Revealing the Fat Experience:

A Neglected Dimension of Hidden and Outside Curriculum

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THESIS
Submitted as partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Curriculum and Instruction in the Graduate College of the University of Illinois at Chicago, 2016

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In Memory of Dr. William Watkins
ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

I would like to thank Dr. William Schubert for his steadfast patience and support of me throughout this process. I would also like to acknowledge all of the Fat Studies scholars I have met along the way, in particular Nathan Chan and Marilyn Wann, who have shown me the power and equity that comes with embracing one’s fat identity. And finally, I would like to thank my sister Erica Fouser, whose love and support made this journey possible.
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I. Framing the Issue

It is widely believed that fat children have become one of this country’s most burdensome issues. What are we to do with these children? What is wrong with them? Who is to blame for this epidemic? These concerns are everywhere—on the front pages of newspapers, as leading stories on morning talk shows, and as breaking news on nightly news programs.

School districts are concerned with students’ BMI (Body Mass Index), so much so that it is included on a child’s report card, alongside their B in Mathematics and their C in Reading and Language Arts. Teachers, too, are blamed for discrimination; reports have detailed educators forcing their students to step on scales in front of their peers and announce their weights to the class (Solovay, 2000). These children know they are a problem. Nothing is hidden from their view. Not only are they abnormal, they are also to blame. What are these kids eating? Why can they not control themselves? Why do they not know better?

This is a lot for a child to handle.

Are these children choosing to be fat? Did they wake up one day and say, you know what, I am going to be fat? Or was it the card that they were dealt—is it an issue of hereditary, a medical condition, an emotional disorder? Or could it possibly be a result of the hidden curriculum presented by our schools (Giroux and Purpel, 1983)? This hidden curriculum is that which is delivered to the students, the teachers, the parents, and the staff via the education system; it is the unwritten, unspoken curriculum, or structural dimensions of society and cultural context, which may be both consciously and unconsciously generated. In the case of the curriculum of appearance, a great deal of the hidden curriculum may be the agenda of the school system, and more specifically, in this case, the vehicle to deliver society’s prescribed parameters.
For instance, in terms of physical appearance, classroom desks have been created to accommodate a student of a particular size, just as the BMI included on a student’s report card may suggest an acceptable range of a child’s body weight to height ratio. These predetermined determinants tell all participants—students, parents, and teachers—the appropriate size of a student. These sorts of specifications may not be as purposeful as Common Core State Standards or as deliberate as specifications on a Lesson Plan; however, they are part of the daily curriculum being delivered by the education system. This hidden curriculum is a part of the inner workings of a school, represented through school mandates, the physical space and culture of the school, and the messages, both direct and indirect, conveyed to students by the school faculty and staff (see Giroux and Purpel, 1983). This hidden curriculum, coupled with the outside curriculum (Schubert, 2010) that all stakeholders—students, parents, teachers, and staff—bring to the table, provides a discourse that extends well beyond the written objectives and daily learning goals of a predetermined curriculum. According to William Schubert (2010), this outside curriculum can be derived from a variety of sources, such as “home, family, culture, community, language, television, movies and other video, music, other arts, books and magazines, videogames, the Internet, peer groups, non-school organizations (scouts, sports, dance, theater, gangs, church, chat groups, music and art groups), work, and hobbies” (p. 14); it is imperative to recognize that all of these avenues provide experience from which a student derives his or her sense of self, and these varied senses of selves are what translate into the outside curriculum that is just as important a part of the school experience as the standardized tests or the skill sets to be acquired for mastery (Schubert, 2010). William Schubert, Ann Lopez Schubert, Thomas Thomas, and Wayne Carroll (2002) further explain: “The authors of our outlooks on the world, those (including ourselves) who create our images of life, are the curricularists we need to join for
mutual exploration of possibilities and for creation of defensible futures for us all (p. 525).” These curricularists are all around us, and they must be acknowledged for their contribution—positive or negative—to one’s experience and sense of knowing.

According to data from the National Health and Nutrition Examination Survey, released in 2015, from 1999 to 2002, 30.5% of adults aged 20 years and older were deemed obese, while 16% of youths aged 12 to 19 years were obese, and from 2003-2006, 33.5% of adults were obese and 17.6% of youths aged 12 to 19 years were obese. These numbers have continued to swell. The most recent figures state that more than one-third (35.5%) of U.S. adults and 19.4% of U.S. youth (aged 12 to 19 years) were obese in 2012. Over 78 million U.S. adults and approximately 12.5 million U.S. children and adolescents are considered medically obese. In 2009-2010, almost 41 million women and more than 37 million men aged 20 and over were obese. Among children and adolescents aged 2–19, more than 5 million girls and approximately 7 million boys were obese (Ogden, Carroll, Kit, and Flegal, 2012). In 2008, the estimated annual medical cost of obesity in the U.S. was $147 billion dollars; the medical costs for obese people were $1,429 higher than those of normal weight (Finkelstein, Trogdon, Cohen, and Dietz, 2009). Obesity prevalence in 2012 varied across states and regions. By state, obesity prevalence ranged from 20.5% in Colorado to 34.7% in Louisiana. No state had a prevalence of obesity less than 20%. Nine states and the District of Columbia had prevalence between 20-25%. Thirteen (13) states (Alabama, Arkansas, Indiana, Iowa, Kentucky, Louisiana, Michigan, Mississippi, Ohio, Oklahoma, South Carolina, Tennessee, and West Virginia) had a prevalence equal to or greater than 30%. Higher prevalences of adult obesity were found in the Midwest (29.5%) and the South (29.4%). Lower prevalences were observed in the Northeast (25.3%) and the West (25.1%) (Ogden, et. al, 2012).
As the statistics surrounding childhood obesity swell, so, too, do the negative connotations of blame. Students who are fat encounter social oppression as a result of their deviance from the norm. Existing within a culture that praises likeness and assimilation, fat students typically find themselves the victims of rejection as a result of their difference and society is on the hunt for who is to blame for this subjugation. According to Natalie Boero (2009), one of the most popular culprits is the ‘mother’. Boero suggests that, “Blaming mothers for the fatness of their children is not a new phenomenon. Implicit in this critique of American culture is a blame of working mothers for allowing their children to watch too much television, for not having their eating habits more closely monitored, and for relying on convenience foods for meals” (p. 114). However, Boero (2009) points out that blaming mothers distracts from the real structural inequalities in health care, employment and education that are most often felt by women and minorities. These disparities are to blame for the societal discrimination felt by women and fat children.

It is evident that early experiences of discrimination have detrimental, unavoidable effects. As Nevin Scrimshaw and William Dietz (1995) explain, young children, both obese and non-obese, who undergo discrimination, formulate a similar sense of self-worth. However, as young obese children reach adolescence, the discrimination begins to be internalized and a negative, life-long self-perception can be formed. This internalization continues into adulthood and runs the risk of dictating a negative self-image. W. Charisse Goodman (1995) unveils the common assumption that “fat is a nutritional demon to be shunned, [extending] that perception to include all people; eventually, the individual becomes invisible while only the fat is seen” (p. 20). And the fatness is inescapable, for it becomes a defining characteristic of the individual—it becomes the only characteristic.
This negativity often initiates in the school setting. A study conducted by the Gay, Lesbian, and Straight Education Network (GLSEN), *From Teasing to Torment: School Climate in America—A Survey of Students and Teachers*, suggests that harassment, even when it is limited to teasing and negative remarks, can interfere with a student’s education (Harris Interactive, 2005). Previous research, such as The 2005 National School Climate Survey conducted by Harris Interactive and GLSEN and the American Association of University Women’s Hostile Hallways reports (1993 and 2001), has found a direct linkage between a student’s academic performance and the amount of harassment he or she has experienced at school. The study examines several aspects of the school climate that can detract from a safe learning environment, as well as teens’ personal experiences with harassment. While sexual orientation is cited as a common reason for harassment, the reason most frequently mentioned is a student’s appearance—the way they look or their body size.

Feeling the pressure to remedy the problem at hand, fat students often feel forced into locating a fix for that which makes them ‘abnormal.’ According to Nathan Chan and Allison Gillick (2009), “These pressures not only affect identity formation but also lead to feelings of instability, invisibility, and isolation” (p. 233). Working alongside their struggle is a push for fat acceptance and the reclamation of the language that has been deemed detrimental and derogatory to fat individuals.

*Weight stigma*, also known as *weightism, weight bias, and weight-based discrimination*, is discrimination based on an individual’s weight, especially those considered very large or very thin. Fat Activism is the movement against this marginalization. Organizations such as the National Association to Advance Fat Acceptance (NAAFA) and the International Size Acceptance Association (ISAA) are two groups that have responded to this discrimination and
have established networks in several large cities and across the web to provide a sense of support and community. As we develop as a nation of obese individuals, it is essential that the arms of these organizations reach to embrace our education system.
II. Society’s Colonization of the Human Body

Throughout time, society has dictated the way in which the human body has been depicted and received. Whether it is in the mainstream media or the in the minds of infant children, there is an ingrained way to observe, react, and respond to others. Society provides the framework for the assignment of particular labels and determinants, and these labels and classifications generate a response from the outside observer, as well as from the individual.

Society has taken over the body. As with any colonized people, the body is being told what to do, what to be, how to act, how to look, and how to respond. It is being told what it should be doing, and it is being forced and manipulated into thinking that their way—the colonizing force’s way — is the right way. The body is under constant observation. The body receives continuous slaps from society’s hand at the first signs of deviation. The body is oppressed. The body that deviates from the norm is marginalized.

The curriculum of appearance fits into the domain of critical and post-modern studies parallel to race, class, gender, place, language, sexuality, ethnicity, culture, membership, nationality, religion, age, and more. These are all labels which carry predetermined stereotypes and identifiers that are placed on the individual by some outside force. These are imbedded ways of being that society uses to classify individuals, to place them into identifiable compartments through which stereotypes and levels of understanding are then created and applied. For instance, society has decided what makes an individual Asian or middle-class or woman or homosexual or German or fat. To the individual, it is their way of being; it is their existence. But to society, these classifications carry inescapable ideals and expectations. When one deviates from a predetermined model of normality, the individual feels the repercussions.
from the ‘colonizing’ force. Society frames the individual, placing around the individual a structure that not only defines, but also separates and encloses the individual within the walls of its definition. Any deviance from the norm is shunned by the stakeholders—condemned and shamed by those who hold the power. Within these curriculums, the marginalized do not maintain the authority; instead, they are the victims of its wielding forces. The authority is held by a small number of people who are responsible for the regulation of society. As C. W. Mills (1956) suggests, it is the power elite who are responsible for determining what is deemed acceptable and unacceptable. In the United States, this power elite group includes those presiding at the head of the governing body. For instance, Michelle Obama’s campaign against childhood obesity may be considered a valiant effort to bring light to an issue, but her assertion that children should exercise for a predetermined number of minutes per day, eat foods which may or may not be attainable by all, and not exceed a particular weight (a non-obese Body Mass Index), are examples of the power elite’s control over the individual’s body. This is the type of control that Michel Foucault (1990) discusses in relation to biopower—the notion that the controlling forces will negotiate the regulation and subjugation they deem necessary to control their populace. For instance, they assert norms such as the superiority of the English language, the determinants of beauty, and the stigmatism associated with homosexuality. In turn, individuals are then marginalized through vehicles such as labeling, stigma, and language. Much like the existence of other curricular norms, the curriculum of appearance dictates that fatness is ugly and thinness is beautiful, and despite the notion that the majority of people are average to fat, society praises the overwhelming majority who strive to be thin.

