat bodies as abject, freakish, and grotesque; contradictions of weight loss surgeries; the limitations and affordances of trauma porn; and instances of resistance occurring in response to these programs, *My 600-lb Life* can be understood as a sticky text that both affirms and resists “obesity” discourse. There has been a shift in recent years away from dominant “obesity” rhetoric, particularly as weight-stigma and anti-fat bias becomes increasingly challenged in public discourse. The Learning Channel has been applauded for responding to this societal shift by producing body positive programming that explicitly claims to challenge these discourses. As seen on *My 600-lb Life*, it is traumatic on several levels to move through the world as a superfat person. Considering this, it is exciting to have the opportunity to watch a reality television show such as *My Big Fat Fabulous Life*, where a superfat person purports to love themselves as they are. That is the subject of chapter four.

## Chapter 4.

### Fat yet fabulous: Identifying body positive archetypes

As was discussed in the last chapter, superfat people are often framed on reality television as needing a radical intervention facilitated through weight loss surgery. These shows, such as *My 600-lb Life*, portray superfat bodies as abject “before” pictures and involve documenting participants as they undergo strenuous and traumatic circumstances to achieve thinness. Much of reality television scholarship centered on fatness has focused on these weight-loss discourses (Palmer, 2014; Raisborough, 2016; Sender and Sullivan, 2008; Sukhan, 2012). However, the increasingly popular body positive movement has inspired the creation of a small number of reality television shows that offer new representations of fat bodies and approaches to fatness (Kim, 2015). The stickiness of body positive shows is more forthright but remains unexplored in the same capacity as traditional reality television formats. As Bahra and Overboe (2020) argue, “the exposure of fatness and impairment that are affirmed and joyous do not have a vocabulary, they are simply expressions of a life” that “generate their own creative force to become something without limits, enabling the infinite possibilities of affective capacities to arise” (p. 206). Such shows, such as *My Big Fat Fabulous Life*, offer new ways of thinking about body size, particularly by spotlighting superfat people who oftentimes have positive or neutral feelings towards their bodies, and thus may not desire, be actively seeking, or significantly invested in losing weight.

*My Big Fat Fabulous Life* centers around the life of Whitney Way Thore, a white American woman in her late thirties who lives in Greensboro, North Carolina. She loves her cats, has a tight knit group of friends, is very close with her family, and loves to dance. Whitney also weighs nearly four hundred pounds. In 2014, Whitney filmed herself performing a dance routine and posted the video on YouTube. The video was aptly titled *A Fat Girl Dancing* and juxtaposed Whitney’s superfat body performing alongside her thin dance partner, Todd. The video went viral; as of June 2022, the video has almost 11 million views. One year after posting that video, Whitney was the star of a reality television show focused on her life. As the first episode explains, Whitney was not always fat; after gaining 230 pounds throughout her twenties, Whitney was diagnosed

with Polycystic Ovarian Syndrome. At the beginning of the first season, the audience is informed that Whitney now weighs approximately 380 pounds. *My Big Fat Fabulous Life* follows Whitney as she goes on dates, establishes a body positive fitness business, and navigates the world in her superfat body.

As will be discussed later in this chapter, the third season involves a scene where Whitney is filmed attending an intervention in the form of a mock funeral. Her mom, a southern belle named Babs, tells Whitney that she has a “special interest” in Whitney and her physical health. I, too, have a special interest in Whitney, as do the hundreds of thousands (if not millions) of audience members who have followed her story over the past seven years. However, unlike Babs, I am interested in how conversations about fatness can move beyond familiar “obesity” rhetoric that often masks fat stigma under the guise of a health concern. Mobley (2014) argues that contemporary media figures—especially those on television—appear to possess less fat shame than previous generations. I felt encouraged upon first discovering *My Big Fat Fabulous Life*; many people in my communities advised me to watch the show because of its explicit affiliation with body positivity. From both the marketing of the show as well as the validation of my friends’ enthusiasm, I was optimistic that the program aligned with queer approaches to fatness that call for an embracement of our abject bodies in ways that “relinquish the desire to be normal, respectable and polite” (Cooper, 2016, p. 193).

White privilege is a critical factor in this discussion of public displays of Otherness; while fat people and queer people use “tactics coded as queer in their actions: the takeover of public spaces, overt declarations that they were ‘out’ as ‘fat,’ and emphasizing their physicality through play” (Lind, 2020, p. 187), the ability to do so safely as well as the public responses to such actions is impacted by the racial identity of the bodies in question. Lind (2020) argues that these acts of resistance evoke white civility, and it is important to acknowledge that people of colour experience backlash that is much different than that facing white people, or white-passing people, who engage in similar behaviours. The characters on *My Big Fat Fabulous Life* are certainly overwhelmingly white, as well as cisgender and middle to upper class, which aids in “framing of non-normatively embodied cast members as extraordinarily normal” (Cleary, 2016, n.p.). As a voyeuristic reality television program centered on a superfat woman’s daily life, Whitney, along with her friends and family, are filmed doing very mundane

activities and tasks: they care for their pets, go on holidays, celebrate milestones, and work average jobs. Therefore, it is significant that it is specifically Whitney's fatness that makes the show's participants worthy of investment from a reality television network, and that her fatness is made palatable by the white, cisgender, middle-class identities of the cast. With these factors in mind, it remains significant that Whitney publicly identifies as fat, and that this show was framed as body positive, as many marginalized groups have worked to reclaim visualizations and terminology associated with their identities that have historically positioned these groups as violating "boundaries of cultural taste" (Snider, 2018, p. 337). My analysis of *My Big Fat Fabulous Life* builds off of this consideration. More specifically, this chapter looks at how body positive discourse is used throughout the show and how this discourse supports as well as resists dominant approaches to fatness within the context of the "obesity epidemic". As will be discussed in greater detail throughout this chapter, I draw from various fat archetypes, specifically the "(f)athlete" and the "no fault fatty" (Bias, 2014), to locate the sticky themes of the show.

## **Fat bodies that move and eat well**

Whitney's profession as a dancer categorizes her as a "(f)athlete", or "exceptional fatty", meaning someone who regularly engages with a physical activity in ways that contradicts fat stereotypes such as laziness. This archetype also places moral value on the fat body by proving its ability to be useful or productive *despite* its fatness (Bias, 2014). Rich (2011) argues that "the imperatives around 'eating well', exercising regularly and monitoring our bodies, carry powerful moral overtones about how individuals ought to behave" (p. 5). A well-behaved individual is often represented by a thin body, as thinness is presumed to be the result of making "healthy" choices regarding food and exercise. Whitney fails this moral test by virtue of being fat but compensates for this failure by expressing a desire to still make "healthier" food choices and by pursuing personal fitness training and a career as a professional dancer. As methods of food consumption are believed to play a large part in the determination of body size, a significant amount of time is dedicated on the show to communicate to the viewer what Whitney chooses to eat. Close-ups of Whitney eating and discussing food are used throughout almost every episode in the series. Perhaps most dramatic is in season 2, episode 4, "Pasta La Vista, Baby," during which Whitney vows to stop eating her favorite

carbohydrates. She hosts a dinner at an Italian restaurant where she watches her friends and family eat her favourite food while she practices self-restraint.

Bartky (1988) identifies three categories of disciplinary practices that govern the body: those that aim to produce a certain body size; acceptable gestures or movements from the body; and acceptable ways to adorn the body. By normative standards, an acceptable body size is defined by specific BMI categories, or clothing that is available in straight-sized stores and other accessibility considerations such as comfortably fitting into public spaces such as seating in restaurants or on airplanes. By these standards, as a superfat woman Whitney fails to discipline her body. However, acceptable gestures or movements include physical activities that are conducive to weight loss or maintenance of a thin body ideal. Whitney's profession as a dancer, which requires significant time dedicated to rehearsing routines in addition to physical training, visualizes an effort to discipline and control her superfat body.

For the most part, this discipline seems to be for professional development purposes. However, there are instances in which Whitney expresses hope that dancing will help her lose weight. For example, within the first two minutes of season 1, episode 1, "A Fat Girl Dancing," Whitney states, "I need to lose some weight so that I can do everything in life that I want to do, and hopefully do that through dance" (Pilighian & Wan, 2015, 1:57). In season 1, episode 4, "More than a Buddy," this sentiment is brought up again, in which Whitney says that she has been dancing more often and is curious if that has resulted in weight loss. It was disheartening to watch this narrative as this approach counters the marketing of the show as centering around the life of a superfat woman who is content with her body, is happily pursuing a career as a dancer, and otherwise living a "fabulous" life. Whitney's interest in losing weight becomes more dire after she collapses during a dance-a-thon in the season 3 premiere, "I Wanna Be Fat." In the following episode, season 3, episode 2, "A Brush with Death," the athletic ability and healthiness of Whitney's body is questioned when she is rushed to the hospital and undergoes medical testing to determine why she passed out during the marathon dance session. Her capabilities as a dancer are continuously questioned at various points throughout the show's seasons.

Despite other health concerns, fat bodies are expected to discipline their unruliness with excessive engagement and dedication to physical activity. A significant

storyline of the show is Whitney's experiences with a personal trainer, particularly how she failed and disappointed one trainer, Will, by gaining back the weight he had helped her lose. Similar to Dr. Now on *My 600-lb Life*, Will's positionality as a thin personal trainer is significant in that his perspective is framed as authoritative and grounded in the assumed expertise he has gained through his work, as well as ability to maintain a thin body. In season 3, episode 8, "Flirting with Disaster," Will says he is discouraged because he thinks Whitney is not trying hard enough to lose weight; Will also says in this episode, "for you to dance well, you can't weigh 380 pounds" (Piligian & Calvert, 2016–2017, 37:49). He talks about having asked Whitney to take photos of her food and send them to him. Whitney says she feels policed by this demand, to which Will responds, "it's what I have to do" (Piligian & Calvert, 2016–2017, 38:32). Shortly after, Whitney leaves the gym and goes to sit in her car, where Will finds her. He points out the food waste on the floor of her car, including coffee cups and empty packaging, and says that this is evidence of her not being committed to their plan while the camera zooms in on the pile of food wrappers. By the end of the episode, Will has fired Whitney as a client. In the next episode, season 3, episode 9, "Big Fat Breakup," Whitney works to earn the respect of this trainer, who eventually agrees to take her back as a client. This storyline is also disappointing to watch, as the pressure, sadness, frustration, and intensity of the workouts in this episode are similar to what is portrayed in shows such as *The Biggest Loser* in which contestants vie for the attention and respect of thin physical trainers who express disgust at their abject fatness as well as disappointment in their confessed behaviours. To witness these storylines dominate the first few seasons of the series felt like a bait-and-switch due to an unfulfilled promise of fabulous fatness.

While her storyline with Will was particularly punishing in that Whitney is documented engaging in disciplinary behaviours, policed by a fitness coach, and punished for seemingly disobeying his authority, there are also many moments in which Whitney addresses joyful movement in a fat body. For example, in season 1, episode 1, "Fat Girl Dancing," she states that "I didn't lose any weight this week, but I also didn't lose any confidence—I'm still at a ten. I did get confirmation this week that I can be both fat and fit and I still believe in my commitment to dance" (Piligian & Wan, 2015, 40:23). She states that she can be "both fat and fit", which is notably different from the perspective that one can be fit *despite* being fat. The potential for a more radical

discussion is here, however, this scene is followed by a swift reiteration that Whitney still feels she needs to lose weight.

Whitney does express a fear of becoming obsessed with exercise and her weight, which draws attention to the insidious relationship between healthism, the “obesity epidemic”, and the development of new forms of disordered eating and exercise, such as orthorexia. For example, Whitney states in season 2, episode 4, “Pasta La Vista, Baby,” that she wants a healthy relationship with food. Whitney also explicitly identifies as fat, which is significant on its own as the use of this word remains rare in body positive discourse. She also expresses a desire to use the show as an opportunity to humanize fat people. Discussions of physical activity and fatness also start to shift in later seasons when Whitney is arguably avenged as she becomes business partners with Will’s daughter to run a body positive fitness training company. Such examples of Whitney’s shifting opinions regarding things like exercise and food serve as opportunities to challenge familiar “obesity” rhetoric. Unfortunately, many of these opportunities for radical dialogue are overshadowed by another significant storyline that runs throughout the series: Whitney’s health.

## **Fat bodies that are sick**

A second good fatty archetype that is evident in *My Big Fat Fabulous Life* is the “no fault fatty” (Bias, 2014), where fatness is permissible if it can be explained as an unfortunate byproduct of illness or disease. Similar to efforts on *My 600-lb Life* to identify the root cause(s) of one’s fatness, the emphasis on Whitney’s health circumstances reveals how fatness can be socially accepted under certain conditions and up to a hypothetical pathological weight limit. Indeed, LeBesco (2004) argues that in the rare occurrences in which fatness is considered an acceptable identity, there are differentiations of “good” and “bad” fat, where fatness is acceptable “only to a certain degree, and not embraced without exception” (p. 62). The show’s emphasis on Whitney’s diagnosis of PolyCystic Ovarian Syndrome (PCOS), paired with the emphasis on the concerns of her family and friends, as well as the use of medical experts on the show, come together in a surveillant assemblage (Rich 2011) that “creates the space within which particular versions of public pedagogies on health” (p. 12) are developed and maintained. This includes the idea that there are “good” and “bad” fat people, in which a good fat person works to assert a moral character and can explain one’s

fatness, compared to bad fat people who cannot justify their fatness in ways that receive social validation.

The plotline of *My Big Fat Fabulous Life* could be summarized as Whitney attempting to regain control of her life after experiencing significant weight gain due to PCOS. In season 1, episode 1, “A Fat Girl Dancing,” music, emotional talking-head interviews, and “before” pictures are used to explore Whitney’s feelings about her PCOS diagnosis. Throughout this premiere episode, Whitney expresses a desire to lose weight but informs the audience that PCOS makes losing weight extremely difficult. This absolves Whitney of some responsibility for her weight gain and evokes sympathy toward her struggle to lose weight. On reality television shows that feature weight loss, fat characters who promote a fat subjecthood appear to apologize “for their fatness and the associated pathological behaviors that their fat bodies imply” (Mobley, 2014, p. 164). While not a transformative or competitive weight loss program, *My Big Fat Fabulous Life* is arguably no different in this regard. The consistent use of pictures from before Whitney gained weight in her twenties insinuate that Whitney has lost control of her body, and that the real, non-sick Whitney is trapped inside. For example, within the first minute of the inaugural episode, “A Fat Girl Dancing,” there is a slideshow of photos of Whitney in high school and her first year of college. In the photos, Whitney is visibly significantly smaller and appears to be quite happy. The photos are accompanied by a voiceover narration: “Looking back at when I was thin, I can’t believe how much I took it for granted. When I started high school, I weighed one hundred and fourteen pounds” (Piligian & Wan, 2015, 0:45). This is followed by Whitney describing how gaining weight made her fall into a depressive episode and is accompanied by a photo of herself looking unhappy and physically larger than in the previous photos.

Research has explored how PCOS may grant women an opportunity to subvert hegemonic feminine beauty ideals. More specifically, PCOS may be an opportunity to reject oppressive disciplinary practices and instead revel in the abject characteristics of its symptoms, such as higher testosterone levels, facial hair, and balding. Fisanick (2009) notes that this potential needs to be paired with actively transgressive behaviors to truly challenge gendered social expectations. Fisanick (2009) continues, stating that PCOS “is hidden within a matrix of cultural expectations, and attempts to make the PCOS body visible are regulated not only by society but by women with PCOS as well” (p. 109). While the show could explore the abjection of women with PCOS, Whitney is

depicted both visually and through audio narrations as actively rejecting these physical manifestations and seeking to fix them. In episode 4 of season 1, "More than a Buddy," Whitney states that PCOS "will rob you of your femininity" (Piligian & Wan, 2015, 4:33), noting the abject characteristics of her body resulting from her disease as she plucks facial hair from her chin.

Throughout each season, Whitney acknowledges the damage of disciplinary practices that are enforced on fat bodies while simultaneously going through many of the same acts of self-governance. In the previously mentioned scene where she is plucking her chin hair, her father enters the room and they have an emotional conversation in which Whitney describes the difficulties of finding seating and accommodations in public spaces; in tears, she states, "I am getting social anxiety because people invite me places and I'm scared I can't fit in the chair. And like, then I can't go where I want to go and I have to feel like I have to stake out where I'm going to see if I can fit there. It makes me want to not go out with my friends anymore" (Piligian & Wan, 2015, 6:10). This is a familiar experience for fat people, myself included, as a component of a fat subjectivity is the undertaking of additional labour that involves assessing whether an environment is accessible. Like the participants on *My 600-lb Life* also illustrate, this tension that arises when one is unsure as to whether or not one will literally fit into a public space, particularly as part of a social activity, further reaffirms the freakish and misfitting characteristics of fatness.

The freakishness of Whitney's body is further emphasized throughout the first season. For example, in season 1, episode 2, "Hate Mail," Whitney struggles to shave her legs and is shown sprawled across her bed on a towel while she asks her mother to shave the backs of her legs for her (Piligian & Wan, 2015, 7:00). In season 1, episode 4, "More than a Buddy," Whitney says "I would like to avoid my body becoming like a disability" (Piligian & Wan, 2015, 16:43); she also states that she loves her body, even while naked, but that she is physically limited by it. This comment and caveat renders the symptom of weight gain as a disabling characteristic and frames such an outcome as a negative consequence that should be avoided. Reality television is sometimes upheld as offering visibility to marginalized groups. Palmer (2012) argues that this visibility often highlights the "freak value" of these bodies (p. 2). Indeed, the freak value of Whitney's diseased body is emphasized in discussions (e.g., sit-down interviews and voiceover audio) and visualizations (e.g., the use of "before" photos) in which Whitney describes

the abject characteristics of her body, refers to her body as potentially disabling, and describes the symptoms of PCOS as robbing her of her preferred gender presentation. Visualizing and constructing a body with PCOS as both abject and disabling thus serves as an important message regarding the need to discipline unruly bodies, actively seeking to stay in good health, and avoiding disability and disease.