The curriculum of appearance which exists around us functions in much the same way. Individuals are permitted access outside of the frames in which they reside but only when
acceptable passage seems possible. For instance, when an individual passes for another race, like the narrator in James Weldon Johnson’s *Autobiography of an Ex-colored Man* (1960), he or she must be prepared to move from one frame of reference into another. When someone gains weight, for instance, the frame may become too small and movement into another realm must occur. This is similar in terms of the shrinking body. An individual who changes the circumference of their body must also change the boundaries in which they exist. For instance, if an individual loses a significant amount of body weight, although the individual may now reside outside of the parameters of fatness, the individual’s understanding of the world and the way in which it views his aesthetic being has not changed. He may look different and fit differently into society, but he is still processing his existence in the mind of a fat individual, and all of those experiences and thought-processes that have shaped his life as a fat person remain present. Society’s reaction and acceptance of a thin body varies greatly from its response to a fat individual, and a newly thin individual must deal with the shift in society’s perception.

Within these frames of reference reside the culturally constructed and construed language and identifiers which are used as determinants. According to Asa Hilliard (2002), cultures create language, and children learn to speak the language of their cultural group at the age of two. He explains that language, culture, history, and oppression are all a part of the African-American experience. In many ways, this is true of any marginalized group that has faced subjugation. It is the language created within the culture which has historically oppressed and dominated the individual. For instance, the notion of standardized knowledge in the curriculum of schools is analogous to a standardized presentation in the curriculum of appearance. In Foucault’s (1979) *Discipline and Punish*, he implies that language equals oppression, suggesting that language is developed to give authority to those who speak the language. As a consequence, individuals
who do not speak the language or follow the determinants set forth by society are then oppressed.

Language attaches meaning to the curriculum of appearance. The social construct of beauty, for instance, is a label placed on a predetermined set of ideals associated with that which is pleasing to the eye. Without ugly, of course, the notion of beauty would fail to exist; therefore, the stigmatism of that which is not an acceptable form of beauty becomes derogatory as an opposing force. The realm of Fat Studies is also made up of these social descriptors. For instance, without the notion of fat, there would not be the ideal thin. There also would not be a bevy of other terms used to define the fat body. Marilynn Wann (1998) suggests that terms such as overweight and obese have been socially constructed to deconstruct and demoralize the fat experience. She considers the terms subjective and meaningless, preferring instead a reclamation of the term fat (p. 19). Marcia Millman (1980) and Laura Brown (1989) also explain that the descriptive term fat, while historically derogatory and demeaning, is actually preferred to terms such as overweight and obese. They suggest that overweight implies that there is an ideal weight to use for comparison, and obese is a medical term that refers to clinical weight tables and charts which are obsolete and defunct.

J. Eric Oliver (2006) also discusses the involvement of the health industry in the creation of definitions surrounding these terms. Meaning has been arbitrarily applied and sports figures such as Michael Jordan and Arnold Schwarzenegger are suddenly considered obese individuals. The public health establishment, according to Oliver (2006), is to blame for the exaggerations and falsehoods placed on obese persons, and they are also responsible for the assumption that thinness equals wellness. Public heath officials have greatly impacted the country, and in many ways, through the use of varied statistics and reports, have thwarted the weight-loss industry into
a big business enterprise (p. 5). Like Oliver, Paul Campos (2004) paints an equally grim picture of the government and private industry’s involvement in the attempt to cure this dreadful disease. He sarcastically asserts, “America, we are told, is on the verge of eating itself to death” (p. 8). Campos (2004) explains that it is the mainstream media which have grotesquely over exaggerated this issue with misrepresentations of obesity and obesity related illness. He credits the medical and pharmaceutical establishments for furthering the sense of apprehension and unrest felt by the majority of Americans regarding their weight (p. 59).

In many ways, the issues associated with language transcend the experience of all individuals of marginalized groups. A post-modern perspective would suggest that it is the labeling—the predetermined determinants—that categorize certain attributes and define sexism, racism, classism, and fatism. Much like these categories, there is an air of power and privilege that comes as a result of residing on the dominant end of the spectrum. In the curriculum of appearance, this power and privilege is thinness. Contemporary media has taken on this notion on several occasions. From the popular drama series Drop Dead Diva’s attempt to place a shallow model into a plus-sized body, to supermodel Tyra Banks’ adornment of a fat-suit, the fat body has been presented as something to be avoided and despised. Contestants on reality programs like The Biggest Loser are financially compensated for shedding pounds, encouraging them to hate their fat bodies and compete in a self-loathing competition against their own body and those of their fat competitors. The privilege of thinness is supported through a depiction of the fat body as burdensome, ugly, and shameful.

As Cecilia Hartley (2001) explains, in American culture, women are expected to be beautiful and beautiful is synonymous with thin. Women are shown image after image of society’s beauty, and whether it be a waif or an athlete, these images depict women with minimal
breast tissue and boyish slenderness. These are molds into which the vast majority of women will not fit (p. 64). In Brown’s (1989) *Fat Oppressive Attitudes* (1989), she also explores the notion that despite the unattainability of these desired outcomes, women often turn these ideals both inward and outward as a means of defeating and judging both themselves and those around them. She suggests that, “North American women of most cultures, and all body sizes and eating styles tend to have fat-oppressive and fat-negative attitudes towards their own bodies and, by inference, those of other women” (p. 20). The fat body represents one which fails to follow societal norms—one which can be viewed in complete ignorance of the rules.

Kathleen LeBesco (2001), too, recognizes the manner in which the language used to identify the fat body is so powerful that it also alienates and oppresses the individual who uses the language. According to Judith Butler (1999), the mere act of speaking permits language to create what is society’s reality. In her piece *Gender Trouble* (1999), Butler (1999) asserts this idea: “Discourse becomes oppressive when it requires that the speaking subject, in order to speak, participate in the very terms of that oppression—that is, take for granted the speaking subject’s own impossibility or unintelligibility” (p. 147). Current discourse surrounding the fat body has been internalized and has subjugated the individual from his/her own body.

Another way in which the curriculum of appearance can be framed within the post-modern discussion is through the qualification of what is considered human within these different paradigms. For instance, Butler (1999) suggests that marking a body with the notion of gender, seems to qualify the human experience, and those that fall outside of these excepted gender roles are falling outside of being human, allowing for the dehumanization of these individuals (p. 142). Other curriculums presented by society appear to do the same thing. There are acceptable and expectable norms, and if an individual is unable to identify with these
determinants, then they are dehumanized, be it by their race, their culture, their appearance, their sexual orientation, or their language.

In her book, *Fat! So? Because You Don’t Have to Apologize for Your Size*, Wann (1998) details a dehumanizing experience she had in a T.J. Maxx department store. Upon hearing a woman suggest to her thirteen or fourteen-year-old daughter that if she did not go on a diet, she may look like Wann, Wann turned to the young girl and said, “Look, don’t let your mother tell you that being fat is going to ruin your life. It isn’t. I know better. Being fat is just one of the things that people are, like being Jewish or being black or being gay or being bald” (p. 153). Fatness, as it exists in the curriculum of appearance, is regularly equated with other –isms. In fact, Oliver (2006) terms size-based discrimination as fatism.

Like Wann, Oliver (2006) points out that fatness can be aligned with societal identifiers, such as race, gender, creed, and other physical characteristics. He suggests that fatness, however, is the last acceptable form of discrimination, and that size-based discrimination occurs in the workforce, in education, in applying for health insurance, and even in renting an apartment. “The derision of fat people is pervasive throughout American culture. In magazines, television, and film, fat people are often the objects of ridicule and disdain, stereotypically depicted as gluttonous, lazy, or impotent” (p. 61).

America’s attitude toward fatness and fat people is extremely negative. According to a study conducted by Rebecca Puhl and Kelly Brownell (2001), “Clear and consistent stigmatization, and in some cases discrimination, can be documented in three important areas of living [for obese persons]: employment, education, and health care. Among the findings are that 28% of teachers in one study said that becoming obese is the worst thing that can happen to a person; 24% of nurses said that they are ‘repulsed’ by obese persons; and, controlling for income
and grades, parents provide less college support for their overweight than for their thin children” (p. 788). Existing in a society that holds these perceptions of fatness is daunting for the fat individual.

At every turn, the fat individual is bombarded with reminders of one’s size and the overwhelming push for thinness. Goodman (1995) details the daily observations of a fat woman:

As she reads the morning newspaper, she sees ads and articles glorifying the slender figure … While taking public transportation to work, she may have to cope with seats designed for much thinner people, some of whom will clearly resent her presence should they have to share a seat with her. Once at work, she must listen to other women discuss at painful length their diets, their own perceived weight problems, and their anxiety and self-reproach at not being more disciplined … [and] their disgust and contempt for fatness as a general concept … When she checks out clothing ads in flyers or newspapers, she finds that garments advertised in sizes ranging from 4-14 or -16 invariably portray a woman at the smaller end of the spectrum modeling the product … When she turns on her TV or goes to a movie … while usually presenting heavy women, when they are included at all, as loud, aggressive, oafish, raw, alienated, etc.; in short, as unattractive, unlovable, unsuccessful, and decidedly unglamorous. (p. 43)

According to Chan and Gillick (2009), individuals who are fat inhabit bodies which are deemed culturally undesirable; they are considered deviant to the laws and regulations put forth by society, “residing on the outskirts of normalcy and normality” (p. 233). Fat individuals are viewed as disobedient, in the sense that they do not adhere to what Foucault (1979) considers the “society of normalization”. Instead, they abide by the natural progression of the body,
disregarding the standards and norms upheld by society. A common assumption prevails regarding the fat body: it is assumed that fat people make a conscious decision to ignore the way in which the body is expected to look and behave, thereby turning a blind eye to the parameters of normalcy set forth by society.

Individuals who are considered fat experience social oppression at every turn. Their lack of adherence to societal norms brings judgment, ridicule, and persecution. Residing in an environment that celebrates uniformity and cohesion, fat individuals are often shamed into believing that they do not fit, literally and metaphorically, into the world around them. Much like other marginalized groups, they face obstacles to complete societal inclusion and recognition.

According to LeBesco (2004), contemporary perceptions of fat are fueled by historical, cultural, and economic conditions. In the United States, fatness is seen as disgusting, comical, hideous, and dirty; excess weight is something to be ignored and dropped. Fat individuals undergo an experience that consciously places them on the outskirts of society. They are excluded from participating in society’s games regarding wellness and beauty, and they are viewed as ignorant to the rules. For these individuals, the world in which they reside perpetually discourages their contribution and places them on the losing side of an allegedly equal playing field.

Susan Bordo (1993) further details this exclusion due to weight and size, asserting that postmodernism points to structures which resist these common cultural assumptions. She asserts that there is a temptation to question meaning, self-identity, and the power/knowledge relationship, and that these social constructs must be deconstructed and then reconstructed. As Bordo (1993) suggests, it is difficult to live within a fragmented existence. When cultural
change makes a significant alteration on human life, she suggests that the change must be named and understood.

Goodman (1995) unveils the common assumption that “fat is a nutritional demon to be shunned, [extending] that perception to include all people; eventually, the individual becomes invisible while only the fat is seen” (p. 20). During childhood, when nutrition and health is deemed both necessary and abundant, fat individuals have often felt alienated and acknowledged only in terms of their fatness, and they have responded in a similar fashion to their fat peers. According to the findings of a study conducted by Janet Latner, Albert Stunkard, and G. Terence Wilson (2005), overweight and obese research participants were no less negative regarding obesity than non-obese individuals. In essence, obese individuals are just as responsible as their non-obese peers for perpetuating a stigmatizing attitude toward weight. In this process, the victim of harsh and unruly judgment is also the victimizer of the negative perception. The self-hatred actually internalizes itself to become a vehicle for judging others based on size. The victimization becomes apparent through not only self-hatred but hatred toward those who offer a similar reflection. Much like the infamous doll study conducted by Kenneth and Mamie Clark (1939), fat individuals utilize a scrutinizing lens through which to view both the self and others afflicted with ‘fatness’. Much like the Clarks’ study which exposed a negative self-perception based on race held by young African American girls, fat individuals seem to possess a similar sense of internalized prejudice against themselves and their fat peers.

In a study conducted of overweight adolescent girls, 96% of the participants reported that they had been the victims of negative experiences as a result of their weight. They explained that much of this teasing came from peers in the school setting, and they received little to no guidance for dealing with this stigmatization (Neumark-Sztainer, Story, and Faibisch, 1998). A
second study of obese women found that the long-term impact of such childhood and adolescent teasing led to a negative body image and sense of self in adulthood (Grilo, Wilfley, Brownell, and Rodin, 1994).

The stigma against fatness begins to intensify once children begin school. While previous research suggests that the self-image of obese and non-obese preschool age children does not differ greatly, this is not the case as children progress through grade school. In a study conducted of both obese and non-obese children between the ages of 9 and 11, the overweight participants had dramatically lower self-esteem. Self-esteem and self-worth were lowest among children who believed they were to blame for their fatness. Of the overweight children, 91% were ashamed of being fat, 90% felt that teasing and bullying would cease if they lost weight, and 69% of the children believed they would have more friends if they were thinner (Pierce and Wardle, 1997).

Despite the growing numbers of obese individuals, acceptance of the fat body has diminished significantly. In a popular study conducted in the 1960s, children were asked to rank six photographs of children with varying levels of disabilities and physical characteristics in the order of who they would most like to have as a friend. More than 50% of the children ranked the obese child last among the other pictures of children in wheelchairs, missing limbs, or having facial abnormalities (Richardson, Goodman, Hastorf, and Dornbusch, 1961). In 2001, Latner and Stunkard replicated the study, reporting that despite the growing number of obese individuals in society, the strongest bias was still towards the obese child and that this stigmatization had actually increased since the study was first conducted (Latner and Stunkard, 2001).
According to Sondra Solovay (2000), obese students do not only receive stigmatization from their peers, but from the adults in the school setting as well; she suggests that many fat kids survive on a diet of disgrace and self-loathing delivered to them by their teachers (2000). A study conducted by Dianne Neumark-Stzainer, Mary Story, and Tanya Harris (1999), determined that junior and senior high school teachers and school health care workers felt that one’s weight is under individual control. They believed that obese persons were disorganized (20%), unsuccessful at work (17.5%), and poor marriage partners for non-obese people (46%). Twenty-eight percent of participants expressed that becoming obese was one of the worst things that could happen to someone (Neumark-Stzainer, et. al, 1999). Findings such as these further explain the National Education Association’s (NEA) stance regarding discrimination due to physical size which suggests that for obese individuals, “the school experience is one of ongoing prejudice, unnoticed discrimination, and almost constant harassment...from nursery school through college, fat students experience ostracism, discouragement, and sometimes violence” (NEA, 1994). These experiences come as a result of a school system that has been established to turn out prototypes of the ideal citizen; when students fail to fit into this mold, they suffer greatly at the hands of the education system.

In 1972, Joel Spring explained that the education system had become the agency for social control, and the public school system was the force by which society was organized. In both education and corporation, individuals were viewed as natural resources. There was an abandonment of the self, and in its place, an adherence to the whole. All efforts were made to expand the corporation, and the school was viewed as the training grounds for the corporate state. Cookie-cutter employees were churned out by the masses, and the corporations benefited greatly. The purpose and idea of education today has not wavered far from the synopsis
presented by Spring. School is a social construct created to *educate* and *formulate* the masses. The more individuals are trained to follow a certain course and fit into a particular mold, the less likely they are to deviate from their seemingly *chosen* path. In many ways, students who do not fit, literally and figuratively, into this *purposeful individual mold* which schools are required to produce, they then become outliers. Their education suffers, and as a result, so does the whole of society. As John Dewey (1915) suggests, the organization of the education system is disjointed and its aims are not unified in theory or in practice. Dewey states that “only by being true to the full growth of all the individuals who make it up, can society by any chance be true to itself” (p. 7). How can a society that ostracizes members based on their appearance possibly be true to itself? If this sense of self deviates from the societal norm and is compromised by the education system, how can the image of the fat body gain a positive place within society, let alone within the structure of the schoolhouse? Perceptions of the fat body, similar to the perceptions of the education system, must change in order to experience the *full growth* of society’s individual members. As William Schubert and Brian Schultz (2015) suggest, “Students’ in-school curriculum and out-of-school experiences combine to form a larger curriculum that shapes their outlooks on the world and their places within it” (p. 614). If both the education system and the world outside are quick to suggest the abnormalcy of the fat body, then the fat student’s comprehension of their place in the world is marginalized, leaving behind only the negative associations with fatness.

Charlotte Cooper (1997) suggests that the “contemporary cultural imagery of fat makes frequent allusions to *surplus*, *extra* flesh, overweight, outsize. This imagery, together with the classic metaphorical archetype of the newly thin person emerging like a butterfly from a fat chrysalis, the *before* and *after*, suggest that a fat body was originally a thin body that now carries
unnecessary fleshy baggage” (p. 35). Due to this perception, many individuals diet and undergo other surgical attempts to lose weight in an effort to return to their preconceived prior thinness. Currently, there is a strong push to release and dispose of this extra weight. Despite the majority of individuals’ failed attempts, a culture of slenderness has been created from which these fat persons who are unable to shed their extra weight are excluded; they are considered deviant, stigmatized beings who cannot adhere to the standards set forth by society (Stearns, 2002). What happens when children and young adults are grouped into this category? How does this affect the psyche of a young teenage girl, dealing with the biological changes that are also altering her appearance and perspective? These children become deviants in a world that offers little support. The presupposed curriculum of appearance—the curriculum that society has created—hovers atop these individuals as they make attempts to find their place and their meaning in the world.

Questions surrounding the voluntary versus involuntary aspects of fatness permeate society. As Goodman (1995) suggests, the continuous barrage of weight-loss programs and advertisements imply that the ability to decrease one’s waistline lies in the hands of the fat individual; however, this is not always the case. She states, “weight prejudice is predicated in large part on the false assumption that all big people are compulsive overeaters who are automatically sick and have willfully chosen to be that way” (p. 20). This thought process allows outsiders to legitimize the stigmatism against fat individuals as self-sabotaging victims of their own demise. However, overconsumption is not the only force to blame for the obesity epidemic. Medical conditions, prescription medications, and mental issues can all be contributing factors to an individual’s obesity classification. Societal factors such as hyper-segregation,
gentrification, and limited access to healthy foods, particularly in areas known as food deserts, are also barriers that contribute to the obesity epidemic in this country.

Cooper (1997) suggests that this perspective is due to the overarching assumption that the consumption of food—a conscious decision—must occur in order for an individual to gain weight: “Because of the centrality of food in this equation, fat can be read as the physiological result of an eating disorder...an attempt to cover deeper problems. If one exorcises the inner disturbance, the fat will disappear. Thus, the fat body is walking, talking evidence of inner dysfunction” (p. 34). According to Bordo (1993), fatness is equated with death and lack of beauty—a construct which forces the acknowledgement of the transition that the body has made from nature’s child to nurture’s cultural construct. LeBesco (2004) suggests that the social construct of fatness was created to align with power and control, marginalizing individuals, not just fat individuals, in an effort to bolster authoritative interests. When fatness is considered a voluntary act, the distaste and abhorrence regarding the inability to control oneself from overconsumption is further propagated. The precedence placed on acceptable diet, nutrition, and exercise denounces the fat individual in this accepted ‘anti-fat’ culture (Stearns, 2002). The acceptance of this anti-fat society must dissipate in order to offer inclusion of all members.
III. Purpose, Theoretical Framework, and Modes of Inquiry

The phenomenon with which I have engaged embodies the experiences and identity construction of fat students. The purpose of my project has been to create a dialogue with three fictionalized fat students and explore the construction of their identities. I explored this phenomenon through the configuration of fictionalized characterizations generated through a collection of the lived experiences of fat students with whom I have engaged and observed throughout my 15 years of teaching in a predominantly African American urban high school setting. While I do not attempt to overtly speak for the fat students I have encountered, their experiences are integrated into the portraits I have created in many subtle ways. The unique relationship between teacher and student affords a rapport that cannot be explored through quantifiable measures alone, and I utilized narrative inquiry, personal essay, and fictionalized accounts as a means to share this experience and give voice to the invisible, misinterpreted, and often misunderstood meaning making of the fat student’s reality. Interwoven in these fictionalized accounts is my own experience as a member of the fat community, and it is crucial to acknowledge that my inclusion in these composites create racialized and gendered stories—stories which are derived, in large part, from the experiences of a white, middle class woman. My personal integration in the process suggests my reliance on autoethnography—a method of research that includes self-observation and reflexive investigation (Maréchal, 2010). Autoethnography is a process of self-reflective writing that attempts to make connections between the personal experience of the researcher and a broader social context. As a member of the fat community, I am conducting an ethnography of my own group while simultaneously recounting my own experience and subjectivity (Maréchal, 2010). According to Garance
Maréchal (2010), autoethnography involves three possible perceptions of the self: (1) “self as representative subject (as a member of a community or group)” (p. 43); (2) “self as autonomous subject (as itself the object of inquiry, depicted in ‘tales of the self’” (p. 43); and (3) “other as autonomous self (the other as both object and subject of inquiry, speaking with their own voice)” (p. 43). In essence, I have attempted to include all three conceptions of the self in my project. Given my shared experience as a member of the fat community, I am hopeful that the collective experience of my students and I will add to the discourse regarding the curriculum of appearance. As Nina Asher and Christopher Kolb (2015) suggest, sharing stories of individuals’ everyday lives has the power to influence change within the education system: “Personal narratives, whether focused on research participants or researchers themselves through autoethnography or memoir, can help teachers and students (re)imagine possibilities for social identities and contexts” (p. 1105). It is essential to acknowledge that within this curriculum resides a seemingly acceptable prejudice concerning weight, and this prejudice must be considered in an appropriate manner. Through fictionalized biography and personal essay, I have been able to explore the collective reality of fat students without attaching specific experiences to individual meaning makers, thus, protecting individuals whose experiences have helped shape composite fictionalized students. In fact, as Philip Lopate (1995) suggests, the function of the personal narrative should have at its core an effort to reveal the commonality of the human experience, attempting through an informal, conversational tone to share the whole of the human experience. I am hopeful that my accounts, both fictional and autobiographical in nature, reveal the central qualities to be found in the fat experience. In this instance, the inclusion of the researcher’s experience coupled with a compilation of observed experiences of individuals who reside within the same group as the researcher suggests a method of inquiry that I will term
the fictionalized authenticity of the collective experience. While this method may appear oxymoronic, it may not warrant this descriptor. The outcome is fiction in that it depicts a student who does not actually exist; however, it is generated through a method that expresses the authentic reality of the lived experience of the individual who gazes, together with an interpretation of the experiences of those who share membership within the same group as the gazer. In this case, the portraits are created to present common realities of the lived experiences of fat students.

According to Thomas Barone and Elliot Eisner (2012), arts based research focuses on an attempt to raise and address social issues utilizing an artistic approach. Through my fictional accounts of the experience of the fat student, I am attempting to address the issues facing fat students—issues which have been both presented and perpetuated by society. However, embedded in my fictionalized accounts is also my own story, my own experience. Barone and Eisner (2012) suggest that the arts based researcher brings with him or her one’s own “existential and cultural baggage” with which to study the phenomena at hand, and it is important to acknowledge the presence of the individual researcher’s place within the artistic expression (p. 68). It is crucial to acknowledge the role of the researcher both within the final product as well as throughout the whole of the entire process.

Existing within the phenomenon I have engaged reside multiple layers of discourse which when considered together generate a dialogue of sorts. I believe that the education system has the unique opportunity to make a change in the acceptance and assimilation of fat students. Recent research has shown that curricular decisions can perpetuate the negative connotations surrounding fatness. For instance, Susan Koppelman (2009) uncovers the various treatments of the short story “The Fat Girl” by Andres Dubus, finding that while it is often paired with various
other texts regarding size and difference, it is never treated as fatness as liberation. Instead, the portrait considers fatness to be equated with a disabled, distressed sense of self, and the reading of the story which finds the woman moving from fatness to thinness and back to fatness again, never incorporates the notion that, in the end, the woman is liberated from the scrutiny of others.