This is a missed opportunity for disidentification between disabled and fat communities, however, it is not surprising as body positive discourses often approach combating fat stigma by trying to disprove assumptions about fatness (particularly those that liken fatness to other non-normative embodiments), or by finding justifications for fatness. The danger of this approach is that treating fat as the result of something (for example, as an uncontrollable biological symptom of a disease such as PCOS) ultimately constructs superfat bodies as needing an explanation that other bodies do not. This approach maintains difference and exclusion of fat bodies outside of conceptions of what a normal body should look like, thus maintaining fatness as a liminal characteristic to be worked through, not lived in, as the show's title implies. Additionally, arguing for equality for fat people by emphasizing someone's personal characteristics outside of their fatness makes identity an internal characteristic, which does not inscribe value or worth in the embodiment and materiality of fatness itself (Cooper, 2016; Kent, 2001; LeBesco 2004). LeBesco (2004) argues that these attempts to justify fatness "drains pro-fatness rhetoric of its power" (p. 114). A radical approach to combating fat stigma would be a position in which fatness need not be justified or explained, particularly within medical frameworks that validate fatness as an unfortunate symptom and not as a valid choice and/or embodiment. Whitney's approach to her own fatness is further informed by medical experts and her community of friends and family, who similarly frame her body as a site of concern.

## **Fat bodies that remain concerning**

Reality television shows often include participants' families as motivation for some kind of transformation, including losing weight. In these scenarios, the family is used to intimately represent the attitudes of the audience or general public (Palmer, 2012). Whitney's parents, Babs and Glenn, whose family home she lives in periodically throughout the seasons, often express concerns for her health and try to intervene in her lifestyle choices and guide her towards particular disciplinary practices to help her lose

weight. Whitney's parents' concerns are supported by the advice of public health experts present throughout the series. As discussed in the previous chapter, the experts relied upon in reality television are often cast to act as a guide throughout the transformation process that "offer prescriptive advice and work with a clear definition of what is 'right'" (Inthorn and Boyce, 2010, 85). Reality television also incites the "stare" (Huff, 2001) in which audiences are similarly encouraged to read bodies and diagnose what is right and wrong. Throughout the series, numerous medical experts (all of whom are visibly thin) examine Whitney's body and identify Whitney's fatness as a direct threat to her quality of life. While not technically a transformative or competitive reality television show, the use of medical experts in *My Big Fat Fabulous Life* and Whitney's attempts to develop a "healthier" lifestyle based on this medical advice do produce a similar trajectory. Therefore, both her family and her medical practitioners serve part of the surveillant assemblage that scrutinize her body, perform interventions, and guide her towards seemingly better choices (Rich, 2011).

Presumably to combat the mortality risk associated with "obesity," Whitney's parents often comment on her food choices, enacting the responsibility of reality television "to resolve the dilemma of citizens who do not make the 'right' choices when assigned the rational responsibility of their own governance and self-care" (Ouellette and Hay, 2008, p. 87). For example, in season 1, episode 3, "The Say-Yes Philosophy," Whitney's dad interrupts her while she is making herself a sandwich and offers to make her something to eat that he deems to be healthier. As Whitney puts mayonnaise on her banana sandwich, he intervenes: "I'll tell you what, let me fix you an egg and turkey bacon" (Piligian & Wan, 2015, 0:50). He says in a voiceover narration, "I'm hopeful that Whitney will start to make better choices" (Piligian & Wan, 2015, 1:05). He then switches their meals and eats the sandwich she was making, which is a confusing action that illustrates how health is performed differently by people of different sizes and genders. In season 1, episode 4, "More than a Buddy" (Piligian & Wan, 2015), Whitney's father Glenn brings home 14 different scales in an effort to find one that Whitney agrees is accurate as she argues that her scale does not work. Whitney laughs about her parents, particularly her dad, being overly watchful, but this scene is reminiscent of how superfat bodies are surveilled by authority figures, as well as assumptions that superfat people cannot be trusted to tell the truth about their health or diet, that they are uneducated about "healthy" behaviours, and/or that they need guidance with regard to weight loss.

Whitney's friends, most of whom are thin, are generally supportive but appear skeptical regarding the health status of Whitney's body. For example, in season 2, episode 4, "Pasta La Vista, Baby," Whitney's close friend Tal (who is visibly thin) says, "if I found myself, you know, facing the same health scares as Whitney is, I would absolutely commit myself to making some positive changes... I would not want to let my health hold me back from anything I want to do, and I don't want to see that happen to Whitney either" (Piligian & Calvert, 2016–2017, 16:58). The most drastic instance of community concern on the show appears in season 3. In season 3, episode 2, "A Brush With Death," her parents and close friends organize an intervention in the form of a mock funeral after Whitney collapses at a dance marathon and is investigating whether she has heart issues. Whitney's parents gather her friends at their home to discuss how to intervene. Her mother, Babs, says that they all need to band together and confront Whitney. Whitney's friend Tal says, "I'm so glad that she's found this confidence in her body, but she's been talking about losing weight for a while now and nothing is changing... with her weight the way it is, just because she's not diabetic doesn't mean that she won't have other problems" (Piligian & Calvert, 2016–2017, 13:03). I was uncomfortable at the assumed pathology of her body despite any evidence, as well as skeptical as to how Whitney would receive this intervention. While one of her friends, Ashley, was similarly skeptical, she insists that this intervention is necessary. Kyrölä and Harjunen (2017) argue that body fat is granted a material immateriality through its framing as "phantom fat" and "liminal fat", where its supposed malleability maintains negative attitudes about fatness, particularly that weight loss is desirable and achievable. Indeed, Whitney's friends and family discuss her fat as "a removable, threatening, continuously disappearing and reappearing, almost haunting entity" (Kyrölä and Harjunen, 2017, p. 101) that Whitney should be more concerned about. As previously discussed, "obesity" discourses use mortality risk as a scare tactic, however, I was surprised at its deployment in this instance given the amount of time and effort Whitney has been shown to dedicate to her health. My surprise did not last as these scenes are also familiar in the sense of having approached my body, or having been approached by others, in similar ways.

Later in this episode Whitney meets with Tal under the guise that he is taking her out for dinner. Tal gives her driving instructions that eventually lead them to a funeral home where there is a large photo of Whitney placed in front of a coffin inside the

chapel. Four of her friends and her parents are present and each give a eulogy. One friend expresses that “with her passing, Whitney taught me there isn’t always a tomorrow to start achieving our goals” (Piligian & Calvert, 2016–2017, 20:40). Whitney’s mother Babs speaks directly to Whitney: “I have a very special interest in you paying more attention to your physical health. I am your mother and you’re my clone. And I love you more than even I could ever have imagined... it’s time for you to think about your own life and your health needs” (Piligian & Calvert, 2016–2017, 22:29).

Whitney is understandably angry about this intervention, and her response is uncomfortable to watch. Whitney takes a moment to decide how she wants to respond to this intervention and her silence is powerful. Indeed, Ahmed (2010) argues that there is power in hesitation because it creates awkwardness when refusal to go along with something destabilizes public comfort. The attendees wait to see her reaction and Whitney eventually breaks her silence to point out that both her partner, Lennie, and her best friend, Buddy, are both absent. She learns that Lennie is not present because he is at work, but it is explained to Whitney that Buddy did not participate because he was extremely uncomfortable with the idea of a mock funeral. Because of this, Buddy is positioned similarly to Whitney in that he is troubled by the pathologization of Whitney’s body and rejects the need for such drastic action. This solidarity further strengthens a different reading of this scene and supported my viewpoint that Whitney’s family and friends are behaving inappropriately and offensively. Furthermore, Buddy’s refusal to participate offers an opportunity to view Whitney and her body as viable at its current size.

Whitney’s hesitation to respond to what she was just subjected to, paired with her clear yet silent disdain, does not frame her in the same way as the resistance of participants on *My 600-lb Life* who refuse to listen to Dr. Now or other authority figures attempting to enforce disciplinary measures. Rather, this scene produces a “bad feeling” that disrupts the entire dynamic; Ahmed (2010) writes that “some bodies are presumed to be the origin of bad feeling insofar as they disturb the promise of happiness, which I would re-describe as the social pressure to maintain the signs of ‘getting along’” (p. 39). Whitney’s silence, hesitation, and discomfort reminded me that such instances consist of conflicting layers: the opinions of friends and family, assumed opinions of the general public, dominant “obesity” discourses, internalized fat stigma, lived experiences of fat shame and public humiliation, and/or political beliefs invested in fat liberationist rhetoric.

Moments in which these intersecting attitudes are present are familiar to fat people, particularly those familiar with body positive and/or fat positive movements, as the influence of dominant “obesity” narratives are hard to negotiate with or consistently resist, especially when one’s mortality is the subject of discussion. This is a particularly familiar scene for those of us whose public-facing work receives similar criticisms grounded in fat stigma and healthist rhetoric.

I waited hopefully to see the results of Whitney’s thought process, as the potential of this storyline would be powerful if Whitney had outright rejected these concerns and if the episode had ended here. However, the sequence ends with Whitney saying that she is going on a ski trip to prove that she is capable of living her life as she wants while at her current size. Later in the episode, the ski trip does not go well and Whitney ends up in a state of panic after hurting herself on the ski slope. This experience incites anxiety within Whitney about the size of her body and reaffirms the concerns that underscored her mock funeral, particularly that her superfat body impedes her ability to live a full life, reaffirming the understanding of fat as a liminal or phantom quality.

## **Fat bodies that toe the line**

An early storyline in season 1 that continues into season 2 is Whitney’s fear that she is developing diabetes after being diagnosed as prediabetic. Whitney’s anxiety and fear of being diagnosed as diabetic provide dramatic tension as she actively engages in efforts, such as increased exercise, to ward off such a diagnosis. In the second season, *My Big Fat Fabulous Life* offers a rare opportunity for intimate and vulnerable dialogue regarding diabetes and fatness. This is a significant example considering how the threat of becoming diabetic is often weaponized in “obesity” discourses. In season 2 episode 22, Whitney meets with Sean O’Brien, a British man who became famous when a stranger posted photos of him dancing at a concert in an attempt to mock him for his size. You can see in the two photos that Sean becomes aware that he is being made fun of, as the first photo is of Sean dancing, and the second photo depicts Sean standing still and looking sullen, his body language inferring that he felt ashamed. After the video was posted, thousands of people responded with offers to dance with Sean, and he eventually flew to Los Angeles to attend a dance party held in his honour. In this episode, Whitney flies to Los Angeles to attend this dance party and meets with Sean

beforehand. In this encounter, they discuss their experiences navigating their experiences with diabetes, or in Whitney's case, a potential diagnosis. Like some of the vulnerable moments on *My 600-lb Life*, the conversation between Sean and Whitney touches on a common debate in both "obesity" discourse as well as fat activist communities, being: "Is every body size really conducive to health, or is there a point when the body size is pathological?" (Mayes, 2016, p. 121). As some fat studies scholars have identified, this question is problematic in that it extends acceptability to some fat people, insinuating that other fat people are beyond biological limits.

Whitney discloses that she is prediabetic, to which Sean responds that he has Type 2 diabetes. It is unfortunate that this conversation is cut short by the editing process, as Sean appears largely unbothered by his diagnosis; he comments that he takes daily medication but otherwise he feels it is under control. Whitney says that she is relieved and encouraged by this, but also reaffirms in a private interview that she remains committed to her quest to managing her weight in order to avoid developing diabetes. While she admires Sean's relaxed approach to his diagnosis, her belief that gaining any weight would push her body into the same pathological category guides her behaviors and attitudes. Her fear has been present throughout the season; for example, in season 2, episode 4, "Pasta La Vista, Baby," Whitney describes hearing a voice inside her head that tells her not to consume sugar or else she will get diabetes. This self-policing is reminiscent of the panopticon effect in which individuals are encouraged to assume the responsibility of surveilling themselves rather than be governed by an external authority figure (Foucault, 1979).

Whitney's insistence on not crossing over any kind of pathological barrier remains sticky, however, in that this episode still involves explicitly challenging the ways fat bodies are made to feel excessive. For example, when Whitney flies to attend Sean's dance party, she identifies the accessibility barriers fat people often experience on airplanes, such as not fitting into the seats or being subjected to negative commentary from fellow passengers. These instances not only inspire feelings of shame but require diligence in navigating in attempts to avoid being shamed by others, and it is this 'third eye' (Orbach, 2009) that is an unfortunate and familiar reality for many fat people. In these instances, Whitney touches on these sticky topics in ways that address the unjust nature of inaccessibility. However, her attitudes about her own body as well as those

with diabetes do not discredit the underlying sentiment that suggests it is fat people, and not structural issues, that are the problem to be fixed.

The lack of interrogation with fatphobic ideologies was frustrating to watch. However, the show became more radical in its discussions of fatness as the series progressed into later seasons. For example, Whitney addresses fat stigma head-on in season 6 episode 6, when her RV is vandalized. Whitney has bought an RV that is decorated with a large photo of her and her dance partner Todd on the side as a method to promote her tour with her Big Girl Dance Class. Someone has spray painted the words “Fat Bitch” across the photo of her face. Understandably, Whitney expresses that she feels unsafe and violated. In an interview, she states: “I deal with fat shaming all the time and it sucks. People can’t stand it, they hate fat people but what they hate more is a fat person who doesn’t hate herself” (Piligian & Calvert, 2019, 41:20). In this instance, Whitney is angry about being subjected to fat hate, and insists that her current superfat body deserves to be treated with respect.

Unfortunately, she does eventually internalize this hatred in ways that encourage her to contemplate what she can do herself to avoid such discrimination. Two seasons later, in season 8, Whitney contemplates undergoing weight-loss surgery. Until the eighth season, audiences have watched Whitney try to lose weight through methods such as diet and exercise to no avail. While she has been subjected to scrutiny from the public and her closest family and friends, this time her community has a different response compared to when they held a mock funeral for Whitney. When Whitney begins to consider undergoing weight loss surgery, contrary to discussions from previous seasons, all of her friends and family express that they are taken aback by this, many stating that such a decision does not align with who Whitney is or what she values, with Heather admitting that such a thing is “so surprising I really can’t wrap my brain around it” (Piligian & Calvert, 2021, 37:34). Considering the mock funeral in the third season, this errs on the side of gaslighting, but perhaps reflects a progression in their collective understanding of fatness or unwillingness to hold space for fat sadness.

In season 8 episode 11, Whitney is filmed sitting in a park having a socially distanced picnic with her friends when she announces that she is contemplating having weight loss surgery. The surprise and apprehension of her friends was productive in the sense that it counteracted my own emotional response to Whitney’s desire for weight

loss surgery. I wasn't surprised to watch Whitney entertain the idea of weight loss surgery as this is something that many fat celebrities undergo and seemed to be a natural progression that had built over eight seasons. Regardless of the lack of shock value, spotlighting the concept of weight loss surgery positions concerns about "obesity" at the forefront of a show that was supposedly focused on a superfat person lived a life that counteracted familiar approaches to fatness, particularly *My 600-lb Life* and other weight-loss reality programming on the same network. It is this hypocrisy that generated the strongest response in me, as almost the entire eighth season was dedicated to Whitney's struggle to decide whether or not she would undergo weight loss surgery.

Whitney's romantic life is positioned as one of the primary reasons for seeking weight loss surgery. Throughout all of the seasons, viewers watch Whitney go on dates and navigate many relationships that have all ended in heartbreak, emphasizing her insecurities around being alone and lacking a husband and family. In season eight episode 11, Whitney and her friend Buddy read out loud some of the harassment that she receives on dating apps and her emotional responses to being shamed or harassed for her weight are certainly powerful. And yet, Whitney's contemplation of such an extreme measure shows us that she is still suffering, not because of her size, but because of public opinions about her size and how she is treated as a superfat person. Following the reading of verbal abuse from men on dating apps, she laments that she is "tired of feeling like, you know, a sideshow or a secret" (Piligian & Calvert, 2021, 30:05). For some fat people, the freakishness of fat bodies can be a source of power. For Whitney, it is a source of pain, particularly considering her role as a public figure. For most, there is ebb and flow between these two attitudes.

Whitney confirms that she is contemplating weight-loss surgery primarily because she is in emotional distress following the dissolution of her engagement to a man named Chase. In season eight episode 11, she states that "weight loss surgery has never been something that I considered for myself and not something that I've been particularly super supportive about for most other people. Deep down, I know that I'm struggling and I know that I'm dealing with depression on a level that I haven't dealt with in a very long time. And I think that I'm seeking relief or a solution or a change" (Piligian & Calvert, 2021, 29:35). She also acknowledges the tension in being a public figure known for being body positive, and the criticism or rejection she may face from the communities she belongs to. Her friend Ashley offers support in this regard, saying

I've watched you starve yourself, I've watched you work out to the point where I've had to make you dinner because you literally couldn't move. I have watched you try... if you think surgery is going to work, then look into it... It isn't like you haven't tried. I support you either way, but I don't want you to think we think you're like a fraud or something because you always said you'd never do it (Piligian & Calvert, 2021, 38:03).

Whitney is understandably frustrated with the way she is treated as a superfat person; she cries as she admits that she is most interested in weight loss surgery so that people will like her and treat her with kindness. This is a brutally honest reflection regarding the underlying motivations for weight-loss surgery that are not related to physical health.

Because Whitney's motivating factor is emotional distress and not physical health, Ashley revokes her support. She states: "She's tried to change the world and she doesn't feel like that's working, so she wants to change herself instead. And that's what I can't support" (Piligian & Calvert, 2021, 40:38). While Whitney feels that her body is a barrier to her happiness, her friends seemingly do not agree and are worried about the risks such surgeries involve. In season 8 episode 9, Whitney goes ahead with a virtual consultation with a doctor who specializes in "obesity" medicine. It is soon revealed that this is the same doctor Whitney saw in earlier seasons for concerns regarding her blood sugar. Whitney asks about the risks of surgery, which are quickly dismissed by the doctor. However, both eventually agree that Whitney needs to work on her emotional health, as well as her relationship with food, before considering surgery.

Whitney ultimately decides to forgo weight loss surgery, and this decision is reflective of a strong sense of self-love and compassion. In season eight episode 9, Whitney identifies that she is not in a healthy emotional state and is exploring weight loss surgery as a result of a depressive episode. This realization is affirmed when her family is not immediately supportive of her curiosity about surgery, which Whitney tearfully describes in season 8 episode 12 as a pivotal moment for her in which she realizes that people do love her as she is. Kyrola (2014) writes that "self-love does not come without effort. Just as in dieting narratives, the process of becoming visible as a valuable and desirable self is represented first and foremost as a change in one's relation to oneself, not as a socially or culturally conditioned and enabled process, although the 'positive' relation to oneself can only become visible when confirmed through the eyes of others" (pp. 161-162). Season eight appears to be a moment of

weakness for Whitney but concludes with a re-commitment to her values as well as to her superfat body.

## Conclusion

Garland-Thomson's concept of the misfit is useful in describing how Whitney and subsequently the reality show centered on her life, both adhere to and reject good fatty archetypes. The title itself highlights the misfitting attributes of the main character and Whitney is a misfit in the sense that she does not fit into public structures, whether that be private homes, public spaces, clothing, or interpersonal relationships (sexual, romantic, and/or platonic). While this is certainly helpful in providing a visualization regarding accessibility issues, and perhaps in heightening the general public's awareness to issues facing superfat people, the gazes incited by *My Big Fat Fabulous Life* along with the power dynamics central to its storylines further alienate superfat people and those on the larger end of the fat spectrum (Cleary, 2016).

However, the show is only one site where Whitney's feelings about fat stigma, weight loss, and her body are discussed, and it is a site that she has no editorial control over. Her social media platforms reveal further tension between the narratives produced on *My Big Fat Fabulous Life* and her actual opinions about body positivity, fatness, and self-worth. It is within these social media texts that instances of fat-positivity are more explicitly identifiable. For example, on Whitney's YouTube channel there is a video, "Body Positivity Bias in the Media," in which she acknowledges media bias towards differently sized fat people. Whitney clearly states that if the person talking about body positivity is superfat, then this person will often be met with resistance or negativity. Whitney says in the video that both she and a fellow body positive activist, Megan (both of whom identify as having a history of eating disorders), were interviewed by the same person and treated differently because Megan is thinner than Whitney. Whitney says that the interviewer flirts with Megan and positively receives Megan's message of self-love. The interviewer tells Whitney, however, that her body and political message are not legitimate. Whitney identifies that the interviewer is sympathetic to those with eating disorders who fall on the thinner side of the spectrum, and not to those who are superfat. In the interview he expresses concern for Whitney's health but not for Megan's. In her YouTube testimonial, Whitney is directly addressing the way media treat good fat archetypes (in this case, body positive activists who fall within a small fat designation of

curvy or plus-size) versus bad archetypes (body positive activists who are superfat). What this YouTube video illustrates is that Whitney is aware of good and bad fat archetypes. She recognizes that various fat people are treated differently for a variety of reasons and that, in line with fat activist ideals, any kind of difference in treatment is not justifiable for any reason. Whitney continues:

Body positivity does not only belong to women who are still conventionally attractive enough. Body positivity is for every woman and for every person... And the thing that really sucks is that even while I'm saying this I know that I still have privilege. I may not be as conventionally accepted as Megan, but I am white, I am able-bodied, I have a symmetrical face, I have a huge but proportionate body, I have a medical condition that contributed to my weight gain. There are things about me that make me easier to swallow for a lot of people (2015, 5:22).

Whitney therefore acknowledges that fat and nondiseased, racialized, disabled, or unconventionally beautiful bodies have less privilege than she does as a diseased, active, and conventionally attractive fat person. It is unfortunate that this perspective is not conveyed as explicitly on *My Big Fat Fabulous Life* considering that the show has significant reach, but it is also the more explicit expression of her politics on social media that, in part, maintains my investment in the show.

Good fatty archetypes are identifiable in *My Big Fat Fabulous Life* through the emphasis on reasoning or justification for Whitney's fatness. First, this is done through the identification of a disease that causes weight gain, thereby absolving her from much of the responsibility for her size. Second, this is achieved when Whitney attempts to prove her self-worth through engaging with physical activity. These archetypes depoliticize fatness and prove to cause missed opportunities to challenge fat stigma and intersecting aspects of identity, power, and meaning making in relation to body size. As such, the reliance on good fatty archetypes in *My Big Fat Fabulous Life* limits the political potential of this program as "the consequences are ultimately de-politicising if our bodies and subjectivities continue to orient themselves" towards normative concepts (Chadwick, 2021, p. 121). Still, I continue to watch *My Big Fat Fabulous Life*, arguably because I have become invested in Whitney.

While certainly culturally important as the first explicitly body positive reality show, *My Big Fat Fabulous Life* should be both celebrated and critiqued for the ways in which it both deviates from and upholds cultural norms. The archetypes used in *My Big*

*Fat Fabulous Life* offer conditional acceptance to only some bodies, framing superfat people as morally good if they are able to distance themselves from fatness either through association with a disease or by engaging in socially acceptable forms of exercise. The emphasis on Whitney's weight gain as a symptom of her disease and her career as a dancer, paired with dramatic concerns from members of her community and medical experts, construct Whitney as an acceptable superfat person who can justify her fatness to the viewer while simultaneously reassuring audiences that she is actively seeking weight loss. The symbolic annihilation of superfat people in reality television programs outside of the subgenres focused on weight loss and lifestyle transformation places immense pressure on shows that are marketed as body positive and progressive to depict the lives of superfat people in ways that counteract these dominant media representations. Gay (2014) argues that popular culture is ascribed an immense amount of responsibility, especially when a television show claims to be revolutionary; indeed, "we cling to it desperately because that representation is all we have" (p. 59). While *My Big Fat Fabulous Life* has received recognition and praise for shining a spotlight on the complexities of the life of a superfat person, the spotlight was shone on Whitney because she could prove her worth despite her fatness, evoking what LeBesco refers to as "the will to innocence", or the shirking of responsibility for one's fatness. Contrary to the marketing of this program as a body positive cultural product, the concept of feeling positive about one's body is not often extended to Whitney.

Garland-Thomson (2017) suggests that those serving as a spectacle can have a profound and meaningful impact on an audience if the audience is willing to actively listen. In paying close attention to the particularities of Whitney's behaviours, voiced opinions, and feelings, negotiated readings of the show, particularly the scenes that seem the most offensive, such as the mock funeral, reveal how fat people's sense of self are influenced by fatphobic behaviours. Whitney's ongoing quest for love drastically impacts her sense of self, and as will be discussed in the following chapter, the program *Hot and Heavy* – a three-episode reality television show focused on the romantic and sexual relationships of 'mixed-weight' couples – confronts western conceptions of love and who is deserving of it. What remains to be assessed is whether this program positions superfat people as worthy of love, or their relationships as desirable let alone viable. Or, like *My Big Fat Fabulous Life*, is it possible that *Hot and Heavy* deviates from

familiar “obesity” rhetoric only insofar as to extend social capital and desirability to the superfat people who still somewhat align or engage with such rhetoric.

## Chapter 5.

### “The bigger, the better”: Loving superfat people

On iTunes, where I watched the three-episode season of *Hot and Heavy*, the show is summarized as following “several couples where one person is morbidly obese and the other person is extremely attractive.” The juxtaposition of superfat bodies compared to those deemed “attractive” immediately sets a tone that, for many reasons, made me hesitant to watch the show. However, I was excited to see a dating show focused on the lives and experiences of superfat people. While the majority of the cast was overwhelmingly white and all were in heterosexual couplings, this was still a reality show that existed in stark contrast to virtually every other one centered on dating, romance, and desirability.

Long-running franchises such as *The Bachelor* have received a significant amount of criticism, much of which calls out the lack of diversity within its casting. Since its premiere in 2002, *The Bachelor* has had 25 seasons, only the last of which featured a Black lead. Similarly, its spinoff *The Bachelorette*, has had 17 seasons, three of which have recently featured Black leading characters (one of whom, Tayshia Adams, was brought in midway through the season to replace the original white bachelorette). There has never been a fat participant on the show; in fact, there has never been a bachelor or bachelorette who has deviated from dominant Eurocentric beauty standards aside from the aforementioned four instances of racial diversity.

Despite the many callouts by devoted fans and members of the “Bachelor Nation” to cast people who represent more “average” Americans, there have been no changes as of yet to the show’s structure or content. Blank (2000) argues that “culturally, we’re taught to believe that sexual activity happens as a result of sexual desire. Sexual desire, in turn, happens as a result of beauty, sexiness, sex appeal, and love” (p. 2). This is reflected in the invisibility, or symbolic annihilation, of people with lower sexual and/or social capital and desirability, such as fat people, from depictions of romantic love and sex in popular culture. This erasure is supported by the influence of the ongoing “obesity epidemic”, which frames fat people as a reflection of the worst parts of the modern American lifestyle and as a threat to the vitality of the nation. As such, to

incorporate body diversity into a show such as *The Bachelor* or *The Bachelorette* would contradict the traditional, conservative American and Christian values that underlie much of the format and content (Pozner, 2010), especially as there has been a notable resurgence of both content and participants devoted to Evangelical Christianity within *The Bachelor* franchise, including its spinoff programs (Carey, 2021). As one of the largest franchises in reality television, perhaps it would be unrealistic to expect either *The Bachelor* or *The Bachelorette* to exist outside of the “tyranny of slenderness” (Chernin, 1981) on which it was seemingly founded, and which is reflected in much of mainstream media.

Before *Hot and Heavy*, the closest challenge within reality television to the tyranny of slenderness within depictions of love and relationships was the Fox show *More to Love*. Interestingly, this show was created by Mike Fleiss, the creator of *The Bachelor*. Premiering in 2009 for a short eight-episode season similar in format to *The Bachelor*, the main character and love interest, plus-size Luke Conley, was presented with a selection of twenty curvy women. It is interesting that what was effectively a fat bachelor was only offered a selection of fat women from which to choose a partner, as if his size placed restrictions on who Luke would be attracted to, or who would be attracted to him. This decision to only cast fat contestants created an environment in which fat tropes ran amuck; the show emphasized many fat stereotypes, including that fat people are consumed by food. For example, unlike scenes from *The Bachelor* and *Bachelorette*, in which food is either completely removed or minimal amounts of food are plated simply to serve as untouched props, *More to Love* involved b-roll of Luke eating fast food and shots of huge, heaping plates of food and drinks at the group cocktail parties.

Many of the contestants over the course of the eight episodes spent a significant amount of time lamenting about the discrimination and ill treatment they had experienced while dating as fat people. These interviews were all juxtaposed within scenes that emphasized harmful stereotypical assumptions about the behaviours and desires of fat people. While these discussions did shed light on the realities of dating while fat, such as feeling insecure or vulnerable due to the influence of social capital and desirability politics, many of the participants expressed disdain for themselves and their size. Because of this, *More to Love*, while progressive in its casting, further reified the fat stigma that underlies all dating and romance themed reality television shows.

Even though *More to Love* was a reality show focused on love and dating, and not weight-loss, there was little material within the season that suggested being fat is a desirable way to live one's life and instead reaffirms cultural understandings of fatness as an abject characteristic. Graves and Kwan (2012) argue that while *More to Love* is framed "as a progressive portrayal of 'real' women bordering on fat activism... Ultimately, the show conveys a superficial form of body equality where fat women too can be loved, but only if they are willing to over-exaggerate their femininity and submit themselves to external validation via the objectifying male gaze" (p. 47). Further complicating the progressive potential of the show, unlike dating shows such as *The Bachelor* and *The Bachelorette*, the Wikipedia page for *More to Love* lists each of the contestants' weights. From this list, it can be determined that it is the smallest contestant who wins Luke's heart in the series finale.

In her critique of *More to Love*, fat-positive activist and writer Marianne Kirby asks "is showing plus-size women in prime-time enough to promote understanding? Or do producers have a responsibility to follow through with the idea and create something that doesn't fall back on cheap clichés?" (2009, n.p.). I, as well as scholars such as Graves and Kwan (2012), do not feel that a fat person simply being filmed is enough to advance fat liberationist efforts, nor does it provide a nuanced understanding of the complexities of fat peoples' lives while maintaining the attitude that above all else, fat people deserve the same love, respect, and kindness as anybody else. There is much debate amongst reality television scholars and popular culture critics whether reality television producers have a responsibility to consider ethical, moral, or social justice issues when creating their programs (Heller, 2014; Wyatt and Bunton, 2012). I have argued elsewhere that those producing media depicting marginalized communities *do* owe something to the actual members of those communities; in sum, because of the limited representations marginalized communities have at their disposal, the few that do exist cannot simply be categorized as entertainment (Cameron and Webber, 2021). Rather, these few texts serve both pedagogical purposes for the larger public while simultaneously satisfying the hungry demands of representationally starved communities.

Deconstructing social prejudices, particularly fat stigma, may not be the responsibility or goal of This Is Just a Test Productions, the producers of *Hot and Heavy*. This is obvious when looking at the company's other projects, including a documentary

titled *We Are Fat* that spotlights the “obesity epidemic”, whose plot can be summarized as: thin people have now become a minority in the United States, and this is a problem. Their documentary *We Are Fat* echoes much of what was stated in the third chapter regarding how the modern industrialized environment of the United States is often blamed for the alarming rates of “obesity” within its population, spouting many of the statistics that fat studies scholars continue to critique. Interestingly, *Hot and Heavy* is missing from their list of projects on the production company’s website, although the trailer is present on its Instagram page. The reasons for this distancing can only be speculative, but it does suggest the possibility of dabbling in abjection gain social capital or investment from an audience with shifting political views on body politics, in addition to maintaining audiences who hold fatphobic attitudes.

The lack of body diversity in mainstream content focused on dating, sex and/or romantic love, paired with dominant discourse that frames fat people as undesirable, made me hesitant to believe that there was something worth watching within *Hot and Heavy*. My main hesitation was that this program would offer little beyond making a spectacle of thin men who are attracted to fat women. However, the positioning of superfat women as desirable romantic and sexual partners situates them as “the beautiful abject”, which Cho (2019) described as “a new form of popular abjection... made pleasurable as abject spectacle” due to its transgression of hegemonic norms (p. 45). From this perspective, the women featured on *Hot and Heavy* destabilize dominant ideologies regarding gender, sexuality, and body size. In a press release about the show, TLC (2019) wrote that “men who love plus-size women don’t have a fetish, they have a preference, just like some men prefer blondes” (n.p.). I became slightly hopeful that there was potential within this program for nuance in regards to fatness, dating and sexuality, perhaps even moments that directly confront “obesity” discourse.

Gailey’s (2014) concept of “hyper(in)visibility” acknowledges the ways in which a person can be both over-represented as well as overlooked depending on the context. Superfat women embody this concept by taking up a large amount of physical space, and also in their high representation on reality television, both of which reduce the person in question to shallow understandings of their character as many other facets of their personhood become overshadowed or invisible. Arguably, *Hot and Heavy* makes visible the complex lived experiences of superfat women who rarely receive positive attention and framing as desirable. Two of the three women, Joy and Adrianna, have

“extraordinary” storylines because they are superfat women who are not actively seeking weight loss (Snider, 2012, in Hurst 2020). Considering this, moments within *Hot and Heavy* challenge and destabilize attitudes about fatness; I was encouraged to see TLC summarize the show as a program that primarily explores how straight-size men defend dating women with less social capital due to their fatness, as well as how these men and women respond to criticism about their romantic relationships and sexual desires. As body positive rhetoric continues to become more prevalent in mainstream discourse, in turn slowly infiltrating cultural industries and posing challenges to social prejudices in ways that lean towards radical fat liberationist dialogue, I watched *Hot and Heavy* hoping that maybe this time there would be something different.

## **Let’s get *Hot and Heavy***

The one-season reality show *Hot and Heavy* features three heterosexual mixed-weight couples in which all of the male partners are “average” size and all of the female partners are superfat. Joy Hill and Chris Ortega, from California, have been together for three years and would like to get married. There is tension as they navigate this chapter in their lives largely due to concerns from Chris’ family, who worry that Joy’s size will hold Chris back from continuing to live an adventurous lifestyle. Kristin and Rusty Keadle live in Florida and have been married for two years. They are hoping to become pregnant but are experiencing difficulties. Despite Rusty’s protests, Kristin decides she would like to have weight loss surgery because she believes doing so will help them conceive a child. Adrianna Harris and Ricardo Thompson, from St. John’s, Newfoundland, are the youngest couple on the show and have been together for two years. They also have a young son, named Eli. Adrianna and Ricardo do not have as clear a story arc as the first two couples; their narrative explores how Adrianna and Ricardo met, as well as how they navigate the stigma and harassment that they both receive because of Adrianna’s size.