The classroom space also presents an issue that must be addressed. According to Ashley Hetrick and Derek Attig (2009),

The relationship between classroom desks and disciplinary practices that seek to form and control body ‘size and general configuration’ is evident: the hard materials and unforgiving shapes of these desks punish student bodies that exceed their boundaries with pain and social shame. Some fat students are unable or unwilling to subject their bodies to the disciplinary powers of desks and must sit elsewhere. In these cases, desks can threaten fat students’ very identities as students; if their bodies cannot fit into structures that signify their intellectually receptive status, then they are, symbolically at least, unable to learn. Homogenous thinness is rewarded with comfort and various other privileges accorded to those granted identification as both students and normal. In these ways, classroom desks control body size and thereby produce the ideal thin student (p. 201).

The confining structures presented to the fat student often leave him or her with a sense of rejection and physical confinement. The physical pressure felt by these inflexible, solid structures are synonymous with the stringent policies and prerequisites demanded by the education system. According to Mara Sapon-Shevin (2015), it is the environment itself which can disable and disempower a student who resides outside of the realm of normalcy. In her discussion of students who have been labeled disabled, she reveals the importance of
determining what about a particular environment may be disabling to a student. For the fat student, oftentimes, it is the physicality of the space that is demeaning and demoralizing. More often than not, those individuals who cannot conform to fit into the system’s mold are often physically, mentally, socially, and emotionally cast to the outlying space of the classroom, as well as society. This banishment typically presents an other-ing that often translates into a form of bullying regarding size-discrimination.

According to Jacqueline Weinstock and Michelle Krehbiel (2009), children and adolescents who are fat experience multiple risk factors at the individual and peer levels that place them in a vulnerable position to be targeted for bullying. The experiences within the classroom can further perpetuate this stigmatization. Weinstock and Krehbiel suggest that, “As long as weight-based oppression remains acceptable, and acceptable body sizes remain narrowly defined, those youth who do not fit the norms will continue to be unfairly and repeatedly targeted” (p. 126).

Society’s colonization of the human body places the individual in an oppressed position. As the oppressive force determines the way in which the body should function, the oppressed parties must determine a curriculum in which they can function and make meaning of their marginalized existence. According to William Pinar and Madeline Grumet (1976), currere or the verb form of the Latin root of curriculum, involves how the individual navigates the curriculum in which they find themselves and the manner by which they construe a pathway through its various structures. However, Pinar and Grumet (1976) explain that the awareness which may come as a result of identifying one’s curriculum cannot diminish oppressive control; it can “bring the structures of experience to awareness [and] enhance the ability to direct the
process of one’s own development” (p. 115). Part of this process may also expose what Pinar (2004) calls the authentic self.

Queer Theory focuses on questions relating to power and oppression, and the idea that the way in which we view others is often problematic, especially when outside of the curve of normalcy. In fact, Susan Woolley, Therese Quinn, and Erica Meiner suggest that “queer theorizing’s ability to call into question normal life destabilizes the ways these arrangements of power—ability and labor—delimit and legitimize specific forms of embodiment, communication, and cognition as normal and natural” (p. 355). Both fatness and queerness involve individuals who are considered deviant, stigmatized beings who cannot adhere to the standards of normalcy set forth by society and are therefore marginalized (Stearns, 1999). Pinar (2004) offers insight into these ideas—the movement from cultural deviance to cultural difference. In the broadest sense, queer theory focuses on any aspect of one’s identity that falls into deviant categorization. The belief is that identity is not [fixed]—that an individual’s identity is just that—individual—and should not be collectively lumped in to a predetermined group. Therefore, proponents of queer theory would find the labeling system that results in labels such as obese according to one’s BMI number/rating to be quite problematic. In fact, like members of the queer community who have gone to great measures to explain that their queerness is an immutable part of their sense of self, so, too, have members of the fat community striven to explain their fatness as inalterable aspects of their individuality. According to Woolley, Quinn, and Meiners (2015), “Queer bodies are, always and already, abnormal and abject because of the normative values and means by which society, the state, schools, and other institutions and discourses construct, discipline, and privilege bodies that are useful for its ends” (p. 355).
Individuals who exist outside of what is considered normal—those who fail to function the way in which society deems appropriate—become potential victims of ostracization and ridicule.

Under a colonizing force, there is a push to assimilate and conform. The individual is no longer seen or acknowledged. The individual becomes a part of the whole, and by doing so, no longer has the right to seek the self. According to Pinar (2004), the regressive phase of currere is about “uncovering the [authentic] self,,..experiencing the relief of understanding how one came to be physically, which is to say, socially” (p. 55). Through this process, the individual engages in “self-reflective study” (p. 55)—a practice which simultaneously involves yet shuns the colonizing force. The oppressive arm is left out of this process, and in turn, the individual searches for understanding. Schubert (1986) suggests that through currere, “the individual seeks meaning amid the swirl of present events, moves historically into his or her own past to recover and reconstitute origins, and imagines and creates possible directions of his or her own future” (p. 33). The act of currere then becomes a subjective inquiry into one’s past and a reconstruction of one’s place in the future; these actions considered collectively carve out a space to call one’s own in the present. According to Marla Morris (2015), “Currere—as the examination of our lived experience—is a way to explore our interiority, our inner lives in the context of education and in the context of our relations with others and the larger society” (p. 522). She explains, however, that the self, or the space to call one’s own, cannot exist beyond simple comprehension without an acknowledgement of the world outside of the individual. She states, “As we learn about others we learn about ourselves; as we learn about ourselves we learn about others” (p. 522). The act of currere, therefore, is the way in which an individual engages with his or her own interiorities, as well as the outside world, establishing meaning of the self and the outside world simultaneously (Morris, 2015).
While the individual is at the heart of currere—the autobiographical pursuit of meaning, it would be impossible to subjugate societal influence. In fact, Schubert (1986) suggests that the act of currere “becomes a social process whereby individuals come to a greater understanding of themselves, others, and the world through mutual reconceptualization” (p. 33). He explains that this shared experience involves not only those who are directly present in one’s life but mediums of art and expression encompassing the individual’s path. Schubert (1986) suggests then that “the curriculum is the interpretation of lived experience” (p. 33), and that while its focus may be on the individual, it is impossible to not include the existence of the world outside of the individual.

Utilizing a variety of mediums, from imagined traditional interviews to a collection of observed experiences of the fat student, I have engaged in an interpretation of lived experience through the fictionalization of three individuals. In an attempt to consider what Max van Manen (1990) terms the lived experience, I have discoursed with my characters in a way in which phenomenological findings are at the core of the discussion. However, as a member of the fat community myself, it would be amiss if I did not mention that embedded within these fictionalized accounts is my own lived experience, therefore, making these fictionalized accounts autobiographical as well. As Morris (2015) suggests, “Some write autobiographies in order to help others or to change others while changing the self. Change involves movement” (p. 537). I am hopeful that exposing the lived experience of the fat student generates a shift in the way in which people view the life of a fat individual—that confronting the oppressive environment in which a fat student resides may result in influencing change.

I have presented the characters through a process similar to Sara Lightfoot and Jessica Davis’s (1997) method of portraiture. They suggest:
“The portraits are designed to capture the richness, complexity, and dimensionality of human experience in social and cultural context, conveying the perspectives of the people who are negotiating those experiences. The portraits are shaped through dialogue between the portraitist and the subject, each one participating in the drawing of the image. The encounter between the two is rich with meaning and resonance and is crucial to the success and authenticity of the rendered piece” (p. 3).

While my interpretation is not literal, but rather “probing, layered, and interpretive” (Lightfoot and Davis, p. 4), the finished product is a product of an evolving, ever-changing relationship between my characters and myself. Recognizing that research is a constructed story of both the researcher and the participant, I acknowledge my perspective and individual interpretation as a crucial part of my inquiry. In fact, it is this idea that sparks my interest in Lightfoot and Davis’s portraiture. It promotes the notion that the outcome is truly the researcher’s perspective. It suggests that it is the artist’s eye (researcher), not the individual’s (subject), who is painting, creating his/her interpretation of the individual on the canvas. Once complete, the portrait then hangs for the interpretation of the individual as well as the viewer, and these interpretations may be similar or vastly different from my own personal intention. In fact, as Barone and Eisner (2012) suggest, “We do not seek for any reader to take such material at face value. Such material always provides a starting point for further inquiry...what we are interested in is a provision of a new perspective that makes it possible for those interested in the phenomena the research addressed to have a productive heuristic through which a deepened understanding can be promoted” (p. 23). It is my hope that the creation of my fictionalized accounts provide a new perspective by which individuals view the experiences of fat students.
For my project, I have relied upon the research strategy known as *narrative construction* (Barone, 2001) in which the collection of experiences, encounters, and observations leads to the formation of three fictionalized portraits of fat students. As Barone and Eisner (2006) suggest, “composites of individuals might be created to make a point more telling. Emphasis may be added to drive home an idea” (p. 100). Barone and Eisner (2006) explain that if the inquiry is said to be educational research then it must raise questions that promote discourse regarding educational issues. As I constructed my narrative research, I have continued to keep the foundations of arts-based inquiry at the forefront of my application. I am hopeful that as Chris Carger (2008) explains in “Narrative Trepidations”, the vignettes I have presented will collectively share the experience of the fat student, and that this qualitative study will “give emotion a place in educational research” (p. 74). Like Carger (2008), I am strongly against the idea of “objectifying [a] human being as a deficit-ridden subject to study” (p. 71), and it is my goal to present my characters in a way which works to eradicate this idea. Along with the three fictionalized portraits, I have also included a section devoted to my personal experience. While my narrative is imbedded in the experiences of my students (characters), I think it is important to divulge aspects of my personal meaning making as a fat individual. I know the fat experience, and I have lived the variance of this experience—I do not need to adorn Tyra Banks’ fat suit to gain insight.
IV. “Jessie” – Student 1

Bulimics know the best bathrooms in town. It’s a prerequisite for the lifestyle. Single person, heavy door, loud flush, running water in close proximity, secure lock, clean floor—these are all necessities for rendering a space safe. Jessie had figured this out during her sophomore year of high school. She knew that the bathroom on the 2nd floor of the library, northeast corner, was the best place for a purge. After starving herself all day, she could walk casually to the library, stopping for a shake, a fry, and a hotdog. She would consume these delicacies at one of the picnic tables outside of the courthouse, and as she made her way to the library, she would work out her plan. First, intruder investigation—typically not a problem as people weren’t poring over the medieval history stacks at 4 o’clock in the afternoon—yet still an important part of the process. Once she confirmed the absence of humanity, she entered the private bathroom, locking and then unlocking and then relocking the bathroom door in quick succession to make sure that the door was a fortress. Sometimes she would run the water, sometimes not—it depended on the number of people she passed on her way to her haven. She usually filled the toilet with tissue to avoid the noise and the splash of her vomit breaking the water’s surface. She had become especially good at bulimicizing—a term she used to jazz up the process. The sanctity of the library bathroom typically allowed for a few moments of collection following the upheaval. On occasion, she found herself quite light-headed, and the privacy of this space enabled her to catch her breath, her thoughts, her clarity. She had never had someone knock on the door while she did her deed; one time, however, she did come out of the washroom just as another woman was walking in. She worried that she had not done a good job of cleaning up after herself, but in reality, she knew she had. She always did.
“At what point did you realize you had a problem?” I asked.

“At the same point that I realized I was a problem,” she replied.

“Why did you think you were a problem?” I asked.

“Because they told me I was, and I believed them,” she replied.

During Jessie’s freshman year, she was pulled out of her gym class because she was believed to be too large to partake in the unit on calisthenics. When the school counselor brought Jessie down to speak to the gym teacher regarding the fact that she wasn’t dressing for gym class and therefore receiving a failing grade, the teacher said that he did not want that responsibility. That ‘responsibility’, as it was called, was “me,” she told me, “and I was so ashamed.” The teacher was afraid that Jessie’s excess weight could cause a ‘heart attack’—a term he yelled with such force that Jessie, her peers, and others could hear. Jessie had endured similar responses in the past—in the 7th grade when she attempted to join an extracurricular activity, she was informed that she was too fat to be a cheerleader, too slow to run track, and too uncoordinated to play basketball.