It is the premise of this show, e.g. issues pertaining to mixed-weight couples, that offer it as an excellent site of analysis in terms of the political potential of affective dissonance. Chadwick (2021) argues that “a feminist solidarity that draws on experiences of affective dissonance would derive its sense of belonging not from the commitment to an ideal that suggests the possibility of a better life despite obstacles... but from an investment in the conversation with others who struggle in similar, yet also

different, ways” (p. 132). The exploration of differences between the two people in each couple, as well as the affective dissonance between the viewer and the show’s content, offers an opportunity to explore issues pertaining to fatness in a more complex way when compared to other programs, such as *My 600-lb Life* and *My Big Fat Fabulous Life*.

Like body positive discourse, *Hot and Heavy* does incorporate many euphemisms about fatness. However, unlike the first two sites of analysis within this dissertation, the word fat is present throughout and is used to either neutrally describe the women or to signify their desirability (for example, Chris intentionally refers to Joy as fat when describing her to his friends). Similar to the trailer for the show *More to Love*, the majority of the promotional trailer for *Hot and Heavy* is composed of clips of the various participants expressing their fear that they may never find love because of their size. However, these interviews are paired with expressions of sexual and romantic desire for all involved, while emphasizing heterosexual male attraction towards superfat women. These conflicting narratives align with what Zimdars (2021) refers to as “fat ambiguity”, or the “multivocal contradictions and ambivalence, as well as feelings of ambiguity, uncertainty, and ‘the complex relationship between the body as it is lived and the body as it is imagined/perceived by others’” (p. 51). This chapter teases apart what aspects of superfat women’s experiences are afforded this complexity or tension within a reality television format, and how the program may reaffirm dominant and problematic understandings of fatness. For some, one of the hardest parts of existing as a fat woman can be the struggle to be perceived as a viable romantic and/or sexual partner (Harjunen, 2009). This is echoed at the end of the trailer for *Hot and Heavy*, when Joy laments what could be rephrased as the guiding question of the entire season: “Because of my size, sometimes I wonder if love is enough” (James et al, 2020, 01:44).

## **Gendered understandings of fatness**

To provide some context for the casting of fat women, and not fat men, within *Hot and Heavy*, it is important to consider some of the gendered factors that underlie both fat stigma as well as fat liberationist efforts. As discussed in previous chapters, body fat is often considered to be a standalone characteristic and not part of one’s entire being. As a physical characteristic, body fat is highly gendered through its association with femininity. This is in part due to the nature of its prominent location within feminized

areas of the body, such as the chest, hips, and buttocks. This is particularly applicable to bodies that have experienced puberty, as the transition to adulthood involves processes that increase the fat-to-muscle ratio in female bodies while decreasing this ratio among male bodies (Hartley, 2001). An important element of fat stigma “is the implicit belief that women should take up less than men” (Mobley, 2014, p. 88). Because of this, in western societies, it is people assigned female at birth who are most often perceived as struggling to manage their body fat throughout their entire lives, particularly during their adolescence and early adulthood when many are in the process of securing romantic and/or sexual partners (Kent, 2001).

Women are disproportionately impacted by fat prejudice and fat stigma (Zimdars, 2019); Harjunen (2017) argues that “body norms (especially those relating to body size) are stricter for women than for men and that there is a strong pressure on women to have a normative body. Women’s body norms are constantly monitored both privately and publicly, and transgressions of them often result in social penalties of some kind” (p. 88). For example, eating disorders are disproportionately experienced by young women. There are also gendered socioeconomic repercussions that are compounded when one is fat: while women are statistically paid less than men, fat women are paid significantly less than thin women (Wann, 2009). Additionally, mothers have been typically blamed for producing fat children as mothers are believed to be in charge of feeding and caring for them (Boero, 2009; Boero, 2012); in some instances, mothers are blamed for a lack of fatness in children, especially in contexts where fatness is a symbol of good health (Sarkar, 2020), prosperity and female fertility (LeBesco, 2004; Popenoe, 2005). Either way, it is the gendered female figure of the mother who is responsible for ensuring children adhere to dominant standards of beauty and health, which points to the underlying misogyny of fat stigma in general and the particular attention paid to the body size of women and girls.

Fat men have not experienced the same social and cultural scrutiny as fat women. While fat feminizes men in the sense that fat deposits in certain areas of the body make it more difficult to adhere to masculine standards of beauty (LeBesco, 2004), feminist theories have identified frameworks and concepts, such as the male gaze (Mulvey, 1975), to illustrate the gendered dynamics of desirability politics in which women are passive objects to be looked at and men are active subjects seeking to fulfill their needs (Kyrola, 2014). Because of this dynamic, fat women are disproportionately

scrutinized, as Graves and Kwan (2012) argue, fat women “who fail to conform to cultural dictates of appearance experience greater social sanction than male body non-conformists” (p. 49). This is revealed in the rates of romantic partnership for fat men compared to fat women, where “fat men are 11 percent less likely to be married” than their thin counterparts, whereas that statistic nearly doubles for fat women (Wann, 2009). Furthermore, heteronormative male beauty standards draw from working-class culture to place value on large bodies by associating bulk with strength. This is not exclusive to heterosexual men, as gay subcultures, such as the bear community, place value on larger gay male bodies (Richardson, 2016). This reality is depicted in the majority of representations of fat people in popular culture, as dominated by fat male characters while fat women have largely been written out of significant roles (Zimdars, 2019).

Fictional depictions of mixed-weight couples as composed of a fat man and thin woman are supported by research which suggests that mixed-weight relationships in which the male partner is heavier experience less conflict within their partnership and are more likely to succeed compared to fat women coupled with thin men, inferring that “women’s weight is a salient component of relationship quality” (Burke et al., 2012, p. 1111). Of course, fat men also experience fat stigma and may experience social isolation, bullying, and the development of unhealthy eating and exercise behaviours. However, these issues are rooted in misogyny due to the correlation of fatness with the female body and feminine gender presentations. There are also significant racial implications within discussions of male gender presentations and fatness (discussed in further detail later in this chapter); for fat Black men in particular, fatness can be hyper-masculine in that it can insinuate control or power. For example, this is reflected in clothing designed for Black men, such as baggy jeans and oversized t-shirts that emphasize the body and encourage men to take up space. In Gross’ (2005) writing on fat Black male musicians, Gross points out that fatness is evident in the names of rappers (i.e. Fat Joe, Notorious BIG, Big Pun) in an effort to communicate male dominance. All of these aspects support a general acceptance of fat men’s bodies compared to fat women’s bodies.

While perhaps common in cultural industries, fat men take up little space in body positivity and fat liberationist spaces (Zimdars, 2019). This is possibly because the fat positive and body positive movements have historically been led by women-identified

activists who were focused on establishing feminine and/or femme identities as central to their cause, often using women's fashion as a starting point to evoke social change (Cooper, 2016). Many queer fat activists and scholars have expressed disdain towards the compulsory femininity forced onto fat bodies, particularly through the limited offering of highly gendered plus-size clothing. This disdain could also be viewed as resistance to the gentrification of fat activism into a white, middle-class, heteronormative and palatable form of self-love that is preoccupied with "consumerism, professionalisation, supremacy and healthism" (Cooper, 2016, p. 171) despite the roots of fat activism in part residing in queer communities and its conceptions of beauty and desirability that theoretically differ from heteronormative values (Cooper, 2016; Farrell, 2011), although a growing body of research suggests that queer spaces are not quite free of fatphobic attitudes (Carter and Baliko, 2017; Conte, 2018; Oliver and Cameron, 2021; Pyle and Klein, 2011; Taylor, 2020a; Whitesel, 2014). For example, body fat also appears to be a compulsory hurdle in the way of achieving one's true self in queer spaces; body fat is often seen as a malleable characteristic and the focus of many gender-affirming surgeries, the removal or relocation of which often signifying the establishment of one's desired gendered presentation and/or identity when a normatively proportional physique is achieved (White, 2020). Drawing from these points of contention, fat cisgender people (particularly fat heterosexual women, due to the dominance of compulsory femininity within institutions and services, such as plus-size clothing, that are tailored towards fat people), receive more sexual and social capital than fat people of other gender identities (Jones, 2019).

In many ways, then, the white, feminine, and heterosexual superfat people on *Hot and Heavy* reflect the overall status of fat bodies within western societies. The women cast on *Hot and Heavy* may challenge gender scripts due to their fatness, however, they still ascribe to conventional beauty ideals and practices that underlie cultural assumptions regarding what type of people are deserving of love (Graves and Kwan, 2012). This positions Kristin, Joy, and Adrianna as more palatable for general audiences and may explain why they were cast. Social capital may be afforded to fat femme-presenting women who are able to participate in consumer culture in ways that enable them to embody as close to a hegemonic feminine ideal as possible (Kotow, 2020). As such, fat cisgender women are over-represented in makeover and lifestyle reality television. Fat women are consistently cast as characters who find their body fat

burdensome and are seeking weight loss through extreme dieting and exercise measures, or through surgical interventions, on shows such as *The Swan* or *The Biggest Loser*. Similarly, fat women with more social capital than others (such as those who are white, heterosexual, and middle to upper class) dominate the limited reality television shows focused on fat women's pursuit of love. However, this inclusion does not eliminate the risk for fetishization within these depictions.

## The role of whiteness

It is critical to discuss race in the framing of desirability and fatness. Social groups perceived to be at “high-risk” for fatness are disproportionately those that experience varying levels of racist discrimination, including immigrants, the lower-classes, and working mothers (McPhail, 2017). Due to the connections between fat stigma and anti-Black racism, colonialism, and the foundations of white supremacy (Farrell, 2011; Friedman et al., 2020; Shaw, 2006; Strings, 2019), fat women's bodies that are closest to Eurocentric beauty ideals, such as whiteness, are upheld as the most valuable, desirable, and acceptable fat bodies (Kotow, 2020); as such, “white cis women are established as the normative BBW embodiment” (Jones, 2019, p. 296). This is because “for men who are attracted to fat women, there is safety in preferring fat bodies at the top of the body hierarchy” (Kotow, 2020, p. 158). Therefore, not casting fat Black women on *Hot and Heavy* was likely a production choice that considered the layered forms of oppression that position racialized and colonized bodies as outrightly unacceptably fat, in order to primarily appeal to white audiences.

Furthermore, within popular culture, the “conspicuous absence of a proportionate number of white counterparts” to fat, Black cultural figures reveals that (fat) white female sexuality is viewed differently than that of fat women of colour (Shaw, 2006, p. 8). For fat Black women, both their race and body size may insinuate resistance or indifference to Eurocentric beauty ideals that underscore heterosexuality. Some critical race scholars have identified that Black communities possess less fat stigma and have a larger range of what constitutes an acceptable body size, which is reflected in the number of Black women in popular culture who do not adhere to the same thin ideals as white women social figures (Shaw, 2006). As Daufin (2020) argues, this viewpoint overlooks other factors (structural issues such as such as class, interpersonal issues such as fat stigma within Black communities, disciplinary issues within social institutions, and cultural

factors such as racist fat stereotypes such as the Mammy) that maintain Black women as subjects to fat stigma and discrimination, albeit in forms and methods that are different than those that white women experience. However, because the dominant social attitude is that Black women appear to possess stronger body positive values, using superfat white women's bodies on *Hot and Heavy* may have been an intentional production decision because these bodies are more likely to provide 'shock value' than the more culturally familiar fat Black body.

Race is also a critical factor in understanding how sexual attraction towards fat bodies is understood. Those who desire fat sexual partners have been framed as primitive (McPhail, 2017) or as "savage" and uncivilized (Forth, 2012) within colonial ideologies that use this "abnormal" desire or appreciation for fatness to justify the (often violent) oppression of racialized and Indigenous peoples. This is reflected in the narrative regarding Adrianna and Ricardo, the only mixed-race couple (Adrianna is white, Ricardo is Latinx), as well as the only Canadians featured on the show. Their Canadian nationality is interesting as it challenges the idea that Canadians are thinner (and subsequently believed to be healthier) than Americans (McPhail, 2017). Ricardo's racial identity also further positions the pair as "outsiders" to the predominantly American cast and focus of the show. Additionally, as McPhail (2017) argues, approaches towards fatness in a Canadian context has transitioned "from a racialized body *characteristic*, like large lips and buttocks, to a racialized *disease* or, at least, a condition that accompanied or caused a chronic disease" (p. 108). At first, Adrianna's mother questions Ricardo's attraction to her daughter. In the first two episodes, both Adrianna and her mother admit that many have questioned whether he was pursuing a relationship with Adrianna to secure a green card; her mother also confesses that she wanted to conduct a criminal record check on Ricardo. This distrust is amplified in episode 2, when Ricardo mentions he has been speaking with his ex-fiancé, who is also a white fat woman. While Ricardo is significantly smaller than his partner, the framing of his status as an untrustworthy immigrant similarly positions him as a contagion. Therefore, Adrianna and Ricardo's relationship is questionable from two different angles that both rely on similar affective qualities and racist understandings of fatness: Ricardo is viewed as primitive and racialized due to his ethnic and racial identities as well as his attraction to Adrianna and her fat body, which is compounded by his immigration status.

The show's attempt to frame fat women as desirable and worthy of love is benefitted by the whiteness of its cast; indeed, "the Western conceptualization of idealized femininity as exclusively white is an important means of sustaining racialized hierarchies because it is able to concurrently devalue both race and gender" (Shaw, 2006, p. 12). While fat white women work to achieve a place in mainstream environments – particularly in the fashion, beauty and entertainment industries – Black fat women continue to be objectified and hypersexualized. Shaw (2006) concludes that associating health and happiness with thin, white womanhood functions as support for the foundational attitudes underlying western late capitalism. Casting Black women would then, in effect, push *Hot and Heavy* into territory that calls into question the dominant values of the show, including efforts to absorb fat white women into a heterosexual nuclear family structure that aligns with the "American dream."

As previously mentioned, the promotional materials for *Hot and Heavy* acknowledge that a popular response to mixed-weight couples is that the fat person is commonly understood as an undesirable partner. The consideration of fat white women as less desirable partners is rooted in racism; these women are failures because their inability to maintain a thin body brings them farther away from white supremacist ideology and in closer relation to racialized bodies. As Strings (2019) argues, race acts as a double agent in that "the fear of the imagined 'fat black woman' was created by racial and religious ideologies that have been used to both degrade black women *and* discipline white women" (p. 6). Attempts to demarcate these white failures from their successful white counterparts include the creation of so-called degraded or hybrid groups of white people, such as Eastern Europeans or rednecks within the southern United States. In these instances, religious, classist, and/or racist discourse places specific white bodies within a lower social category, although still above Black people. This arguably allows fat white people to transgress dominant understandings of fatness and expand the parameters of acceptable ways of being (Friedman, 2014). This is, in part, assisted by the socioeconomic class categories of the participants; while the class status of Adrianna and Ricardo is not immediately clear, the other two couples (Rusty and Kristin, and Chris and Joy) appear to be middle to upper-middle class. As such, other than the fatness of the female partners, these two couples adhere to much of the white respectability politics founded on historical colonial and religious ideologies. These ideologies perpetuate hierarchies that privilege certain white people over others, as well

as people of colour and/or poor people. This aligns with Kyrola's (2014) assertion that "feminist criticism of too narrowly defined beauty ideals has become mainstreamed to a large extent – but with ambiguous results, as the demands are directed at the narrowness and uniformity of beauty standards, while their gendered, class-related, and racialized structures are not necessarily perceived problematic as such" (p. 159). Therefore, the potential for fat positive discourse within *Hot and Heavy* is arguably limited due to the racial and class demographics of its white, middle-class cast. Similar to feminist debates regarding postfeminist sensibilities (Gill, 2007; McRobbie, 2008), it is important to ask who benefits from examples of fat ambiguity within popular culture, including how such representations influence the allocation of social capital.

## **Social capital and the politics of mixed-weight couples**

Social capital may be afforded to fat people who secure a thinner lover because of their intimate association with someone who has more social capital. Due to the influence of fat stigma, a thin person has a more socially acceptable body, which translates to possessing more social capital and therefore more validation and confidence in their decisions. Because of this, research suggests that "people may perceive that one person in a mixed-weight relationship (the lower status, overweight person) is benefitting much more than his or her partner" (Collisson et al., 2017, p. 512). This research also suggests that the general public assumes that people in mixed-weight relationships experience more relationship stigma than relationships in which both partners are fat. Contrary to this assumption, fat people in partnership with other fat people reported experiencing more stigma and discomfort compared to fat people in relationships with thin people (Collisson and Rusbasan, 2016). This suggests that while fat people certainly experience detrimental amounts of oppression and discrimination because of their size (and thus this is compounded in relationships where both partners experience this individually as well as together), due to the unequal distribution of social capital within mixed-weight couples, the general public feels apprehension as to why a thin person with more social capital would choose to have a fat partner who has less social capital (Moblely, 2014).

Joy states in the first episode that "the people who seem to be the most offended by us being together are conventionally attractive women" (James et al, 2020, 00:01),

and Kristin states in the trailer that people often ask “how did that big girl get that hunky guy?” (James et al, 2020, 01:00). Both of these sentiments speak to the confusion others might express towards a thin person’s desire for a higher-weight partner. Fat peoples’ options for a partner are presumed to consist of less conventionally attractive people, including an unlikelihood of thin candidates (Carmalt et al., 2008). Therefore, when a fat person is coupled with a thin person, this can result in confusion, ridicule, and/or questioning of the intentions, stability, or character of both partners. Chris articulates this experience: “We get a lot of looks in public. I don’t think a lot of couples deal with constant judgment” (James et al, 2020, 04:55).

Research suggests that mixed-weight couples experience more discrimination, including being viewed as more incompatible than partners of similar weights (Collisson et al., 2017). Drawing from social comparison theory (Festinger, 1954) and partner comparison theory (Markey and Markey, 2011), these findings are similar to social attitudes towards couples with a significant age gap or racial differences. For example, when prompted to give advice to mixed-weight couples, a study revealed that suggestions included “going on less active, public, and expensive dates, display less physical affection, and delay introductions to close others” (Collisson et al., 2017, p. 510). These problematic attitudes are supported by sentiments expressed by many of the cast’s friends and family members.

For example, much of Joy and Chris’ storyline revolves around the disapproval of Chris’ friends and family. The disapproval and bullying Chris is subjected to from his friend Mike is discussed in more detail in the next section. Chris’ mother, Lori, expresses repeatedly throughout the program that she feels Joy is not a good match for Chris because of her size. Lori worries that Joy’s fatness will serve as a barrier to Chris’ ability to live a fulfilling life. At times, she attempts to express empathy for Joy in the form of assuming that Joy must be using food or other poor lifestyle choices in response to trauma; she comments in the first episode that “it’s very easy to eat your pain away” (James et al, 2020, 26:32). Her opinions are given more depth and value when she admits that she herself had gastric bypass surgery after reaching her heaviest weight of 250 pounds. Joy opposes Lori’s opinions, often privately discussing with Chris her feelings about his mother’s opposition to their relationship. Even though the friends, family (and at times medical providers) of the three couples are supporting characters,

their opinions on the dimensions of their loved ones' mixed-weight relationships are given the majority of screen time.

In episode 3, as Joy is getting dressed on the morning of her wedding, Lori again reiterates her concerns to Joy that she is holding Chris back from living an adventurous life. Joy asks for alone time with Lori so that they can speak privately, and so her sister and best friend leave the room. Lori expresses to Joy that she's proud that she raised her son to value someone regardless of how they look. Joy responds by saying that their relationship does not rest on Chris loving her in spite of her fatness. Rather, she attests that they love each other and are attracted to each other as is; she says, "if Chris wanted a partner like that, he could have easily found someone like that. But he chose me" (James et al, 2020, 24:47). The scene cuts to a talking-head interview with Lori, where she attests that Joy is now a part of her family and that she will support Joy "especially if she wants bariatric surgery. I know a lot about it, and I can help her and guide her" (James et al, 2020, 25:28). Their wedding ceremony concludes the episode, with audio edited to emphasize Joy's heavy breathing as she descends a few stairs towards the altar. It is clear that the audio has been edited in post-production because Chris is crying during this scene but we cannot hear him. At the wedding reception, his mother asks him if he would still love Joy if she lost weight. He responds that his feelings wouldn't change. This conclusion appears to offer a sense of hope for all involved: his mother believing that Joy may still pursue weight loss, Joy broaches establishing boundaries with Chris' family, and both Chris and Joy committing to each other and their relationship by entering a new chapter as a married couple.

There is certainly material within *Hot and Heavy* that suggests Joy, Kristin and Adrianna may accrue social capital and/or receive various forms of validation through having secured thin partners. After all, the show is not concerned with couples in which both people are fat, but instead looking at the politics of those in which one partner is heavier. While Joy says in episode one that her relationship is "special and rare", she does not that this is because she is fat. Rather, she says it is because they have a good connection. For all three couples, despite the issues they face throughout the season, it is clear that they feel loved and valued, and that securing a partner who loves them played a key role in their sense of self confidence and pride. Regardless of influencing factors such as mental health issues, education, and income, research suggests that mixed-weight couples in which a woman weighs more than her male partner experience

less relationship satisfaction and may increase pressures on women to maintain a thin body (Meltzer et al., 2011)<sup>5</sup>. While research shows that mixed-weight couples (specifically those composed of fat women and thin men) experience greater conflict in their relationships, it also suggests that conflict is reduced when the partners are highly supportive of each other (Burke et al., 2012). The love and understanding between the couples that is communicated throughout all three episodes of *Hot and Heavy* may mitigate these negative relationship outcomes.

## Fetishizing fat

It is fat women who occupy much of the space regarding fat fetishes, most often positioned as objects of heterosexual male desire (Cooper, 2016). The first episode of *Hot and Heavy* opens with the following scenes: two fat women express that they thought it would be hard to find love because of their size. Next, a third fat woman, Kristin, says that every woman dreams of having a “hunky” husband. The b-roll accompanying both vocalizations involve fat bodies either naked and being massaged, or wearing bikinis so that their body fat is hypervisible. The visibly thin male characters repeatedly state their physical and sexual attraction to these superfat women. One man, Rusty, while describing his partner, Kristin, states that he “wouldn’t mind if she was a bit bigger” (James et al, 2020, 12:02). Jones (2019) summarizes fetishization as “the intricate ways in which minority subjectivities are objectified, based solely on stereotypes and in ways that deny people their humanity” (p. 280-281). Jones continues: “according to this logic, fat women are not loved for their personhood but for their large breasts or butts” (p. 281).

The most common depictions of fat sexualities involve a sense of moral disgust. Considering this, men who are sexually attracted to ugly fat bodies are perceived as turning towards their partners because of their ugliness; moral disgust is something that they are excited by. Ugly bodies are dehumanized due to their inability to achieve hegemonic beauty ideals, and the sexualization of ugly bodies does not challenge this

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<sup>5</sup> The purpose of this study was to evaluate how much influence BMI measurements have on men and women in heterosexual marriages. The reasons for unsatisfaction were centered on BMI measurements, but also considered discrepancies between how men and women value income levels and/or emotional stability. While the authors conclude that this research may alleviate the pressures placed on women to be thin as compatibility with the “right partner” is possible regardless of size, the article nevertheless emphasizes the “importance of maintaining a healthy weight” (p. 422).

dehumanization or grant these bodies agency. As Harrison (2021) writes, "Fuckability as desire/ability does not mean that all bodies deemed fuckable are humanized... it is often for this reason that fat subjects live with Insecurities. Being fuckable is determined by someone other than ourselves, and therefore it is completely about whether or not others locate desire in you" (p. 19). Desirability and sexuality is a part of the human experience, and this sticky terrain delineates between the human and the abject.

The visuals used in the opening scene described above maintain the binary of thin bodies versus fat bodies by employing a specific gaze. Much like shows depicting people with disabilities, the abject qualities of fatness are exaggerated. Comparatively, the omission of fat people from longstanding popular dating shows, such as *The Bachelor*, contributes to the dehumanization of fat people that underlies the difficulties they often experience when seeking romantic or sexual partnership. Indeed, the impact of this representation impacts the treatment of fat bodies in real life encounters, including experiencing 'skin hunger' due to a lack of physical affection from others, or even medical practitioners being unwilling to touch fat or disabled patients. Underlying this treatment is a sense of moral disgust that positions fat people as unworthy of love and care; a sentiment that greatly influences the reception of media in which fat people are the recipients of sexual or loving activities. When fat people *are* portrayed as sexual beings, it is often framed within the context of a queer fetish.

Drawing from Ahmed (2014), Kotow (2020) further emphasizes how affective dimensions are conjured up when fat bodies are the recipients of physical touch, sexual desire, and other forms of intimacy. As with her analysis of how her fat body, and subsequently her emotions, changes as she receives validation and physical affection in explicitly fat-friendly environments, so, too, does *Hot and Heavy* elicit a new way of thinking about superfat bodies that deviates from the dominant approach of seeing these bodies as abject sites in need of intervention. In this sense, there is no authentic 'thin' person trapped inside Joy, Kristin, and Adrianna, as their partners assert that they desire the very person right in front of them, as they are in that moment.

Body fat automatically queers the body, and so it is not surprising that all three of the couples featured on *Hot and Heavy* are heterosexual couplings to combat the association of fatness with deviant sexualities. Using "queer" as "both a sexual identity and a quality" (Cooper, 2016, p. 191), fatness has the potential to queer the body in

many ways. First, it can queer the body by constructing ambiguous gender presentations. Second, fatness also remains stigmatized and pathologized in ways comparable to queer sexualities. Both fatness and queerness have been viewed as a lifestyle choice resulting from trauma; a defense mechanism to protect the body from sexual harm; are recognized as sexually deviant; are socially constructed as susceptible to reckless behaviour; remain unprotected in some legal systems; and may undergo a complicated 'outing' process in which one self-identifies publicly as queer and/or fat. Fatness also differs from queerness, largely in the sense that as a highly visible identity, and so it cannot be closeted in the same way. However, both groups are encouraged in progressive circles to resist "passing" in public, and instead be out and proud about who they are (LeBesco, 2004).

Third, sex with a fat person is also "queer" because "fat people are not supposed to be sexy or sexual" (LeBesco, 2004, p. 89), and thus fat people are unable to achieve heteronormative ideals (White et al, 2016). This manifests both as outright rejection, and as fetishisation (Taylor, 2020a). On the one hand, fat people face significant discrimination in sexual and romantic contexts by being framed as undesirable or unworthy candidates for sexual or romantic partnership. On the other, fat people can also be considered as an object of desire within the context of a fetish. When non-normative bodies, such as those that are fat and/or racialized *are* sexualized, it is often in a fetishized manner, or, if the sexual partner possesses a normative body, then that sexual partner is often perceived as intellectually disabled in some way by being characterized by confusion, a lack of self-esteem, or a psychological disorder. By featuring mixed-weight couples, *Hot and Heavy* fetishizes and stigmatizes fat bodies by inciting viewers to watch couples that may seem hard to believe.

Joy and Chris met on a dating app explicitly designed for plus-size people, and people who are attracted to plus-size people. In episode 1, Chris says, "I love big women, I always have. I've dated smaller women and it's just not the same. Joy has a soft body, it's comforting to hold and to grab" (James et al, 2020, 02:47). Joy comments further, "I think he likes the way the weight feels. It's sort of a playful thing between us" (James et al, 2020, 03:23), to which Chris concludes: "A lot of people think it's a fetish, but it's not. It's a preference" (James et al, 2020, 03:37). Indeed, all three male counterparts state that they simply prefer bigger women. Dating apps such as those marketed toward fat people and fat admirers are arguably not that different from other

preferentially based dating apps that exist to serve people who are looking for particular characteristics within a partner. However, it does feel fetishizing when the dialogue is concerned explicitly with the person's body fat, how this abject characteristic feels, and the degree to which one is attracted to and objectifies this part of the body.

In the first episode, Chris is nervous for Joy to meet his friends and feels that he needs to warn them that she is fat. His coworkers, who are curious as to why they haven't met Joy yet, express that they think Chris is attractive, sweet, and could date anyone he wanted to. Upon being introduced to Joy, one coworker says that his jaw dropped: "This is really what you're doing? This is what you want to be with? Oh my god, really?" (James et al, 2020, 20:16). The description of Joy as an object, and not a person, that Chris wants to be with reaffirms her fears; because of her fat body, Chris' attraction to Joy is highly questionable. Indeed, Chris' mental state is questioned by a friend asks "Anything weird happen to you growing up... is this a sexual thing?" (James et al, 2020, 18:51). And while Chris responds that he expected there to be jokes about his relationship, this interaction frames his relationship as a fetish.

In the second episode, the same friend, Mike, plans a bachelor party for Chris. Mike shrugs and says, "Chris doesn't necessarily like big girls, he just likes big boobs, and whatever comes along with it, comes along with it" (James et al, 2020, 15:23). Mike hires a plus-size burlesque dancer to perform at the party; drawing from Asbill (2009), this may be an opportunity for reframing Mike's perception of Chris' sexual desires given that "although the fat body commonly represents a burgeoning public health epidemic, burlesque performance redefines the fat body as an object of sexual desire and as home to a desiring sexual subject" (pp. 299-300). Like burlesque, the entirety of *Hot and Heavy* is in some ways an example of erotic entertainment: Joy, Kristin, and Adrianna are positioned throughout each episode as sexual objects, both passively as they are filmed in their bathing suits, or explicitly when they engage intimately with their partners or discuss their sexual behaviours. This is particularly significant when the men speak about their fantasies in relation to their superfat partner because when the partners express desire or enthusiasm for their sexual relationship, this "provides a crucial interruption from fat negativity, opening possibilities for pleasurable fat embodiment" (Asbill, 2009, p. 301)

At the bachelor party, Mike continues to criticize Chris during an interview with producers: “it blows my mind because he could get any girl he wants but he ends up being with Joy” (James et al, 2020, 15:28). Mike’s attitude and behaviour towards Chris’ relationship with Joy is an example of the discriminatory attitudes that mixed-weight couples are often subjected to. Because of hierarchical structures within societies, social groups with higher status receive certain privileges, while lower status, marginalized groups are subjected to oppressive behaviours and attitudes; “when this hierarchy is threatened, people, particularly majority group members, tend to engage in prejudice and discrimination as a means of restoring the hierarchy” (Collisson et al., 2017, p. 512). Understandably, Joy makes it clear to Chris that she doesn’t trust Mike. Chris’ attraction to bigger women is reaffirmed when he asks the thin burlesque dancers performing at his bachelor party to stop dancing and leave. Following Chris’ rejection of his efforts to force Chris to engage with conventionally beautiful women, Mike tells the camera: “I want Chris to be happy but I wouldn’t mind if their marriage went a little sideways” (James et al, 2020, 17:13).

Like Chris, Rusty expresses that he prefers larger women. He says that “the majority of the women I’ve dated have been bigger, full-figured women.” He continues: “The bigger, the better... skinnier women tend to be more full of themselves. Personally, I think a lot of guys are into bigger women they don’t want to show it” (James et al, 2020, 09:31). While this may be a byproduct of the editing process, this is the second time that the fatness of their partners has been the first item listed off as to why they like their partners. There’s a lot to unpack within Rusty’s commentary. First, Rusty states that thin women have a tendency to be “more full of themselves”, insinuating that they may have higher self-esteem, potentially bordering on the level of narcissism. This contributes to the dehumanization of fat women in which they are viewed as possessing low self-esteem and, therefore, are a more attainable target for men’s sexual advances. Kristin somewhat affirms this perspective when she states that perhaps she secured a “hunky” partner by having a “golden vagina” (James et al, 2020, 01:02). Second, stating that men who are attracted to fat women tend to hide their desire once again identifies the shame that contributes to the framing of sexual interactions with fat women as a fetish.

Third, Rusty says that exploring food is one of the most pleasurable parts of his relationship with Kristin. While research suggests that the thin counterparts in mixed-weight relationships may attempt to monitor or restrict the food intake of their fat partner,

and that attempts to regulate the food intake of the fat partner may create conflict (Markey et al., 2008; Burke et al., 2012), in *Hot and Heavy* it is the food intake of the *thin* partner that becomes the object of scrutiny. In one of the most heated scenes of the show, Kristin and Rusty invite their friend John over for lunch. While Rusty is out of earshot, Kristin and John discuss his reluctance to support Kristin in her weight-loss endeavours. Kristin maintains that Rusty is not being a good partner because he isn't encouraging her to lose weight, and in this scene, it feels as if Kristin is the one being unreasonable. Both Kristin and John escalate the conversation, and when Rusty returns to the dining table and offers Kristin a hot dog bun and some chips, John verbally attacks Rusty. Both John and Kristin feel that losing weight would make Kristin a "better person"; Kristin accuses Rusty of wanting to keep her fat for his own pleasure without considering how that may limit her life expectancy. She states: "I don't want to just be hot now and then I'm dead, and then you find some other big girl to ride into the sunset" (James et al, 2020, 17:51).

The amount of screen time devoted to Rusty's negative feelings about Kristin trying to lose weight feels like an attempt to explore *why* Rusty is attracted to Kristin, especially as he expresses immense dissatisfaction towards her new approach to food. From one angle, Rusty is framed as a "feeder", meaning a fat admirer who uses food to objectify fat women. Jones (2019) writes that the "role-playing fetish of feeding can be used as an example to exemplify how fat admirers often objectify women and in ways that reproduce gender inequality and bolster hegemonic masculinity" (p. 281). Rusty's desire to keep Kristin as fat as she is, can be received as an attempt to control her, both in terms of within the parameters of his aesthetic preferences as well as potentially limiting her options for partners. Fat studies scholars have assessed whether heterosexual men's sexual encounters with fat women serve as an opportunity to reaffirm their masculinity. Because fat women are viewed as deviant and less desirable than thin women, they are often considered "easier" targets whom men do not have to feel guilty for exerting control over (Gailey and Prohaska, 2006). The prevailing form of masculinity in North America is hegemonic masculinity, which includes characteristics such as control, competition, aggression, sexual dominance, as well as a lack of emotional expression (Prohaska and Gailey, 2009). As such, in addition to exerting control or dominance, many men poke fun at their sexual encounters with these "easy targets" in order to avoid social humiliation, particularly from other men.

Rusty and Kristin visit a counselor in episode 3 to identify the root of their opposing opinions on weight loss. The counselor, Stephanie, tells producers that “this is the first time that I’ll be encountering a couple where the husband actually prefers his wife big. That’s very unique” (James et al, 2020, 27:27). In their session, Rusty says that he is worried weight-loss will change Kristin’s personality, because he had a previous partner who embarked on a weight-loss journey and he felt it changed who she was as a person. Kristin agrees that losing weight would change who she is. There seems to be relief at identifying this underlying concern, because otherwise it was mystifying to Kristin why Rusty felt so strongly about it. By the end of the season, it is unclear what will happen with their relationship or Kristin’s weight-loss journey.

The men on *Hot and Heavy* do not frame their relationships as humorous. Instead, all three men discuss at-length their emotional investments in their relationships, including how they feel about the discrimination they experience in response to their choice of partner. Chris in particular is a very soft-spoken, gentle, and effeminate heterosexual male who partakes in activities such as helping Joy wax her legs. The men on this show do not need an excuse to be with their partners and are all explicitly proud to be in partnership with fat women. Considering this, the discourse on *Hot and Heavy* both threatens the masculinity of these men while simultaneously reinforcing their masculinity by highlighting their ability to secure a sexual partner.