“I felt like deep down they were just concerned that the uniforms wouldn’t fit me. Then I’d make them all look stupid if I was the only one standing there without the right sweater or jersey on,” she explained.

This experience pushed Jessie to find solace in bags of potato chips, sugary sodas, and hours lying horizontal in front of the television.

“I became a huge fan of ‘I Love Lucy’,” she told me. “I often watched the same episodes, over and over, escaping into this alternate universe.” Clearly Jessie found it difficult to exist in the world around her.
Jessie had been a latch-key kid since the 4th grade. Her parents divorced during the summer between 3rd and 4th grade, and before school began the following school year, Jessie’s mother found work at a local daycare facility. The job required her to arrive just after dropping Jessie off at school; however, she did not get home until almost 7 o’clock each night. This provided Jessie with a sense of independence at a very early age.

“I hate buying clothes,” she told me, when I asked her what she despised most about being ‘overweight’. “To most teenagers, going shopping is like finding a pot of gold at the end of a rainbow. To me, it’s torture, especially when I am with other people. Especially when I am with my mom.” She recounts this story for me.

“Calm down, Jessie. Calm down,” her mother said.

“I can’t help it, Mom. I don’t know what to do.”

Jessie and her mother stand together in the fitting room at JC Penny.

“Why did you wait to the last minute? I told you not to wait until the last minute.”

Her mother’s repetition is not helping. In fact, it appears to be making matters worse. Her mother is frustrated, angry, and sad.

“Why do you do this to yourself? Don’t you see how hard this is?”

Jessie continues crying. She stands in her oversized underwear and sports bra, not sure what to do with herself.

“I don’t want to go,” she says. This is what she always says.

“Oh Honey, you have to go. This is a big day for you.”

At this moment, Jessie’s mother’s frustration and anger subsides. This is her baby, and she is hurting.

“We’ll find something. Come on.”
Jessie hasn’t eaten in two and a half days. She was preparing for this moment. Her last
ditch effort didn’t work…nor did her dreams, prayers, and promises. She is starving, and the last
thing she wants to do is express it. She dreads graduation day. She knows this is supposed to be
fun and exciting. She wishes she could be at home right now watching television with her
cousin. She wishes she could get the little pink sundress with the cap sleeves and open back.

Her mother wonders how it got so bad. She blames herself; she blames her daughter; she
blames her ex-husband. Why can’t Jessie be more like the other girls in her class? Why doesn’t
she want to change? Why does her father ignore her weight? Why does she want to cry when
she looks at her?

Jessie tells me that her mother is fat too but that she wasn’t always fat. “Believe me, she
is quick to remind me of that,” Jessie says with a smirk. Her mother was the captain of her high
school’s tennis team, homecoming queen, and senior class secretary. She had the boys “eating
out of the palm of her hand”, she says. To Jessie’s mother, this is what it means to be a teenager;
to Jessie, her reality couldn’t be any further from this scenario.

“I think one of the most embarrassing experiences I have had in school was when I fell
off of a stool during my 9th grade Biology class. We were dissecting earthworms, and when I
tried to grab ahold of the lab table, one of the pins holding the worms skin back went right into
my hand. It was embarrassing. Not only did I hit the ground and hit it hard, but I had a pin
sticking out of the palm of my hand.” The stool that Jessie was forced to sit on did not
accommodate her size. She told me that every time she tried to stand, Mr. Buol, her teacher, told
her to remain seated. “I tried skipping days when we were working in the lab, but the pattern was
obvious. I was suddenly failing Biology because I had no lab grade.” Jessie also suffers from
Type 2 diabetes. She explained to me that balancing on the stool for an extended period of time
made her quite light-headed. She tried to explain this to Mr. Buo, but he dismissed her. Jessie stated that if the little cheerleader at the front table had an issue, he would probably let her stand. “Buo probably would not have gotten angry at her if she fell either.” Jessie explained that the teacher chastised her in front of her peers, stating that she was trying to make a scene and that she better “get with the program.” “Yeah, Weight Watchers,” one of the assholes behind her said. “It would have been nice if Buo asked me if I was okay,” she said. “Instead, he acted as though I did it on purpose, like I was trying to get everyone’s attention or something.” This couldn’t have been further from the truth. Jessie didn’t hunger for any looks, any stares, any recognition. She wanted to fade away. She wanted to disappear into the abyss.

Jessie explained to me that she learned about purging after watching a movie about the gymnast Nadia Comaneci. “I remember being in shock to see her eat a dozen donuts and then vomit them up in the bathroom.” Jessie told me that she had not perfected the trick, as her attempts to eat and purge had not rendered her any thinner. “I guess it makes me feel better to think that I am not retaining excess calories, but the guilt I feel in the aftermath overrides any sense of gratification…oftentimes, I can’t even do it.” And often, she explains, she finds herself eating more to make up for her shameful actions. “You see,” she says, “I eat when I’m bored, I eat when I’m lonely, I often eat when I am not even hungry. But I just can’t stop myself.” Jessie has been doing this for a long time. She feels as though she exists in a world that doesn’t accept her, and the place where she is supposed to feel a sense of commonality—the school—only gives her a sense of unease. “I used to love school. Now I dread going. I try to conjure up every excuse in the book not to go, but my mother is on to me. She says that the more I stay away, the harder it will be to go back. And I know she is right. But sometimes it would just be so easy to stay away, away from it all.”
Jessie explains that the bullying she receives as a result of her size is not as bad as it used to be. “I think I have become a bit numb to it,” she explains. “I am used to the glares and snickers, and I have actually gotten really good at ignoring it.” She tells me, however, that it is the condescension from the adults at school that most upsets her. Adults are supposed to serve as examples of how to behave and are supposed to show students the appropriate manner in which to handle challenging situations. She recounts the following experience in her Math class:

It was the day of the semester final in her Algebra with Trigonometry class. The teacher, Mr. Mitchen, was already annoyed because the students arrived to the class late due to a fire drill. He was handing out the calculators, and as Jessie was about to get up from her seat in the back of the class, the teacher told one of her classmates to bring her a calculator because they didn’t have time to wait for her to get herself up to the front to retrieve one herself. “I was completely humiliated,” she told me. “It wasn’t even what he said that was so awful, it was how he said it. His tone was negative and perturbed. He insinuated that my fat ass would take too long and that I would be the reason for the delay. He rolled his eyes and glared at me. Everyone heard what he said, and no one missed his accusation.” She failed the test, and the ones that followed. She was placed in remedial math the following semester. “I had actually really liked the class. I liked math. I felt like it was a class that lacked subjectivity, and for some reason, I had always felt comfortable knowing that no part of who I was or how I was feeling played a part in arriving at the correct response.”

During her junior year of high school, Jessie lost 20 pounds over the course of a couple of months. She immediately received praise from her teachers, in particular, Ms. Mertz, her photography instructor. She came into class one day, and Ms. Mertz told her how amazing she looked. Jessie was confident and felt proud of her achievement—she had been quite successful in
limiting her caloric intake and purging anytime she overate. Her mother had also enrolled her in a Weight Watchers program designed specifically for teenagers. “I was happy to be losing weight,” she said, “but I felt shameful that so many people noticed. It confirmed my feelings that something was wrong with me, and the embarrassment I felt every time someone commented on my decreasing waistline made me uncomfortable. I didn’t like feeling that way, especially since I knew I was being deceptive in the process.” Jessie quickly put the weight back on and then some. Her mother was frustrated, for she, too, had enrolled in a Weight Watchers program and was dropping pounds at a steady pace. She knew her mom had the right intentions, but she also knew that she wasn’t learning the right way to eat or how to manage the stress and emotions that caused her to overeat—instead, Jessie felt great pressure to make this diet work and to drop the undesirable pounds. The pressure pushed her back into the comforting arms of sugary sweets and sodas. She felt euphoric when she allowed herself to indulge, much better than when negotiating not to eat or how to avoid those extra calories.

There were so many things that every student looks forward to upon entering his or her senior year of high school. Jessie dreaded all of these things, except for one, which was getting out of high school. She felt burdened by the idea of embarking on another foray into education—college—and despite her counselor’s insistence on her applying to at least five schools, she was less than thrilled. She was also troubled by the events that would occur during the course of the year, such as the Senior Homecoming Skit, in which everyone was expected to play a role, the class trip to Washington, DC, the Senior Prom, and Graduation. “My graduation from 8th grade was a bit of a disaster. When they called my name, I didn’t want to move from my seat. My gown was too tight, my shoes were too big, and I was sweating profusely.” Jessie eventually made it across the stage, but not without the glaring eyes of the school principal who seemed to
have a serious issue with Jessie’s size. The year before, the school had begun to include a student’s Body Mass Index (BMI) on his or her report card. For the past two years, Jessie had purposely tried to avoid the weight screenings, but even if she was absent, the school nurse was instructed to find her immediately upon her return to school. She felt as though they were out to get her, and instead of conducting the test in a way that at least attempted to make her feel at ease, she often felt poked and prodded, like a fattened cow or calf going in for slaughter. “I don’t know how I expected them to handle the situation, but I knew I should not have felt the way I did. I knew there was something very wrong with making a 12 year old think that there was something wrong with her because she had a few rolls of fat around her belly and upper thighs.”

This experience was quite traumatic for Jessie, and she believes that she never rebounded from the shame she felt. “They told us to take off our clothes and put on these hospital gowns. They had stalls set up in the gymnasium, and I was mortified that I had to wait around in this ill-fitting gown in front of my peers, both males and females. It was a horrible day.” Jessie went on to explain that the face the nurse made when conducting the test was forever ingrained in her mind. “She looked at me like I was the fattest thing she had ever seen. She said ‘oh, you haven’t missed a meal, now have you?’, and I started to cry. She felt bad, but it was still me who had to walk out of there, past the other kids waiting in line, with red puffy eyes and snot dripping from my nose.” Jessie could hear the other kids whispering as she came out, and although she claims that she didn’t care, how could she not? “I was in my own private hell,” she said, “I remember thinking back on that experience a few months later and actually doubting that the nurse had said that to me. But she did, and in the notation section of her report, she actually suggested that I needed to get out there and move around a bit, perhaps take an extended gym class.” Jessie also explains that the nurse suggested that she attend counseling sessions with the school’s social worker, for
she appeared to be experiencing emotional distress as a result of her weight. At the time, Jessie acknowledges that it may have appeared that she was in turmoil as a result of her weight screening; however, looking back on the incident, she is quick to point out that she was reacting to the way in which she was treated as a result of her weight, not the actual weight itself.

Jessie often acts tough regarding her weight. I noticed that when she speaks about her own feelings about herself, there tends to be sadness in her voice; however, when she is recounting the ways in which others look at her and treat her, she becomes defensive and aggravated. When I asked her about the difference in her reactions, she explained that what angers her the most is that she allows herself to be affected by others’ perceptions of her. “I guess I feel it the most at school. School is a place where we are constantly being assessed and evaluated, and because of my size, I will always receive a less than favorable evaluation,” she states. “My mother thinks I am ridiculous, but I do feel as though my teachers are prejudiced against my size. She will never understand this, but I feel it…I know it is true.”

Two years ago, Jessie met with the school psychologist. Her homeroom teacher thought it would be a good idea, so she orchestrated a session and insisted that Jessie attend. “Initially I was excited about it because meeting with Ms. Vicki meant that I would miss at least half of my music class,” she explained. When I asked what her issues were with her music class, she began to explain that the teacher doled out the instruments based on the students’ size, giving all the bigger students the larger instruments. “The teacher literally told a few of us that we had the girth to handle the trombone or the tuba,” Jessie explains. The other issue was the risers that they had to stand on for 55 minutes. “Every time I moved or shifted my weight, I felt as though the landing I was standing on was about to break,” she explains. “Why couldn’t we just stand at ground-level? What was the difference? The damn instruments sounded the same 12 inches
closer to the ground.” Jessie explained that the teacher liked to hide the fatties in the back—that due to the tight uniform jackets, it was better to hide the undesirables in the back row, as far away from the audience as possible.