The show’s logic troubles sexual relationships between fat people and those who are popularly referred to as “fat admirers”; for many fat people, when a lover expresses an explicit sexual attraction to fat people, this can simultaneously feel dehumanizing as well as comforting. Yet, Bunzl (2005) warns against romanticizing instances where fat people are involved in sexual encounters because of their size, such as pornography that explicitly features fat people, because while this might be a subversive challenge to fat stigma, it is still a form of commercial work that is catering to the desire to consume a fetishized identity. *Hot and Heavy* arguably constitutes another commercial work that caters to fat fetishism. While not explicitly pornographic, the scenes where Joy, Kristin, and Adrianna receive romantic and sexual affection from their partners could be similarly categorized. For example, a scene that opens the show’s promotional trailer is a clip of Joy entering a hot tub. In this scene, Joy lowers herself into a hot tub along with two other superfat women. Joy is wearing her hair in pigtails and all of the women are in bikinis. The camera pans from the floor up as water is displaced by their bodies and

spills over the edge of the hot tub. Another piece of footage used within the first ten seconds of the trailer is a clip of Adrianna lying face down and topless on a massage table while receiving a massage treatment. In both of these scenes, the emphasis is on their flesh as it is touched by water or oil. While the visual elements of the first ten seconds could be categorized as pornographic, the audio overlaying these images involve the women lamenting over their fears that they are unworthy or undeserving of love because of their size – fears that have been reaffirmed by people close to them, including their families.

The impact of the potential fetishization of fat women on *Hot and Heavy* is significant. For example, Kyrola argues that “if one is continuously shut out of the realm of desirability personally as well as culturally, the ability to see oneself as sexual can gradually fade. This denial may even produce a feeling of radical disconnection from one’s body” (p. 160). This disassociation that fetishization may cause can manifest as psychological consequences, including what Orbach (2009) refers to as the “third eye”, where fat people (or those who embody other non-normative identities) are never truly present during a pleasurable encounter because they mentally monitor and surveil themselves from outside their bodies. As Gailey (2012) summarizes, “if women are distracted by concerns about their physical appearance, they may be unable to relax and focus on their own sexual pleasure” (p. 115). As a result, the body and self become separated, and the fetishized person continually observes and critiques themselves regardless of expressions of desire or enthusiasm from a sexual or romantic partner. This split further distances one’s experiences of a whole “true self” by preoccupying the mind with anxieties. This can also be applied to other areas of one’s life, including non-sexual social interactions or even the experience of watching oneself (or people similar to oneself) on television.

And yet, these instances where the cast of *Hot and Heavy* are arguably fetishized can also be categorized as cultural products of fat activism that “expand notions of the ‘aesthetic validity’ of fat” (Cooper, 2016, p. 70). In response to feminist critiques that negatively criticize sex work, Jones (2019) advocates for “the pleasures of fetishization”, which include “corporal and affective pleasures” afforded to fat women positioned as objects of desire, such as a sense of empowerment or elevated self-confidence (p. 282). The premise of *Hot and Heavy* is to focus on love, dating, and sexuality in relation to fat people. The women on *Hot and Heavy* are, at times, framed as

viable sexual partners who are both desirable to others as well as possessing their own sexual desires (Graves and Kwan, 2012). Due to the abject nature of fat bodies, fat people have often been framed as asexual (Thomas and Wilkerson, 2005). While asexual fat people certainly exist, homogenizing all fat people as lacking sexual desire inflicts harm on those who actively seek sexual encounters. Like pornography depicting fat women, fat sex workers, and the “oppressive liberation” of BBW bashes (Kotow, 2020), depictions of fat women’s bodies within *Hot and Heavy* can constitute as a form of cultural expression in which there is “exposure to and participation in forbidden forms of fat embodiment mediated through desire” (Cooper, 2016, p. 74). From this perspective, it is the presence of fat bodies within publicized sexual contexts that offer potential for fat liberation (Jones, 2019) because it directly challenges feminist criticisms that men are willing to engage sexually and/or romantically with fat women in private, but not publicly (Colls, 2012).

Cooper’s (2016) term “ambiguous fat activism” is helpful here, as the presentation of these images without the inclusion of explicit political context renders this form of activism difficult to identify. Compared to forms of activism, such as political activism involving identifiable behaviours such as protests or policy reform, ambiguous activism takes on less covert forms, including a refusal to participate in diet culture or fatphobic practices, or “putting a fat body in a situation where it might appear out of place” (p. 88). The very act of centering a reality television show on the romantic and sexual relationships of not just fat women, but superfat women, is arguably empowering and challenges anti-fat discourses that position these women as undesirable and undesiring.

To some, Rusty’s insistence on indulging in “unhealthy” foods with his partner could arguably also be considered ambiguous fat activism. While Rusty does not explicitly reject the categorization of “good” and “bad” foods, his strong feelings on this subject reveal the multiple purposes that food serves, including fulfilling social, emotional, and psychological needs. Acknowledging these varying functions of food, as well as the pleasure that he and Kristin derive from “exploring” food together, troubles mainstream understandings of food that underlie fat stigma, including the idea that there are foods that we should and should not eat. A significant portion of Rusty and Kristin’s storyline is dedicated to emphasizing Rusty’s feelings about enjoying food with his partner. This emphasis draws attention to a major supporting attitude within the context

of the “obesity epidemic”, being that fatness is a direct result of poor lifestyle choices and a lack of self-control. As Rusty is thin, the viewer is forced to confront the fact that people of all sizes consume foods that have been labeled as contributing factors to the “obesity epidemic”, which weakens the assumed direct correlation between ‘bad’ foods and fatness by “exhibiting the viability of such lives and practices” (Snider, 2009, p. 228). At the same time, it also reaffirms potential suspicions as to how or why Kristin weighs over three hundred pounds.

Rusty is not the only one who finds pleasure in enjoying food with his partner. In episode two, Adrianna presents Ricardo with a collection of boudoir photos that she took to show off her newly found self-confidence. He responds by identifying his favourite photo as the one where she is seductively eating cake. On one hand, his response sexualizes the consumption of food and borders on enacting a feeder-feedee dynamic. A critical eye, however, would attest that it is problematic to assume that for the feedee in this scenario, the experience of indulging in food consumption with (or for) their partner is automatically fetishizing – at least in a negative way (Jones, 2019). Both Rusty and Chris are identifying scenarios in which food, sex, and their superfat partners, are experienced in consensual, loving contexts (and let’s not forget that such behaviours may also be indulged in by sexual partners who are both or all thin or normatively sized). Jones (2019) further writes that

Intellectually, our minds may tell us that allowing people to fetishize our bodies compromises our self-worth. People should value us for our whole humanity. However, the gaze of an admirer, regardless of their motivations, can still be arousing and cause pleasure. In addition, a sociologically focused analysis of pleasure highlights that subjectivity, societal structures, and social context shape our experiences of pleasure. (p. 294)

Therefore, representations of fat people engaging in sex (with or without the involvement of food), as well as depictions of their admirers, are arguably too complex to be reduced to only a fetish. And yet, as a viewer, the spectacle of heterosexual male’s fat fetishes feels like the main focus of the show.

## **Making room for fat sadness**

Fat sadness refers to the negative emotions fat people may experience in response to instances of weight-based discrimination and/or oppression. Fat sadness is

a complex topic within fat liberationist discourse. These feelings, such as shame, self-hatred, disappointment or anger, accumulate over time due to repeated harms and microaggressions as well as instances of symbolic and physical violence. Allowing for outward displays or conversations about fat sadness is not a common occurrence in fat-positive spaces, as fat sadness threatens efforts to challenge negative attitudes about being fat. Often, responses to fat sadness involve some form of self-improvement or emphasize self-love despite the harsh reality of navigating the world as a fat person; very rarely is fat sadness discussed in a way that highlights the need for institutional and systemic change. In sum, feeling sad about one's experiences as a fat person risks undermining the fat liberationist idea that being fat can be, or is, a good thing (Gordon, 2016).

Considering *Hot and Heavy* as a site of ambiguous activism provides an opportunity to explore the dimensions of the instances fat sadness that are exhibited within the show. A notable example that is used in its promotional materials is when Adrianna is verbally harassed by a passerby while she is eating ice cream on a sidewalk. In this instance, a driver shouts "Lay off the ice cream you cow! Moo!" (James et al, 2020, 00:46) from a passing car, prompting Adrianna to cry in public. Being subjected to fatphobic insults from strangers in public spaces is a familiar experience for most fat people. Indeed, social harassment in public spaces works to draw attention to the abject nature of fat bodies. In response, Adrianna says that she no longer wants her ice cream, however, she does not express a desire to lose weight in response to this harassment.

Joy also does not express desire to lose weight despite experiencing discrimination and uncomfortable altercations because of her size. In episode 2, Joy invites her friend as well as Chris' mother, Lori, to accompany her while she shops for a wedding dress. Joy books an appointment at a plus-size bridal store. These scenes depict Joy being subjected to uncomfortable stares from other shoppers, which is odd considering that this is a plus-size bridal store and therefore it is highly unlikely that Joy is the store's first superfat person considering the limited number of retailers that serve this demographic. Joy's friend expresses that she is worried the store won't have Joy's size, but Joy is shown trying on gowns in sample sizes for which she could order her own size. This is a common practice in bridal retail stores for people of all sizes. While Joy is trying on dresses, Lori engages Joy's friend in an awkward conversation in which

she talks about being sad that she won't be the only woman in her son's life, as well as her concerns about Joy being fat. Lori comments that she feels sad that Joy's fatness seemingly negatively impacts her ability to live her life, noting that it is taking Joy a longer time to try on the dresses because of her size. The friend tells producers that she is uncomfortable with this interaction, and this conversation is made more uncomfortable when the viewer is reminded that Joy is changing behind a curtain only a few feet away. In a private interview with producers, Lori is informed that Joy weighs approximately five hundred pounds, to which she responds with shock.

Neither during the scenes in the bridal store nor when Chris' friends are rude to her, does Joy express significant emotions. Instead, her feelings about being the site of scrutiny based on her weight are discussed in individual interviews or in conversations with her fiancé. Joy points out that Lori has experienced her own health issues but that no one has questioned whether Lori is a good mother or wife. She expresses dismay that Lori has not spoken directly to Joy about her concerns, but instead has discussed her weight behind her back. Furthermore, she points out that Lori has never seen Joy's medical records so her opinions are not based on any concrete information. Her sadness is evident when she says, "I've been told throughout my life that no one would want to marry me" (James et al, 2020, 25:23). Her fear is validated by Chris' family. In episode 1, Chris tells his family that he plans to propose to Joy. His mother, Lori, responds by saying that marrying a fat girl will limit his happiness and quality of life. Lori says that Joy does not deal with her personal issues and instead turns to food; she worries that Chris, too, will turn to food as a crutch because of his intimate relationship with Joy. This is revealed to be, in part, due to Lori's feelings about her own health struggles: she reveals that she had gastric bypass surgery in an attempt to fix some of her health concerns. While Chris admits that Joy's size can be an issue in their relationship because they are sometimes not able to do a particular activity together, he explicitly tells his family that he feels judged for choosing a fat person to be his partner. Later in the episode, while playing board games with his family, Chris says that he is worried about how Joy feels when his parents talk about activities such as hiking, camping, and traveling that she may find difficult to do.

The degree to which the women's fatness is considered a disabling characteristic is emphasized in scenes that depict them as struggling to execute basic everyday activities. For example, in episode 2, Ricardo ties Adrianna's bowling shoes for her as

she has difficulty reaching her feet. In the same episode, Chris helps Joy wax her legs. There are numerous shots used throughout the three episodes that emphasize the women's inability to fit into public spaces, as well as shots of other people reacting to their size. Kristin is not alone in her desire for weight loss, as Joy, too, expresses that she desires to lose weight so that daily activities and public spaces are not as difficult to navigate. She says that her home is hard to move around in because it is not fully accessible and includes sets of stairs. She also comments that she prefers to spend time with people who have similar bodies as hers, insinuating that such an environment serves as a safer space for her to exist within. However, the framing of the scene in which Chris helps to wax Joy's legs contradicts the framing of a similar scene in *My Big Fat Fabulous Life* where Whitney receives help in shaving her legs. While Joy is similarly framed as both Whitney and the participants on *My 600-lb Life* in the sense that her fatness renders her incapable of undertaking behaviours such as removing body hair, in this scene, Chris lovingly waxes Joy's legs in an intimate way that borders on almost a sexual interaction. The conclusion of this scene is not that Joy's fatness serves as a risk to her existence, but as an opportunity to connect with her partner.

Joy refers to herself and her friends as "survivors" of trauma who have found solace in food. This is a sentiment that has received more attention in recent years, partly to identify structural determinants of health to displace the blame and calls for individual responsibility towards those who do not achieve neoliberal standards of health and beauty. More specifically, a growing amount of writing has been dedicated to exploring the relationship between sexual violence and fatness. For example, Roxane Gay's 2017 memoir *Hunger* and Bessel Van Der Kolk's *The Body Keeps Score* (2015) have popularized this topic in mainstream discourse; both address the relationship between trauma and the body, equating experiences of childhood neglect, sexual abuse, and war as equally damaging on the body and manifesting, in part, as a cumulation of body fat in order to "protect" the self. These trauma narratives position fatness as an undesirable consequence of trauma, and not as an apolitical result of very real human experiences; this is seen by unequal treatment and attention paid to thin people responding to similar traumas.

It is certainly critical that space is made to discuss fat sadness, especially that which derives from significant traumas. However, it is unclear whether a reality television show is the most appropriate format to facilitate such conversations. Gordon (2016)

writes that “sadness is tangible, organic, important and *useful*. Sadness is what reminds us of what it means to hurt. Sadness drives empathy – it is how we remember not to hurt others, and how to lead with our hearts. Your sadness is fuel for understanding mine” (n.p.). As I have written elsewhere (Cameron, 2019), it is difficult to produce reality-based media that is palatable to a general audience, challenges “obesity” rhetoric, and captures the nuances of fat subjectivities while simultaneously maintains the complexity of these topics. However, one of the most significant missed opportunities for such an approach is within scenes focused on fatness and fertility.

## **Pregnancy and weight loss surgery**

A complex site of analysis in which there are elements of fat sadness as well as explicit medicalized fat stigma are the overlapping topics of fertility, pregnancy, and fatness. Fat people experience significant barriers in accessing fertility treatments and maternal health care, such as being denied access to in-vitro fertilization services due to a high BMI or being subjected to judgment from practitioners. The reasoning for this is usually reduced to the idea that fat bodies have higher-risk pregnancies (McPhail and Mazur, 2020). The influence of colonialism also results in significant class and racial issues at play when considering who is denied adequate maternal care (Boero, 2009; Friedman, 2015; Parker et al., 2020). Fat women are often blamed for instances of childhood “obesity” due to their assumed caregiving roles as the providers of food and overseers of children’s activities (McPhail, 2017). Considering these issues, efforts to block fat women from parenting children (whether that be refusing fertility treatments, refusing adoption opportunities, or removing children from their care) have been argued to reveal efforts similar to other eugenics movements in which institutional interventions occur under the guise of serving a public good. In order to access the services or supports needed to become pregnant and/or parent children, despite these contradictions, hypocrisies, and/or false social beliefs, weight loss – particularly through surgical means – is often emphasized as a necessary step to achieving this goal.

Kristin is the smallest of the three main female characters. She met her partner at Disney World, and soon after sold a bridal boutique that she owned, which enabled her to retire at a young age. At 35 years old, she is also the oldest participant on the show. Her partner Rusty already has three children, and Kristin says that she ideally wants 4-5

more. She has been trying to become pregnant for a few years, but with no success. While Kristin also has Type 2 diabetes and high cholesterol, she expresses that it is her weight which is affecting her fertility and ability to have a baby. Weight loss surgery becomes a topic of conversation eleven minutes into the first episode when Kristin and Rusty debate whether a gastric bypass procedure will help Kristin become pregnant.

In the first episode, Kristin meets with a doctor who recommends gastric bypass surgery and says that this procedure will allow her to become pregnant. At 5 feet 4 inches tall and 329.4 pounds, he states that her BMI is 60, which means that she is morbidly obese and at a high risk of dying (while also telling Kristin that all of her organs are healthy). He confirms that “one of the problems with obesity is infertility, and the surgeries that we do, the change that it allows will allow you to get pregnant” (James et al, 2020, 23:07). Similar to the authority held by Dr. Now on *My 600-lb Life*, as well as the various medical professionals on *My Big Fat Fabulous Life*, Kristin’s doctor is framed as the expert and voice of reason on this topic. However, it is incredibly reckless to guarantee these outcomes and allude to a successful pregnancy post-surgery. First, the doctor states that Kristin’s diabetes will go away with a seventy-five pound weight loss, but there is no way of guaranteeing that outcome. Second, weight loss surgeries may negatively impact pregnancy and fetal development due to “micronutrient deficiencies, iron or B12 deficiency anemia, dumping syndrome, surgical complications such as internal hernias, and small for gestational age (SGA) offspring” (Falcone et. al., 2018). Weight loss surgeries also possibly increase risk of stillbirth or neonatal death (Johansson, 2015). Undergoing weight loss surgery will also impact the nutritional value of breastmilk and will delay pregnancy altogether, as patients are encouraged to wait at least one year before attempting to conceive. If someone who has undergone weight loss surgery does become pregnant, the quality of their prenatal and postpartum care may also be compromised due to a lack of qualified doctors who are prepared to work with such patients.