Jessie told me that she sometimes fantasized about what life would be like without these daily issues concerning her weight. “I don’t know what I would worry about,” she laughs. “I’m sure I would find something.” Next, she details a story about a potential internship with the local newspaper.

Jessie groaned aloud. “Shit,” she thought to herself. The city parking lot was full already. She had to drive to the next one hoping that she would ‘fit’, both literally and figuratively. A sign stating “Under Construction” hung over the horse blocking the entrance. At this point, two things ran through her mind: 1) She should have taken the train and walked as her mother had suggested, and 2) Just skip it and head home. The first option was not a possibility, as she would have never made it on time, and she would have certainly been drenched in sweat by the time she arrived. The second option was also invalid, as she could not miss the interview again. She was lucky enough to get a second shot at the internship—the thought of getting a third was ludicrous. So she drove to the next parking lot, pulled a ticket, and found a spot—a spot which ironically backed right up to the train station where she would have disembarked had she decided on that option. She began the long journey to the newspaper office—a journey which at this point, was just shy of a mile—as the sweat began to bead on her upper lip and the small of her back.

“I knew I probably would not get the position,” she explains. “But I did have some experience working on the school newspaper, so I decided to give it a go.” Through tears, Jessie reveals that not only did she not get the position, but she was treated so horribly by the staff at the office that she didn’t think she would want to work there anyway. As she sat in the waiting
room, she saw at least three individuals enter. Not only were they greeted kindly, but the receptionist offered them a bottle of water and took their coats. When Jessie entered, she did not receive this reception. When she walked up to the counter, she tripped slightly and the woman rolled her eyes at her, saying “Can I help you with something?”, as opposed to the kind “May I help you?” that the next student received. The interview itself was a disaster. They interviewed all four students at once, and Jessie had to fight for an opportunity to speak. Two of the other girls were petite little things who went to the Catholic high school down the street, and Jessie felt immediately as though she didn’t stand a chance. The other candidate was a kid who went to Jessie’s school. She had seen him around, and he actually told her after the interview that the woman who interviewed us owed his father a favor. “I totally lied to my mom when I came home. ‘Yes, it went amazing’ I told her. ‘I’d be surprised if I didn’t get the position’, ” she said.

Jessie did not feel like getting into it with her mother. “My mom always seems to take the other side of these situations. The truth is that I only answered one question, and I was so nervous I don’t even remember what I said,” she explained. Approximately two weeks later, Jessie received a standard rejection letter from the newspaper thanking her for her interest and suggesting that she consider applying again in the future. She was relieved; her mother was devastated. She assumed that the boy she knew from school received the position; however, the reality of the situation was that they gave it to one of the tiny girls from the Catholic school. They also created a second internship to accommodate the interests of both of the girls. Once again, Jessie was left out of the equation.

The senior class trip was quickly approaching, and Jessie was trying to conjure up a way to get out of attending. Unfortunately, there was really no way to get out of it. Jessie had never flown on a plane before, she had never been to the Nation’s capital, and she certainly had never
taken a trip without the watchful eye of her mother. There were so many things to be excited
about, but none of them were very appealing. “My cousin told me about the issue with the
seatbelt on the plane. That if it didn’t fit, I would have to get a special extender strap to put
around my waist,” she explained. She was not looking forward to dealing with this issue. The
day before the trip, she feigned an illness. She actually made herself sick, telling her mother that
she had picked up a stomach bug. In the morning, her mother called the school and told them that
she would not be attending the trip. Jessie spent the next three days in her room, crying and
wishing she had gone. This was only the beginning of the senior events she would miss. She
ditched school on the day of the senior skit, spending the day hiding out in the comfort of the
Medieval stacks at the library. She couldn’t bear the thought of getting up in front of the whole
school to take part in the skit. She hardly had a role anyway; she had been assigned to be a part
of the chorus, which is where all of the unpopular students who didn’t take part in orchestrating
the skit were placed. She would have loved to have been a part of the planning committee—she
actually had some great ideas—but she wasn’t even considered. Without a date to the Prom, she
went to Chili’s and to see a movie with her mom. As her peers danced the night away and spent
the following day at Six Flags Great America, Jessie played video games on her computer,
wishing that she never had to return to school again. She dreaded hearing about the amazing time
everyone had at the dance and the even more exciting adventures that followed over the course
of the weekend. Her mother told her that she would regret these decisions, but to Jessie, these
weren’t decisions that she was making. No one had asked her to the dance, no one had suggested
that she join them at the lake house for the after party, no one invited her to the amusement park
the next day, no one acknowledged her existence. She attempted to rationalize this experience,
telling herself that it only made her stronger, more resilient. But she knew she was lying to
herself. She knew that for her whole life, she had been living a falsehood that was robbing her of the opportunity to live her life to the fullest. Instead, she numbed herself to the pain of existence. She spent countless hours planning her escape—an escape that she hoped would one day take her outside of the realm of the fat experience.

Graduation should have been met with utter excitement; however, the cap and gown Jessie was given did not fit. When she attempted to exchange it, she was told that it was the largest gown they received that year. Mrs. Whelitz tried to accommodate Jessie, providing her with a larger gown from 3 years ago. “I was relieved and very thankful, until I arrived on the day of graduation with it pressed and actually fitting, only to realize that it was a much lighter shade of green that the ones the other students were wearing.” Of course Mrs. Whelitz had no idea that the gown had faded over the past three years. It had been hanging up near a window in the costume room, and clearly the sun had altered its hue. “I wanted to go home as soon as I arrived,” Jessie explains. Out of frustration and embarrassment, her mother blamed her for this mishap. Jessie felt as though she had done the right thing in her attempt to get a gown that actually fit her. She was mortified, but she had no choice but to wear the discolored gown. Her mother’s reaction brought tears to Jessie’s eyes, and it was a challenge to fight them off. She responded by getting in line and preparing for the procession into the ceremony. Her peers stared and gawked, but in some ways, this seemed fitting. This had occurred for the past four years; why should the situation suddenly change because it was graduation day? Jessie kept reminding herself that she was moments away from receiving her diploma. She would never have to return to this place that she had tried to avoid for the last four years. So her gown was a different color; she spent four years being different, not fitting in, angering those around her because she fell outside the parameters of their mold. And as she stood for the class photo, a smile broke out
across her face. She understood what had occurred. She knew they would be angered by the way in which her graduation gown stuck out from the crowd—the way it did not match the ones her peers were wearing. She was certain many people felt as though she had ruined the photograph, that she had soiled the graduation ceremony. But then she had an epiphany; she realized that they were paying the price for the way in which they had ostracized her, forgot about her, dismissed her over the years. Tears of joy overwhelmed her. For the first time in her life, she cried because she was happy, and she cried because she felt a sense of pride for what her faded gown represented.
V. “You” – Student 2

You are eighteen. You have always been a good girl, a “yes” girl, if you will. Can someone help with the groceries? Can someone take care of your brother? You can. Your sweetness knows no bounds.

You are about to leave for college. You are scared to death. You have a posse; they are like you—sweet, kind and just all around good people. Accepting people. Your kind of people.

You get into one of your reach schools as your guidance counselor likes to call it. You are about to move very far away from your family and friends—the support system you have had in place your entire life. You choose this particular institution, halfway across the country, because there is a very specific nagging that needles you on a daily basis. It starts very slowly and quietly in the morning and then it builds throughout the day and keeps you awake at night. FRESH START. FRESH START. FRESH START. Because as grateful as you are to have a loving family, a great group of friends and up to this point, a completely wonderful and normal upbringing, you can’t help to want a bit more. A new place. New experiences. An even better winning hand.

You are working at the pool, checking in guests at the front desk, the same tan faces you’ve seen every summer for the past three years. Everyone knows your name; you have in depth discussions with some of the mothers about television shows or new books as their children go careening into the locker rooms. Trivialities with others. Some pool goers you can’t even look directly at. You avoid eye contact with the younger, cooler kids from your high school. Even though you’ve graduated, even though you are older, even though you can taste your freedom, there is nothing you can do about it. Because you know Anne Marie Duggan—
you’ve seen her smiling face gleaming up at you from your yearbook always on the two page spread following directly behind your class. Even though she approaches the desk and greets you warmly, “Hi Lauren. Is it crowded today?”, You stare at the computer screen as you scan her membership card and mumble, “Not too bad.” You know she is dating Tom Norgan, the current captain of the lacrosse team. Tom is almost annoyingly perfect…friendly, devastatingly handsome, and funny.

You also know the Norgan family. The Norgans attend the same church that your family does. They are fixtures at the Saturday night mass, just as your family is. Your parents are friends with the Norgans. They go to the same parties around Christmastime; they attend the same barbeques in the summer. Tom’s brother Matt is a year older than you. Also cute. Also nice. The Norgan boys are what you would call popular. They are invited to all of the parties that your classmates throw. You’ve never been to these parties but you have heard the stories. They sound like a lot of fun. Not to say that you don’t have a blast with your friends, but it is different. I guess the issue is that you feel a bit stuck between two worlds and one of those worlds doesn’t really fully acknowledge you.

Your friends are the best. You go to the drive-in movie theater. You lock someone in the trunk and sneak her in for the double feature. You stay out late; you get food at the diner in your sleepy town. Someone’s older brother offers to buy you beer. You have dance parties in the basement. You play cards. You take little road trips. Everything is funny. Someone’s older brother offers to buy you marijuana. You go to the park. You laugh until someone quite literally wets his pants. You follow one another on social media, you comment on one another’s postings. Your friends make you feel safe and secure. You never fight, and you know you can count on them for anything. Having said that, you know you are still the outcasts. Everyone but
you seems to be just fine with that. You have never said “I wish…” and it would have been your completely true feelings.

But there is another you. A school you. A you who was lab partners in AP Biology with Matt Norgan when you were a junior, and he was a senior. It was a completely arbitrary pairing, but it was fantastic. Matt brings contraband snack items into class and is always eager to share. Doritos. Twix. You even shared a Coke that he cracked open while you perfectly timed a cough right in the middle of class. You two also shared inside jokes. One in particular that you think really won him over was when you compared your Biology teacher to a poor man’s Daniel Day Lewis. You actually heard him repeat that joke to other people. If only you had been yourself when you were a freshman instead of doing your classic avoidance dance around the halls. You could have been invited to those fun parties. You could have been telling the funny stories, you could have been “popular”.

Now you are headed off to college in a few short weeks. You are planning on being yourself from the first day. You are going to make friends and be yourself in every situation. You are going to marry the confidence you feel when you are securely nestled in the comfort of your friends with that of your school self. You are excited and terrified and jubilant about the prospect of something new. You are going to make eye contact with every person you see. You’d adore me if you knew me! Voice projected! Confidence!

Okay. You need to come clean. It’s time. It’s not that you have a great personality and you don’t understand why life isn’t working out the way you feel that it should. Why are you not getting what you think you deserve? Why are you not popular? Why no boyfriend? Where is the confidence? The truth is you are overweight. Not just overweight, not big-boned, not a little heavy, you are fat. You weigh two hundred eighty five pounds.
You are the worst kind of fat too. You eat sparingly in front of others. You lie. You say you aren’t hungry; you offer to go to the grocery store for your Mom. You stop at McDonalds and get a Big Mac and a large French fries. Then you stop at Taco Bell and buy twenty dollars worth of the menu; everything tastes the same—doesn’t matter what it is—you just know you need it. Then you actually do go to the store, and you buy what will make you feel better about all of the food you just ate, the thing that will quell the raging guilt and disgust you are feeling toward yourself right now. Sweets. Cupcakes. Candy bars. Pepperidge Farm four layer cakes. You buy all of these things and stash them in your bedroom, and you eat all night by yourself. You cry. You can’t stop; you are powerless to this cycle.