Pathologizing attitudes about pregnancy and fat people encourage self-medicalization in which fat people view themselves as “objects of concern” (Conrad, 2007). In addition to concerns about her own body, Kristin is also worried about how her desire for the surgery will impact her relationship with her husband. While similar fears were expressed in a minority of episodes on *My 600-lb Life*, this presents an interesting counter-perspective compared to most depictions of weight loss in which achieving a

thinner body is framed as conducive to better relational outcomes. Rusty is staunchly against the surgery, as he says “even if the surgery increases her chances of getting pregnant, I don’t want her to change” (James et al, 2020, 12:58). Rusty says that he would prefer Kristin attempt weight loss methods that do not involve surgery. He faces not only resistance from Kristin, but also her family. In episode one, Kristin’s aunt discusses that she had bariatric surgery two years prior. Kristin acknowledges that her paternal lineage has “awful genes”, and that her father “just accepted his fate because everyone before him had” (James et al, 2020, 11:15). In this way, gastric bypass surgery is framed as a necessary intervention to avoid continuing the intergenerational inheritance of fatness and poor health outcomes. Problematically, this conversation identifies that Kristin’s fatness is, at least in part, inherited through genetics, therefore further reaffirming medical intervention (as opposed to lifestyle changes) as a presumably viable solution.

Kristin feels that not having the surgery is riskier, and there are close-up shots of Kristin crying as she worries about the possibility of dying at a young age. The association of fatness with death is reaffirmed by another public health expert, Kristin’s trainer, Danny. In order to be approved for the surgery, Kristin is told she must first lose 30 pounds (the contradictions of this logic have been explored at length in chapter 1). As Kristin exercises with her trainer, she tells him that Rusty is unhappy with her weight loss journey because he wants her to stay the size she is now. With a confused look on his face, Danny says that is confusing because he assumes Rusty wants Kristin to be alive for a long time. In an independent interview, Danny says, “maybe he doesn’t want someone hitting on her, but when she loses weight she’s going to be a bombshell” (James et al, 2020, 12:36).

Following their workout, Danny has Kristin show him the contents of her refrigerator. He notes that there is mostly healthy food, including a lot of fruit, and asks if Kristin put it there because she knew Danny would be coming over. He acts surprised and skeptical at the contents of Kristin’s kitchen, but manages to finally find “bad” foods, such as bagels and ice cream, in the freezer, that he then makes her throw away. Rusty becomes very clearly agitated at this, and says that one of the best things in his relationship with Kristin is their ability to “have fun with food.” This is a unique instance in the framing of food consumption habits and associations with body size; in this context, it is the thin partner who appears to be more invested in consuming “unhealthy” foods.

Research suggests that conflict often arises in mixed-weight couples “because relationship partners are likely affected by each other’s health habits, weight concerns and related struggles” (Burke et al., 2012, p. 1110). However, this research assumes that this conflict is instigated by the larger partner’s habits. As previously discussed, Rusty’s preference for fat women as well as his emphasis on the role that food plays in his romantic relationship can be understood as fetishizing and/or as a method of exerting control over his female partner.

Kristin and Rusty’s desire to conceive a child is emblematic of the most dominant understanding of fatness and fertility, being that fat women experience difficulties conceiving and maintaining a viable pregnancy due to their size. As I stated earlier in this dissertation, I employ a soft opposition in my analysis of weight loss journeys. While I can acknowledge the harms of weight loss methods – particularly surgical procedures – as well as critique the sentiments and public health data underlying anti-fat healthist rhetoric, I also understand the desire for weight loss. My empathy for these instances is especially strong if the situation in question involves considering weight loss as the cure for a time-sensitive issue, such as achieving pregnancy.

What I found most interesting about this topic within *Hot and Heavy* was how Adrianna and Ricardo’s storyline directly contradicts the idea that fat women face more difficulties in becoming pregnant. This contradiction is not emphasized or made obvious to the viewer, as no connections are explicitly drawn between the narratives of the three couples. Adrianna and Ricardo have a son, Eli, who was conceived only two weeks after they moved in together. This part of their story is introduced right after Kristin and Rusty’s segment in the first episode. The fact that they were easily (and perhaps unexpectedly) able to get pregnant challenges the idea that conceiving is always a struggle for fat people, particularly fat women, as Adrianna is framed as hyperfertile. The existence of fat mothers worldwide, as well as the increasing number of fat-positive fertility specialists, reaffirms this reality and quietly challenges Kristin’s storyline regarding pregnancy, which dominates this topic within the show. This allows for an opportunity to address the complexities within discourse surrounding fatness and fertility, which the show does not take advantage of. Instead, the ease with which Adrianna became pregnant is not addressed, and the idea that Kristin’s fatness – and not her age or other health concerns – serves as the main barrier to achieving her dream of becoming a parent is over-emphasized.

## Conclusion

In the past few years, reality television shows that aim to test “true love” have emerged, such as Netflix’s popular series *Love is Blind*, in which a group of single men and women are placed into “pods” where they communicate with a potential suitor through a wall. The couples only ever meet each other if they propose and agree to marriage while separated in the pods. By challenging participants to select a partner without having seen them, this program acts as a social experiment regarding appearance, sexual attraction, and commitment. However, *Love is Blind* misses an important opportunity to explore the laws of attraction by failing to cast participants who do not adhere to dominant beauty ideals. While there was notable racial diversity amongst the cast, there was not a single fat participant nor any participants with visible disabilities. As Rodriguez (2020) argues, this reveals how truly uncomfortable non-normative and abject bodies make audiences feel and reaffirms that people occupying abject bodies are undesirable romantic and/or sexual partners. Similarly, while not explicitly marketed as a dating reality show, the Netflix series *The Circle* is structured around a similar premise as *Love is Blind*. On *The Circle*, participants are isolated within individual apartment units in the same building. They communicate to each other via a social media platform. Because of this, participants can choose to communicate as themselves, or can construct a virtual self that is different from their embodied identities. One contestant reveals that she is using photos of someone else to construct her profile because she wants to avoid how fat people are commonly treated. As has been written elsewhere, *The Circle* also reveals a lot about fat stigma and implicit bias (Chung, 2020; De Maria, 2020; Grumley, 2020).

The lack of people who are superfat or larger on reality television programs (especially those that aim to question social capital and desirability politics) suggest that fat people are too undesirable to be included in these social experiments. In contrast, *Hot and Heavy* explores how the materiality of superfat bodies is viewed by some as a critical component of a happy partnership. The pain of rejection for being fat (or possibility of rejection), does not leave the women in *Hot and Heavy* without a future; the enthusiastic partner and the continuing investment in the superfat person (through marriage, children, commitment, physical affection) insinuate a viable future and a very much loved present. Chris’ frustrations with his mother and his friends, and his desire to

protect Joy from their perspectives while moving forward and building a life with Joy, exemplifies a queer, fat-friendly future and positions non-fat people that hold anti-fat attitudes as barriers to that goal. Similarly, Rusty's criticisms of non-fat people who encourage Kristin to lose weight so that she can achieve her goals (such as her trainer, doctor, friends and family), is a rare narrative that invites exploration of what a fat present looks like, or what could happen when fat people are granted the same investments or agency as non-fat people. It is the emphasis on the future of the fat participants that feels most compelling to me.

The first episode of *Hot and Heavy* began with voiceover narration stating "this season on *Hot and Heavy*", insinuating that there would be future seasons of the program. To date, two years after the show was aired, there has been no mention as to whether there will be another season. This may be because of the backlash the show received almost immediately after it was announced, before it had even aired (Muller, 2019). Criticisms included that the show only featured superfat women. One snarky comment on Twitter from the user @emjmccarty read, "Of course, only the women are heavier. Let's retitl, "How Can Men Possibly Love Fat Women?" (McCarty, 2019). Another user, @realityrubbish, demanded "quit exploiting obese people" (@RealityRubbish, 2019). These comments are reflective of research that suggests that the extension of love to fat people, while rare, usually occurs "in a very specific form: male validation via objectification" (Graves and Kwan, 2012, p. 56). It is possible that the producers of *Hot and Heavy* navigated these responses to the visibility of super fat people in romantic and sexual relationships by simply shutting it down altogether. In some ways, the cancellation of *Hot and Heavy* despite insinuation of more seasons or future episodes creates a sticky ending, one that "eschews cruel pessimissim without falling into myths of neoliberal fat dignity or of restored agency or of any form of self-presence being complete" (Crawford, 2017, p. 468). We are left wondering if Kristin had a baby, what Joy's marriage is like with Chris, and whether Adrianna and Ricardo were able to work through their trust issues.

Crawford (2017) argues that fat presence is "a mode of temporality that refuses to be pulled between traumatic pasts and slender futures" (p. 467). A fat presence is not fully achieved in *Hot and Heavy*, as discussions of past and ongoing experiences of fat stigma risk affirming existing social prejudices towards fat people. It is also questions whether the show's producers achieved what they stated they aspired to accomplish,

being a genuine exploration of mixed-weight couples, considering that “obesity” discourse remains dominant throughout the show over other understandings of fatness. Ultimately, I think that *Hot and Heavy* is a sticky text that underscores the ambivalence of visibility (Brunow, 2018) in which media representations can be both harmful as well as affirming. It is possible that the producers were disingenuous with their intentions as there is not much content dedicated to questioning the attitudes (particularly regarding health) that perpetuate fat stigma. Additionally, the program had moments of challenging assumptions about fat people, but it may not be explicitly fat-positive enough to satisfy viewers whose perspectives align with fat liberationist efforts. As Kent (2001) argues, “if the process of abjection means that the fat body is pushed to the margins, placed in the past, linked with death, envisioned as a crypt in which the (presumptively thin) self is in danger of withering away, and made to bear the horror of corporeality, then the process of fat-affirmative representation must counter or undermine these moves” (p. 137). There was no overt attempt to disprove “obesity” rhetoric despite many opportunities to do so, such as during Kristin’s investigation into weight loss surgery or Joy’s conversations with Chris’ mother. This may be because general audiences are not yet receptive to having fatphobic attitudes or their investments in fatphobic structures, such as diet culture, questioned.

The topics of love, dating and sexuality are largely framed within *Hot and Heavy* in a way that insinuates that securing a (heterosexual) partner is the most important thing one can do, especially if you are fat. The ideology of a heteronormative “fairy-tale romance” is incredibly common within media, as it “is an old story that is still compelling and still generates a strong, perhaps irrational, emotional response” (Deery, 2012, p. 110). It resonates with audiences because, to some degree, the majority of viewers want love for themselves and become emotionally invested in the love stories of others. In her assessment of *The Bachelor Nation*, a term applied to the devoted audience of *The Bachelor*, Feuer (2018) writes:

The show and its fans know that it is ludicrous. They know that the fairy-tale view of romance it depicts is outmoded and sexist. They know that the racial politics of the show didn’t improve much when they finally had a black bachelorette... *The Bachelor Nation*... does not care about political correctness because it is governed by what those who are not feminists or Marxists might call ‘universal values’. Romantic love is shown to be full of pain and humiliation but it is also shown to be the only reason for living. (p. 49)

*Hot and Heavy* deviates from the pursuit of the American dream only insofar as the body size of the female characters is concerned; the show does little to challenge the heteronormative pressure on women to be domestically inclined and subservient to a male partner (Pozner, 2010). Perhaps the farthest the show could stray from longstanding corporate interests and methods of profitability were to envelop fat women into the fold, which supports how reality television rebrands itself in part by framing nationalist and capitalist ideologies within a sentimental lens (Deery, 2012).

The emphasis on romantic love seems more important than self-love, or that self-love can be achieved once someone is loved by a thin person. For example, Adrianna says that she hated herself throughout her childhood, but now makes a daily effort to like herself. Ricardo also acknowledges that growing Adrianna's sense of self-love and confidence will greatly improve their lives and relationship. It is not clear whether Adrianna embarked on this journey before or after meeting Ricardo, but it is insinuated that being in a relationship with Ricardo has helped her. While the men on the show all claim to love their partners, in part, *because* of their fat bodies, the dominant framing of mixed-weight relationships insinuates that fat people are loved *despite* their fatness. The narratives of those who are claiming otherwise, such as Rusty, Chris, and Ricardo, slowly become undone when framed as fetishizing, or insinuating by production to be influenced by other contributing factors that therefore result in an "average" sized man resorting to dating a fat woman.

As with *My 600-lb Life* and *My Big Fat Fabulous Life*, there are moments in *Hot and Heavy* where a viewer with lived experience as a fat person may acknowledge moments of resistance, fat liberationist rhetoric, or the complexities (and sometimes hypocrisies) of navigating fat oppression. Within ambiguous fat activism, fat people are encouraged to "thrive through the joyful and mischievous takeover of an institution" (Cooper, 2016, p. 91). The more we see of these instances, the more likely they are to influence societal attitudes; as LeBesco (2004) argues, theoretically institutional and systemic understandings of fatness can change through the repetition of counter-perspectives. Mingus (2011) asks, "what would it mean if we didn't run from our own ugliness, or each other's?" A reality television show focused on mixed-weight couples certainly confronts dominant understandings of fat sexualities as well as cultural attitudes about who is deserving of love at all. For example, Joy and Adrianna are divesting from dominant desirability politics by not engaging with weight loss; the power

of this representation is that it validates experiences that instead embrace “ugliness.” The focus of *Hot and Heavy* on the everyday lives of these couples is similar to Kotow’s (2020) discussion of BBW bashes, in which participants have “‘normal’ social experiences that are otherwise tainted by fatphobia” (p. 151), such as going on dates, receiving public displays of affection, planning a wedding, or raising children. These aspects align with Zimdar’s (2021) concept of fat ambiguity in the sense that they “navigate a discursive terrain that encourages individual body positivity while not overtly pushing back against discourses of the ‘obesity epidemic’” (p. 51).

Insider reflexive knowledge – particularly personal experience with mixed-weight relationships, or more broadly, experience in dating while fat – is helpful in terms of developing a strong affective resonance with these tensions. Because this knowledge may not necessarily reside amongst the majority of viewers, attempts made by *Hot and Heavy* to emphasize the humanity of fat people (similar to attempts on *My 600-lb Life* and *My Big Fat Fabulous Life*) risk being lost to the more familiar tropes and narratives that maintain the fat body as a spectacle. Moreover, as *Hot and Heavy* demonstrates, body freedom is not an easy concept to achieve, even in the context of healthy interpersonal relationships. Rather, it is susceptible to the same power hierarchies that maintain and perpetuate institutional forms of fat stigma. As with *More to Love*, *Hot and Heavy* juxtaposes fat-positive instances with familiar oppressive fat tropes without providing the necessary political and informational context to guide the audience. This lack of contextualization paired with prioritizing the male participants’ sexualities, as well as the emphasis on the achievement of heterosexual partnership as a key contributor to the happiness of its fat women characters, makes it hard to fully embrace *Hot and Heavy* as a step forward for fat liberation. But, as a site of fat ambiguity, the possibility is there.

## Conclusion

### The stickiness of fat presents and futures

The majority of fat subjectivities on reality television “reinforce an abject identity of fatness” in that fat people are read, understood, and treated as pathological (Mobley, 2014, p. 164). However, the increasing presence of fat people who either reject the disciplinary measures they are subjected to or are encouraged to take up on their own, or otherwise direct their attention and efforts elsewhere, makes room for new fat subjectivities that challenge dominant understandings of fat people and their bodies. Dovey (2000) asks: “what kind of collective identities and common symbolic patterns emerge from a public speech increasingly rooted in local and particular speaking subjects, from ‘Other’ people who speak intimately and incessantly of their profound difference to an assumed ‘public’” (p. 3)? I interrogate this question throughout my analysis by drawing from my affective readings of these programs to identify elements of fat lived experiences as well as counter-hegemonic attitudes about fatness, particularly those that challenge fat stigma and “obesity” discourses. My lived experiences as a fat person, as a fat activist involved in physical and online communities, in addition to my professional work in broadcast media as well as my academic expertise, all inform my affective readings; indeed, “experience is articulated in a close and complex interaction between humans and their environments, how it is bodily mediated, how it plays out in a particular spatial framework, and how it is inextricably invested in and dependent on social relations between humans, and between humans and social institutions” (Sharma & Tygstrup, 2015, pp. 2-3). The shift that I identify from this unique perspective reflects how particular reality television programs challenge “obesity” rhetoric in ways that new fat subjectivities emerge, particularly those that move away from conceptualizing fatness as a liminal characteristic and instead situate fat people in both the present as well as within viable futures.

Within the context of the ongoing “obesity epidemic”, the programs explored in this dissertation are examples of “a crossroads for dangerous mixtures, a meeting-place for forbidden circulations” (Foucault, 1979, p. 144) that both reaffirm as well as resist attempts to discipline abject and unruly fat bodies. The participants on *My 600-lb Life* consent to weight loss surgeries that ultimately fail their goal of achieving a normative

body, revealing contradictions within traditional approaches towards fatness. The concepts of the misfit and the freak are also useful in interrogating the pleasures of watching some of this show's participants as they demand care for their superfat bodies regardless of if weight loss is achieved. For Whitney Way Thore as well as the cast of *Hot and Heavy*, their desire to tell their stories through participating on a reality television show is an example of how vulnerability can be translated into social capital that can be used for fat liberationist purposes, such as challenging fat stigma and combating harmful social attitudes that incite feelings of shame. The dominance of fat stigma, particularly within healthism grounded in "obesity" rhetoric, encourages skepticism and restricts the political potential of this vulnerability, as Ahmed (2010) writes, "bodies can get stuck depending on what feelings they get associated with" (p. 39). Nevertheless, the presence of such representations are useful, particularly for those who identify similar vulnerabilities and/or instances of resistance within their own lived experiences.

The stickiness of these sites of analysis reveals that reality television cannot be categorized as only a pleasurable or bad pastime. These programs, as well as responses to them, are messy, contradictory, complex, deeply rooted in histories of the body and identity, and further impacted by the sociopolitical and cultural contexts within which they are produced. Because fat participants on *My 600-lb Life* who undergo weight loss surgery have complex, often traumatic stories and often remain fat post-surgery; because Whitney Way Thore emphasizes self-love while navigating fat shame on *My Big Fat Fabulous Life*; and because three superfat women allowed for an intimate look at their sexual and romantic relationships as well as how they negotiate and/or resist the pathologization of their bodies, all three of these programs challenge viewers to question dominant "obesity" rhetoric that influences how we think and feel about body fat, and by extension, fat people. Increasingly, these negotiated readings are presented in public formats, such as platforms like Twitter, which allows for a larger spillover effect rather than containing these moments to private viewing experiences.