Some days you don’t succumb though. You have a great exchange with Matt Norgan earlier in the day; you decide to walk home from school. You are sweaty and out of breath, but you are also elated. You eat the healthy dinner your Mom cooked, no snacks; you don’t even have dessert. You feel unstoppable, you don’t need to eat three chocolate cupcakes while you do your homework and watch Jay Leno; you are turning this cycle around; you are going to make only smart decisions from here on out.

You wake up for school the next morning; your Mom says something a little off, something about your shirt; you feel picked on. You are annoyed. You get to school, and you know a couple of freshmen are starring at you as you walk by them. Did you hear them snicker? You feel like crap, and it is only 8:30 a.m. You already know what you are going to do after school, and you are counting the minutes until the final bell. You are going to race home and order a large pizza with extra cheese, and you are going to eat the entire thing before your Mom gets home from work. Then you are going to eat dinner with your family; you will have dessert
tonight; your mom makes sundaes. In your room, by yourself, you eat a Snickers, a Twix and a bag of peanut M&Ms. You cry yourself to sleep.

Now that you’ve told the truth, you feel a little bit better. You are beginning to amass all of the things you’ll need for college. You are so excited about this part of the process. That’s the thing; you are so out of control with your eating that you are in hyper-control of everything else in your life. People assume that because you are fat that you are dirty, smelly even, but that is not the case. You shower every day, sometimes twice a day. The things you are taking to school are pristine and beautiful. You’ve picked out the best of everything; everything matches—your bed spread, your towels, your shower caddy. Your cousin who is a sophomore in college already has given you some great Intel. You need a complete setup for your side of the room, great posters and fun little tchotchkes—things that will quickly convey your personality to classmates who enter your room and most importantly, to your roommate. After all, in approximately eighteen days you are going to be sharing a very small living space with a complete stranger.

You have exchanged several letters with your roommate. Your roommate’s name is Gwen. Gwen Harrison. Her stationary is monogrammed, and she writes in swirly cursive. You type your correspondence on the computer because you don’t want her to judge your handwriting (because you are left-handed, it always ends up looking as if a different person wrote each sentence). You agree with her about almost everything, and you are confident that you two are going to be great friends. You like the same music as Gwen. You think the same celebrities are cute. You and Gwen are both majoring in nursing. You couldn’t be more in sync.

You don’t let Gwen know about your physicality. You receive Gwen’s pictures in the mail; she is smiling in her bathing suit on a boat, she is at the top of a pyramid in her
cheerleading uniform, her smile is absolutely infectious, she is adorable, you are heartbroken. You know she is going to judge you on your size before she gets to know you. You breeze over the fact that you don’t send pictures, telling her that you forgot to enclose them, you will send some next time. You know there won’t be a next time; the next time you see her will be when you are moving in to your room.

Your mom and dad make the twelve-hour drive with you. Your family car is stuffed with all of your belongings—your computer, your clothes, all of your new purchases. You pull up to your assigned building after a long drive and hop out of the car to stretch your legs. You look around at your new home; you are nervous and excited all at once. The orientation counselors walk by you. No one is stopping to help you and your family. Other cars are pulling up and you see a cute boy in a bright yellow shirt bound up to those cars with a clipboard; you see him dole out room assignments and set up these families with other strapping young men who will assist them in getting their belongings up to their rooms.

You are completely deflated. You were looking forward to this new educational experience as a fresh start for yourself. The problems you faced at home—the invisibility, the judgment—they are all still present in your life. You know all of the old clichés are true—you can’t run from your life…it follows you wherever you go. Your dad flags someone down who begrudgingly comes over to help. You know what this person is thinking, “How did I get stuck helping this fat ass get her and her dirty shit up to her room?” You smile as brightly as you possibly can; you make a joke about the size of your suitcases, nothing gets through. This person hates you, and he doesn’t even know you.

You are relieved. Gwen has chosen a side of the room, but she is nowhere to be found. Your parents help you; you get everything upstairs but you are too tired to unpack. You leave as
quickly as possible before anyone can stop you and goad you into an awkward conversation. You don’t even want to be there anymore. Your parents take you out to dinner, and you eat a lot. You claim it is because you are going to be eating solely dining hall food when your parents leave in the morning, but you know that is not the reason. You are hurt; you don’t even want to go back to the dorm and unpack, meet your roommate or any of the other girls on your floor. You tell your parents you are going to miss them so much. Your Mom starts crying; she agrees to let you sleep at the hotel with them.

When your parents drop you off the next morning in front of your building, Michner Hall, you are endlessly sad. You are going to miss your parents, the comfort of your bedroom. You don’t want to unpack. You want to go back home to your stash; you want to eat how you really feel about your “new experience”. It hasn’t even begun, and you are already feeling anxious about it and only one thing can calm you down.

You get up to your room relieved to see that Gwen is almost completely unpacked, and you think you might hear her talking in the room next door but you can’t be sure. Girls are laughing and meeting and beginning to make friendships, and you need to get down to business. You start with your clothes. You quickly realize that your clothes are too, well, big. Your top drawer, reserved for your unmentionables, which it has been since you were a toddler, barely fits half of your bras/underwear/socks. You try your pants in the second drawer down; you can really only fit about three pairs. You give up on the clothes, make your bed, hang your posters and begin to relax as Gwen bops into the room.

Your first meeting is a bit tense. You can tell that you weren’t what she was expecting. You know she was assuming she would live with one of your neighbors, a petite person, someone perky, someone like her. The two of you quickly discuss the upcoming dorm meeting.
and when your first classes start on Monday. You tell her you don’t feel well when she announces she is going to the ice cream social on the quad with some other girls from your floor. You manage to shove your most worn clothes into the dresser and cram the others in a box and put it in your closet. You know you won’t wear those clothes; you really only brought them to appease your Mother, plus they will be wrinkly and too hard to get to in there. This is the reason you avoided sleep-a-way camps all of your life. You always wear the same couple of things anyway; you keep them clean; you just feel the most comfortable in them. You feel that life is enough of a struggle without worrying about what you are going to wear. So it’s a black blousy top and a pair of jeans with cute sneakers for your first day tomorrow. You are determined to wake up feeling positive.

You get a good night’s sleep. You hear Gwen get up early to go to the work out facility in your building. You know she brought a change of clothes; you most likely won’t see her for the rest of the day. Your dream of having a great relationship with your roommate is never going to come to fruition, so you settle on becoming a polite acquaintance. Not a lot of talking, kind of just working around one another, Gwen will become another person to you who you know is judging you and hates you for no reason. Luckily your schedules will keep you apart and out of the room for the majority of the day. You will only really see her when you wake up and when you are about to turn in. Typically, you would be destroyed by this, but you need to move on. From your correspondence over the summer you knew in the back of your mind that you were being somewhat deceptive. You don’t know why, but you almost feel bad for Gwen.

You head to the bathroom, which of course is very far from your room at the end of the hall. You refuse to walk around half naked like most of the other girls, so you are completely dressed and hauling your towels, toiletries and clothes you are planning to wear for the day. You
went to the bathroom yesterday, but you never turned the corner to check out the shower stalls. They are small, there is no place to set down your clean clothes. The curtains don’t close all the way; if you can’t use the last stall at the end of the row, someone will most likely see you in the shower. Luckily the last stall is available. You quickly shower and get dressed but because you are in a rush you don’t dry yourself completely; you pull your clothes on, and you are already sweating.

You’ve seen the campus map; you give yourself plenty of time to get to your first class, Ethics. You begin your walk and realize it is actually a lot warmer out than you thought it was going to be. When you looked outside earlier, it was sunny, but it looked cool. The campus is beautiful; the trees are changing colors; you assumed it would be a crisp fall day. Why don’t the windows in your room open? You don’t go anywhere without some sort of cover up, a jacket, a sweatshirt, something you can button up. Something you can sink in to and disappear. Today you are wearing a long wool cardigan; you are sweating, and you haven’t even walked a full block.

You try to calm yourself down when you get to the building your class is in, but you are beet red, and you are dripping sweat. When you enter the building, you look on at the directory and realize the class is on the fourth floor; there is no elevator, for it is an old building. Class starts in ten minutes; you don’t know if you are going to be able to get up there on time. You barely make it; everyone looks at you when you walk in. All of the seats by the window in the back of the room, just where you were planning on sitting, are taken. You have to sit in the front row, directly in front of the teacher.

The rest of your day continues in the same fashion. You make it to all of your classes, but you don’t really move quickly, so you don’t get a good seat in any of them. You don’t talk to
anyone, you don’t make any friends, and you feel as if this is a preview of what is to come for the rest of the school year. You couldn’t have been more wrong about this whole experience, the moving away, the starting fresh. It doesn’t seem like it is going to take. You can’t believe it is only the first day, and you are already contemplating moving back home and doing a couple of years at the community college in your hometown. You don’t want to entertain those types of thoughts; you don’t want to give up on this yet.

You eat lunch in the dining hall by yourself. Because you can feel the stares of the other students, you make yourself a salad with hardly any dressing or add-ons, no croutons, no cheese. You drink water. In your head, you are imagining what you would eat as you look at all of the different food stations. If you were by yourself or if you truly didn’t care what other people thought of you, you would have had pasta. You would have had French fries and fried chicken. You would have had one of those juicy looking hamburgers or a custom made sandwich, stacked with cheese and salami and prosciutto and all kinds of other Italian meats. There is a Chinese station -- fried rice, sweet and sour pork, eggrolls. There is also a dessert station with all kinds of pies and cakes and cookies. This is making you so anxious. All you want to do is eat everything in sight and relax and not think about how bad your first day was, but you can’t. People are looking.

Towards dinnertime the weather starts to cool; you are comfortable walking around. You decide not to rush home to your room. You know that avoiding Gwen will become part of your daily routine. Before your parents dropped you off, you drove around the town your college is situated in to make sure you are aware of your surroundings. Around the corner from the main campus you know that there is a strip mall that houses a grocery store, a nail salon, a diner and a laundry mat. You decide to walk to the store and buy some food to keep in your room. Just a
few things you can store that you can rely on when you need a little release. You fill a basket with a few candy bars, a box of doughnuts, potato chips and a couple of bottles of Coke. The bags from the grocery store are transparent; you stuff the items in your backpack and make a mental note to bring an extra opaque shopping bag with you whenever you need to walk over here. It’s dark outside by the time you get back to the dorm. You decided to stop in the diner and have a big plate of pancakes with bacon and hash browns before you head home. When you get back to your room, you put the items inside your suitcase and slide it back under your bed. You feel relaxed knowing you have a couple of items to help regulate you when you feel like you can’t handle the stress of your new life.

It is day three of school, and you are already out of your snack reserves. You’ve also given up on trying to eat healthy at the dining hall. You can’t walk by those food stations and not indulge—they are irresistible. What you’ve decided to do to curb the embarrassment is to get everything to go. You act as if you are in a big hurry. You order two of things and ask the person making the pastas not to add meatballs to one order because your “friend” is a vegetarian. Little does the cafeteria worker know that you are going to go back to your room and eat two servings of pasta, two pieces of garlic bread and several chocolate chip cookies that you grabbed at the dessert station. That was your plan anyway. When you get back to your room, you find Gwen inside with her nose in a book along with one of the most attractive eighteen year olds you’ve ever seen in your life. You apologize and say you will be back a little later. Gwen mouths “Thank you” but you don’t miss the mortified eye roll she gives her study companion as you back out of the door. You take your Italian feast and devour it in a bathroom stall.

Your first weekend away at school you spend Saturday and Sunday at that little strip mall near campus. You push your laundry over in a small cart that resides in the lobby of your
dormitory. You have to sign it out, and you don’t really care about the wrath that will ensue when the other girls need to use it. You eat at the diner four times; there is a kind waitress there who is also overweight and doesn’t judge your order or the fact that you are always hanging out in there. She takes pity on you and gives you the student discount and doesn’t ask a thousand questions.