Wanzo (2019) argues that abjection inflicts a constant state of precariousness, which is evident in the conflicting feelings of superfat participants revealed across all three sites of analysis. In this sense, this precarity of the superfat participants is what positions them as suitable for the dramatic and sensational aims of reality television. It is also what inspires affective resonance. For example, participants on *My 600-lb Life* who reject the harsh conditions and violence they are being subjected to during their pursuit

of weight loss surgery, as well as discussions on *My Big Fat Fabulous Life* and *Hot and Heavy* regarding how fat people are often publicly harassed and subjected to public humiliation, “revealed the violence by which intermediated subjects are *repeatedly* stripped of their agency and sovereignty” (Hennefeld & Sammond, 2019, p. 18). The anger, humiliation, sadness, empathy, and/or compassion these moments incite within the viewer can be understood both as aligning with a preferred reading informed by “obesity” discourse, or as an opportunity for new fat subjectivities to emerge, particularly if changing attitudes about fatness render these instances less productive in terms of the ability to reaffirm “obesity” discourse. Furthermore, affective resonance is facilitated through explorations of pleasure that can be derived from living in a superfat body as well as attraction to superfat bodies. While Whitney Way Thore is less explicit in her discussions of sexuality and intimate relationships, in the sense that most often Whitney is depicted lamenting about the difficulties of pursuing such relationships in a superfat body, the couples featured on *Hot and Heavy* make such attraction appear much more simple in the sense that they are in established relationships that were made possible, in part, *because* of their body size. While acknowledging the vulnerability of self-love and romantic love involving superfat folks, particularly when subjected to scrutiny from one’s communities as well as broader sociocultural pressures, the eroticism of these three relationships dominates the affective resonance of the show as it is sexuality and romantic partnership that is the program’s primary focus.

As outlined at the beginning of this dissertation, reality television became mainstream along roughly the same time frame as the “obesity epidemic”. Importantly, the emergence of social media shortly followed, with platforms such as MySpace, Facebook and Instagram developing in the 2000s. Both reality television and social media foster a sense of intimacy and authenticity through their production and consumption practices and, as such, viewers often become emotionally invested in reality television participants. Reality television producers are aware of this investment. For example, social media is used by both producers as well as participants to maintain and sustain a fan base between seasons. Feuer (2018) quotes Billie Gold, VP-director programming research, Amplifi U.S., part of the Dentsu Aegis Network, who says that reality television shows “remain viable in a cluttered landscape thanks to the fact that these shows are built for real-time conversation and social media” (p. 49-50). Additionally, many reality TV participants are discovered on social media. As mentioned

in the fourth chapter, Whitney Way Thore was approached by TLC after a video of her dancing went viral on YouTube. Furthermore, social media presents opportunities for reality television participants to express opinions or perspectives about the shows they are featured on, or on issues that, for multiple reasons, were not included in the final edit of a show (Rudolfsdottir & Johannsdottir, 2018).

Sharma and Tygstrup (2015) argue that affectivity “is when something happens to us, and we react to it. We react according to the capacities we are able to mobilise. That is, the same impulse will propagate and crystallise in quite distinct manners, depending on who is being affected” (Sharma & Tygstrup, 2015, p. 14). It is beyond the scope of this dissertation to conclude how the presence of fat subjectivities that disrupt and/or challenge dominant “obesity” discourse generate affective responses within diverse audiences, or whether these representations advance or popularize fat liberationist aims. However, to step towards such work, this dissertation identifies and locate these subjectivities and acknowledge their possibilities, particularly how these representations both conform and resist to “obesity” discourse. To be explored in future research is the circulation of affect (Hemmings, 2015), particularly in digital spaces where viewers congregate to discuss their feelings and responses to such programs. I am interested in expanding this research to think through social media’s influence on reality television, which is not pursued in this dissertation because of my academic and scholarly investments at the time in which it was written.

There has been some interesting developments in the time since these programs were first released. For example, many participants on *My 600-lb Life* have publicly filed and discussed lawsuits against the production company as well as Dr. Now for how they were treated during production and how they were represented on the show. When *Hot and Heavy* came under intense public scrutiny, Adrianna defended the show to the *New York Post*, arguing that mixed-weight couples involving fat women were filling a gap in media that tends to focus on fat men paired with thin women (Dellatto, 2019). As discussed in chapter four, Whitney Way Thore’s #nobodyshame campaign is an excellent example of Whitney’s use of social media, outside of the reaches of reality television, that contradicts the way she is represented on *My Big Fat Fabulous Life*. With the ongoing development of communication technologies that allow for self-representation and critical engagement with mass media (Sender, 2012), it will be exciting to see what happens next for the reality television industry, as Palmer (2012)

argues “it will no longer be feasible for the next generation of producers to claim to speak on behalf of people when the people themselves can hear each other” (p. 90). I acknowledge that this discussion in some ways fetishizes technology and its possibilities, and of course not everyone has equal access to either digital technologies or a large social reach and thus not all viewers can equally participate in new forms of engagement. I am also aware that the opportunities afforded by technologies that may create a feminist utopia are equally as likely to produce a horrific dystopia (Halberstam, 2012); while blogging or social media platforms, for example, have been effective methods used by reality television participants to influence reality television production practices or to provide counter-narratives, those same methods have also given voice to incredibly harmful and violent perspectives, particularly ones that encourage trolling, violence, or other modalities of “cancel culture” towards public figures (Jane, 2014).

Future research within reality television studies is needed to tease apart the contradictory uses and gratifications of its programs. Negotiated readings can be both mocking and enthusiastic; audiences love reality television subjects, hate them, love to hate them, and hate to love them. Because of these mixed emotions, Phillips (2019) argues that popular approaches to these topics, namely considering audience responses within a binary, or as a fandom or “anti-fandom”, is perhaps the wrong way to look at many consumers of reality television. Considering the vast grey area that these responses occupy, more research is needed to assess how these varying perspectives may influence reality television and vice versa. In order to further understand whether reality television programs focused on the lives of fat people resonate positively or negatively with audiences, more research (such as qualitative interviews with viewers of a particular program) situated within reception studies is needed. In summarizing how her research subjects came into a fat activist sensibility, Cooper (2016) writes:

We all experienced moments where we had been made into a problem by others; we had realisations about this that occurred through series of events; these events led to shifts over time, like a dot-to-dot picture that slowly reveals itself. I noticed that in the telling, people were keen to share their autobiographies but that theorising did not take place... Participants who did suggest theoretical rationale for what they do tended to offer very broad explanations at a high level of abstraction than more specific comments (p. 99).

Considering this revelation in work involving people who explicitly identify as fat activists, I am not optimistic that the average viewers of reality television programs focused on fat

people are highly politicized, either. It is unclear as of yet where this may stem from; perhaps there is a fear for potential pathologization through identifying commonalities, which could validate the severity of individual experiences of trauma and harm. Or, as Cooper writes, maybe our traumatic experiences as fat people feel too intensely personal to be universal, and so we hold them close. As such, future research, such as interviews with viewers but also discourse analysis of content on social media platforms, would be helpful (Harjunen, 2009).

Research in production studies involving qualitative interviews with participants would provide additional insight into how participants felt they were represented, the tactics they may have employed during production to achieve particular framing or storylines, as well as how they may use social media to provide supplemental or contradictory content (Patterson, 2013). As discussed, Whitney Way Thore from *My Big Fat Fabulous Life* is an excellent case study that would satisfy all three of these underexplored areas. An explanation for this discrepancy may be found in the commercial interests of reality television as a cultural industry. Mobley (2014) argues that media and other consumer industries resist embracing fat positivity due to the potentially negative impact that could have on the health and beauty industries. Indeed, as explored in this dissertation, mainstream uses of body positivity often signify a neoliberal co-option of fat activist values, such as self-love, to maintain problematic industries that rely on fat stigma to maintain a profit (Cooper, 2016; Inthorn and Boyce, 2010). While self-actualization is thought of as a personal and unique journey, on reality television this process occurs in conjunction with economic systems that are not concerned with the individual (Sender, 2012). Reality television continues to place consumerism ahead of the needs of the individual, therefore promoting governance of the self over happiness or freedom (Palmer, 2014). The consequences of such governance are that fat people, especially super fat women, are constructed as being in a state of crisis and requiring radical change – even if that isn't how they actually feel about themselves.

These suggestions for future research culminate in a broader concern that some academics have identified within this area of study: new communication and information technologies are challenging what constitutes reality-based, or documentary media. In the Web 2.0 era, media texts on social media platforms such as YouTube, Instagram or Snapchat possess similar qualities to more formal factual entertainment industries. For

example, YouTube, while composed mainly of amateur producers, is a platform that enables users to document a topic of interest, often using approaches such as talking-head interviews, archival footage, live action footage, and hidden camera observations, to construct a narrative. Instagram – particularly through the Reels and Stories functions – also offers these capabilities. One step further is the example of Snapchat, whose feature of the ‘Snapchat Map’ enables users to upload content to a global map that can be viewed by anyone in the world within a 24-hour time period. Arguably, these platforms operate as a new form of factual entertainment database where multiple viewpoints are expressed and available publicly to viewers. This database provides content for a participatory media environment by removing some barriers to participation. As Dovey & Rose (2013) argue:

Media production platforms have different affordances that offer different possible processes of production, different cultural forms and genres, and different audience or user experience.... Our contention is that the process of documentary production can change through new forms of collaboration, and that, in fact, the forms of documentary are changing through software design and interactivity. (p. 366)

It is possible that the media landscape has shifted so drastically that research on reality TV is not yet equipped with the language or frameworks to categorize and assess contemporary examples or the sticky relationships between producers, audiences, and digital media. The suggestions for future research outlined above attempt to offer ways to approach these new sites.

The demand for interdisciplinary research drawing from areas of study such as new creative industries, media studies, and convergence culture studies, persists as communication technologies and media platforms continue to rapidly evolve (Aslinger & Huntemann, 2013), further fragmenting media engagement and consumption practices (Wood, 2007). More research is certainly needed on how the political sentiments of digital contemporary feminist counter-publics are received by people outside of these communities (Rudolfsdottir & Johannsdottir, 2018), especially considering the lack of research on viewers who may be dedicated to viewing specific programs but who may not engage with traditional or common understandings of ‘fandom’ behaviours. Considering the often confessional act of revealing that one is a consumer of reality television, more research could be dedicated to the oral culture surrounding reality television and its impacts (Bury, 2017). Additionally, relatively new consumption

practices such as binge-watching offered by new streaming services and cable companies have significantly altered how media is engaged with, offering television as both potentially all-consuming, or as a background activity for distracted viewers. Therefore, research centered on the digital attention economy provides another intersection with which to explore the potential impacts of contemporary programming (Pilipets, 2019).

This dissertation has identified some of the pleasurable, joyous, challenging, and radical possibilities of contemporary representations of superfat people on reality television. This includes exploring visualizations of what fat presents and futures look like, however, more research is still needed on the “everyday politics of fat” (Hopkins, 2012 in Jones, 2019) in order to “document the pleasures of fatness and not just the discrimination faced by fat people” (Jones, 2019, p. 295). The harms of reality TV have been well-documented, but the more complex representations offered in contemporary programs paired with the feedback and demands of audiences as expressed on social media, requires the attention of researchers who aim to go beyond familiar frameworks, particularly the disciplinary and governmental aspects of the genre. In her analysis of *Here Comes Honey Boo Boo*, Friedman (2014) suggests that we have entered “a new phase in our consumption of difference and the fluid and disruptive boundaries of the ‘normal’” (p. 77). Many of the public responses on social media to *Hot and Heavy*, particularly on Twitter, indicate more critical understandings of fatness and how it is represented in mainstream media; for example, multiple media outlets cited a tweet that read “Since TLC’s production team somehow missed this, it is INCREDIBLY disrespectful to first, characterize someone based solely on their size and second, portray concepts of ‘hot’ and ‘heavy’ as polar opposites – implying that hot and heavy may not ...characterize one person simultaneously” (France, 2019). In many ways, body positive programming and attempts to evoke fat-positive discourse are considered by viewers as a bait-and-switch; in theory, these programs align with these values, but in actuality are limited in their capacity to advance cultural understandings of fatness.

As illustrated in the first chapter, *My 600-lb Life* is representative of what happens when cultural industries respond to cultural hysteria about the supposed risks of the “obesity epidemic”; super fat people are positioned as unruly, abject bodies in dire need of intervention. However, the failure to achieve long-term weight loss through surgical interventions, as well as the affective resonance facilitated through trauma porn

in addition to participants' demands to have their superfat bodies shown care at their current size, troubles dominant "obesity" discourse that position fatness as a liminal characteristic rather than a viable form of existence. The introduction of programming such as *My Big Fat Fabulous Life* indicates a slight shift away from trust in "obesity" discourses, instead exploring new fat subjectivities and the possibility of living in the world as a superfat person. As a sticky site of analysis, this program simultaneously rubs up against "obesity" discourse and reveals underlying fat stigma within body positive movements. As discussed in the third chapter, *Hot and Heavy* is indicative of an even greater shift towards advancing fat subjectivities in ways that challenge dominant understandings of fatness. It is a sticky text in that the program engages with various tensions within experiences of being fat. As Zimdars (2019) argues, while body positive discourse is becoming more mainstream and present in cultural industries such as reality television, anti-fat health and medical discourse still prevail. It is evident that dominant "obesity" discourse underscores all of these programs and, as such, informs the framing of the participants; this discourse can make it hard to apply value to new fat subjectivities that emphasize self-love, fat joy, and the superfat body as a sexual subject. Fat liberationist discourse may not dominate such representations until an adequate counter-discourse to the "obesity epidemic" infiltrates public thought (Boero, 2012). Nonetheless, a queer reading of these programs locates these possibilities which are felt by viewers such as myself.

Teasing apart the stickiness of the three sites of analysis used throughout this dissertation offered me the opportunity to reflect on the (somewhat shameful) love I have for the genre. As Sharma and Tygstrup (2015) argue, being affected involves "being struck by something that makes you change your direction or composure ever so slightly" (p. 16). This is evident in my negotiation of my identities as a reality television enthusiast and as a fat person deeply invested in fat liberation. McGregor (2020) questions whether there is political value to be found in a collective critique of the activities that we both indulge in and feel shame about. McGregor (2020) writes in a Twitter thread:

Being ashamed of the things that we love is intertwined with the idea of the guilty pleasure -- but while the guilty pleasure says "I am a 'good' person who sometimes likes to enjoy 'bad' things," the shameful pleasure says "I am bad for liking this."... I think when people feel that they are being shamed for the culture they love, they react either with a kind of violent

insiderism (see white male comic book or video game fans) or with an ironic distancing (“I know this is bad, I’m in on the joke”). But what of the culture we love, but feel ashamed of loving? Not that shame is being imposed on us, like the misogynist disdain for romance novels, but that we recognize a gap between our values and the culture we love, and we feel shame about the reality of that attachment?... This act of collective reading and collective critique has not ‘solved’ the problem of this shame, but it has activated it into a site of possibility. There’s potential, here, for something more nuanced than total disavowal or unthinking adherence. Something between, or beyond, “I don’t want to think too hard about this because it will ruin it for me” and “my ethical responsibility is to burn every copy of a book written by a shitty human.” And that possibility happens, I think, not despite but because of the experience of shame. The shame is there to tell us that there is a problem, that something we’re doing is out of line with our values. Shame can be a good teacher. And I think its potential to teach us is amplified through the act of collective reading and critique, through the pleasures of carefully thinking something through together, giving time and energy to the things we love. I guess what I’m saying is, if there’s something you love but feel ashamed of loving, is there an opportunity for you to activate this shame into collective conversation? Can it connect you rather than cutting you off? Can it be the beginning of something?

Certainly, as described at the beginning of this dissertation, I have felt and continue to feel a level of shame about my love for reality television and the culture surrounding it. As a fan of certain programs, I engage with Reddit discussion boards, follow the social media accounts of participants, and consume various other forms of public discourse regarding the shows that I watch loyally and enthusiastically. I also sometimes sit in silence as I watch problematic content, including violent, traumatic, or otherwise negative depictions of people whose bodies look like mine. As a viewer, I have watched these scenes unfold while someone else has silently sat beside me and waited for me to say something about it. Sometimes, I have been watching fatphobic content and felt the eyes of other people in the room slyly take note of how, or if, I react. While watching these programs, there is always a tangle of emotions in the air.

Ahmed (2018) suggests that “we might need to attend to bad feelings not in order to overcome them, but to learn by how we are affected by what comes near, which means achieving a different relationship to all our wanted and unwanted feelings as a political as well as life resource” (p. 65). This dissertation involved teasing apart the shame or “wilful ignorance” (Pohlhaus, 2012) that I have felt as a devoted scholar and consumer of reality television. A post-“obesity” sensibility may not yet exist. However, the shift that I have identified in this dissertation has occurred over a short period of time and indicates that western cultures, or countercultures, may be headed in that direction.

I remain optimistic that consuming reality television does not have to be categorized solely as a problematic guilty pleasure, and that the pleasure derived from viewing reality television is significant and has value. At this point in time, I feel that programs centered on the lives of superfat people offer a sense of discomfort that is important, productive and meaningful. At the very least, the shifting attitudes revealed throughout this dissertation point to new fat subjectivities on reality television that challenge dominant understandings of fatness rooted in “obesity” discourse and offer opportunities to imagine the possibilities of fat presents and futures.

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