You decide to call your cousin on Sunday night, and you give her the highlights of how school is going and she senses that you are haven’t a great time. She suggests that you join a sorority. Rush Week is next month, and you think, why not? You haven’t made any friends, well, you haven’t really even tried. Joining a sorority might be just what the doctor ordered. You will make two hundred friends in one shot; you will have sorority sisters. You can move off campus next year, have your own room and live in a house with some of your new friends; you can get away from Gwen and not worry about who you are going to room with sophomore year. You decide you are going to do this—you are going to rush. You will need to take the bus and the train to get to the mall, but a new outfit might be in order—something that will look good on you and make a great first impression.

Of course, nothing works out the way you think it will. You always have such grand plans, and you either don’t act on them at all or you give yourself such a false sense of how the world works that you always end up disappointed. Joining a sorority was no different. You find an outfit that you feel comfortable in, you chose black pants, well, because black is supposedly slimming although nothing about you is slim and all of the black fabric in the world isn’t going to change the fact that you are obese. You also buy a bright purple top; it is long and covers your stomach and rear end. You think it looks pretty good although you never really look at yourself in the mirror, and shopping is your least favorite task. You have cried in the dressing rooms of
many stores. The best part about going to the mall for you was getting to enjoy some time at the food court.

Back to Rush Week. At the first rush party, you walk in with the other girls, and you are promptly ignored by everyone in the room. No one comes up and talks to you; however, everywhere you look people are engaged in conversation. You go over to the refreshments table and have a cup of punch and a sugar cookie. The party lasts about twenty minutes, it is designed to be a quick “getting to know” you session. No one seems interested in getting to know you. Typically, if the girls in the sorority take a liking to you, you get invited back for the second round which is longer, with more in depth conversation. There are four rounds total and then all of the sororities you visited with send a card to your dorm and let you know whether or not you are invited to join them. Needless to say you don’t join a sorority. You signed up for four sororities, you only go to two first round parties. You thought being ignored at the first party was bad, but what happened when you went to the Kappa Alpha Theta party made you give up on the whole sorority thing.

You were waiting in the hallway of the student union outside one of the conference rooms with about thirty other girls. You are about halfway down the single file line. The girls in front of you are talking about how much fun this whole process is, how they recognize the older girls they’ve seen around campus in their matching sweatshirts. It’s your turn to enter the room and the girl who is opening the doors asks you to please step to the side while the rest of the freshmen file in in front of you. Once the doors close, the girl who stopped you from entering turns to you and tells you that you they have size standards and that fatties simply aren’t allowed to join with them. She smiles sweetly and says that she hopes you understand. You disgust yourself by nodding and smiling back, and you walk back to your dorm crying the whole way.
After a couple of days you start to feel a little bit better. You still feel shattered, but what can you do? You stick to your new routine; you are getting good grades because you have no social life to speak of and you spend most of your time at the diner doing schoolwork when you are not at class. The waitress lets you keep your laptop behind the counter, so that you don’t have to drag it back and forth every day. You no longer use the cart; the last time you returned it mysteriously disappeared. You have a feeling the girls are hiding it from you because they are tired of you monopolizing it. So you bring just a few items in your bag every couple of days and do a little bit of laundry at a time, always making sure to leave a little space in your bag for some food from the grocery store to keep in your dorm room for emergencies. Emergencies like as soon as Gwen sneaks out of the room in the morning, you can eat a couple of doughnuts before you head to the dining hall for breakfast. You barely see Gwen anymore anyway; she is dating that hottie from her creative writing class, and she spends a lot of time in his room, even overnights.

The first semester ends at Christmas, and you go home for a week and really decompress. You lie to your friends about how great your experience has been, all the people you’ve met, all of the friends you’ve made, your roommate is a blast, you guys get along great. You lie to your parents. Where is all of your money going? You tell them you are using it for new clothes and going out with friends, movies, trips to the city. You don’t tell them that you are basically a fixture at a greasy spoon and that most of your money is actually spent on food there. You paint a picture of the amazing fun time you are having. After a couple of days you start to believe it yourself because you are feeling better. You are back in the safety and comfort of your own room. You have a car again, you can order take out and speed through drive thrus. You are dreading going back to school and the only thing that makes you feel a bit better about it is that
you will have new classes and new teachers. You can’t wait to get done with these core classes and select the things you are really interested in and possibly meet some people who share your similarities.

Second semester doesn’t go according to plan, but what else is new? The first problem is in your humanities class. The class is in one of the newer buildings on campus—everything is smaller, more compact, more modern. The class is held in a small room, everyone sits at a communal table to help foster discussion. You hate this set up. The first day of class, everyone basically sits on the opposite side of the table from you. Your classmates would prefer to rub knees with one another than get close to you. In the older buildings, the desks are huge, and you can get behind them and really hide yourself, your stomach. In this new configuration, you can’t push your chair close enough to the table to even take notes, you are too on display, you barely fit on the chair. You feel as if you are in front of a firing squad; it’s everyone in the room against you. You can’t wait for this class to be over.

You try to stay positive. You are actually really looking forward to a class you’ve signed up for that begins tomorrow. You had a hole in your schedule, and your academic advisor gave you approval to take an upper level literature class about The Harlem Renaissance. You have heard about the professor who is teaching the class, and you are really excited to meet her. She has written books of her own on the subject, and she is rumored to be very engaging and her lectures and guest speakers are supposedly legendary.

Your hopes are dashed of course. The first couple of weeks are amazing—the books you are reading, the things you are learning—you are thrust into a whole new world. You don’t even have time to dwell on your previous bad experiences, your lonely existence; you are devouring the course work and becoming quite an expert yourself on all things Jim Crow—Langston
Hughes, Zora Neale Hurston, Claude McKay! It’s all so exciting—you are really loving this class, and you feel as if things are turning around for you. Is this what you’ve been waiting for all this time?

Around week three Dr. Brainard is giving a lecture about style and femininity during the 1920s. She is talking about color and fabric and what was acceptable and hats and gloves, and it was all so interesting. She stops by your desk and says something that shocks you to your core. She basically tells you that you would most likely be ostracized from your community. You wouldn’t fit in. Your weight would be a big problem for others to handle. No one was as big as you back then. The students sitting around you heard her say it. She is smiling a bit, a wry smirk. She knew what she said, and she was pleased with herself. You asked to be excused and barely made it to the bathroom before you started crying.

You wait in the bathroom until your face starts to look a little less blotchy. Class is over, and you enter the room to collect your things. Dr. Brainard is still at her desk. She sees you come in and looks up. She tells you she is trying to help you. She tells you she used to struggle with her weight and that all it took was for someone to tell her to her face what she herself couldn’t admit—she said it turned her life around. This woman may weigh one hundred pounds soaking wet. You can’t imagine what her “weight struggle” would have been. Maybe she had two pieces of cake one time, or she missed a work out session. She apologizes if she was too harsh, but the damage has already been done. You spend more time at the diner eating and less time reading; you aren’t excited anymore to learn about the Harlem Renaissance. You can’t stop thinking about what she said, and you replay it in your head often. Within a couple of weeks you stop going to her class completely. She lets you finish by writing papers and turning in reports, so you still receive a grade. She gives you a “C”.
You trudge on through the rest of the year, spending time at the diner, passing the days in the library. Other than Dr. Brainard’s class, you do quite well on your finals. During the last weeks of school, Gwen begins moving all of her things over to the Kappa Alpha Theta house, and you find yourself alone in your room for a couple of days before your parents come to get you and move you back home for the summer. You bring abundant amounts of food back to your room, you watch movies, you cry. You are so depressed. You call the pool back home and tell Mrs. Birch that you won’t be working the front desk for the summer. You don’t really know what you are going to do when you get home, but you know you don’t want to feign excitement every time someone sees you and asks you how your first year of school went.

You pack up; your parents arrive. You are halfway home, and you break down. You explain through your tears that you don’t want to go back to school, but you don’t get into specifics. Your mom wouldn’t be able to understand what you are feeling or why you are feeling that way. If you explained about the sorority party or your teacher or how uncomfortable you felt just sitting at a conference table with your peers, she would say that it couldn’t have been that bad, that you were blowing things out of proportion. She would tell you that maybe you could stand to lose weight and that then maybe these types of things wouldn’t happen to you. Instead you lie and say that you are homesick, being that far away from your family isn’t really for you and that you want to be a commuter student and live at home.

When you get home your friends act like they understand. They call you brave for going away in the first place. You realize this is the right step for you. You couldn’t bear the thought of going back to that school. You begin to relax into your old routine, driving around, eating, sneaking food up to your room. You are finally safe and back to your old habits, and it feels so good. You enroll in a few classes over the summer at a community college. Your credits
transfer. There is no pressure to belong. You park in the lot, walk a few steps to the building. You take your class, you get back in your car, you stop for food, you go home. After the worst year of your life, you don’t owe anyone any explanations. You can be yourself. You can ignore the world and it can ignore you. You can breathe.
VI. “I” – Student 3

Ugh. I hate getting out of bed. I love my bed; it is the one place in the world that I feel comfortable. It is huge, larger than life, a king-size mattress with the most plush pillows, blankets, and sheets that money can buy. I have my mother to thank for this thick slice of heaven. She and I may not agree on much: what makes a good television program, the volume at which we should speak to one another in public—it feels like if I say it’s sunny, she will only point out the clouds. But one thing we both love with equal ferocity is a comfortable bed, a well deserved nap, a good night’s sleep, anything that has to do with getting rest. Unfortunately, I never wake up feeling like I can take on the world.

Reluctantly, I get up, dress, and go down to the kitchen to have breakfast. One of my brothers is still sleeping, and I can hear my mother knocking louder and louder on his bedroom door. Her voice trills out in sing-song, but I can tell she is getting nervous that she will have to walk in and violently shake him awake and then suffer his wrath. I am not her only offspring that inherited her zest for slumber, but with me, she knows I will always wake up to my alarm on my own. My room is my private space, my sanctuary, it is neat and tidy, and I pride myself on never having to be barged in on or told that I need to clean up.

My older brother is sitting at the table, devouring the sports section in an effort to discover the final results of last night’s Phillies game. I sit down and pour myself a bowl of cereal. I enjoy a short conversation with my Dad about our upcoming fishing trip. I am excited and nervous about it, but I don’t express any of this to him. I think to myself that I will wait until the day we leave to feign a stomachache if necessary. I’ll fall in the water if it gets bad, I’ll think
of something, I always do. I load my bowl and spoon into the dishwasher, and I am off to school.

Stepping on the bus I survey the situation. I am looking for someone small who will provide me enough space. Space is something I am always after. An empty seat is ideal, but we live relatively close to school, so by the time I board, it is typically packed. Today’s driver is Maria. She always makes us wear the seatbelt. The problem is the extender. On the plane with my brothers, I don’t mind it much. It’s always an ordeal, but I am safe. Paul, my older brother, always reminds me that we are on vacation, and I will never see these people again. On the bus, however, it is very much a different story. “Charlie needs the extra belt,” Clare shouts as soon as I get on. “Thanks, Clare,” I think to myself. Maria slaps the seatbelt into my hand with a satisfying thud, and my journey as the fat kid begins.

I really do despise riding the bus. The whole day typically stinks, but I always use the morning bus ride as a guesstimate as to how the rest of it will play out. Every time I get on the bus, I feel the bus driver roll her eyes at me. Sometimes she lowers the step to help me out; other times, she can’t be bothered. Those three steps are kind of tough for me, and it takes me a minute to get onto the bus most days. I can tell the mornings when she is really pissed because she guns it as soon as I am off of the last step. One day last school year, I turned to take a step down the aisle, and I fell to my knees. She apologized, but I know she didn’t mean it—her smirk was a dead giveaway. The pain in my left knee eventually dissipated after a couple of weeks; the embarrassment the incident caused, well, that never went away.

I spot an unoccupied seat—a great find. I’m a freshman in high school, and at almost three hundred pounds, there is not much space left in my seat, so it’s a pretty safe bet that no one is going to ask me to scoot over before I get to school. Once I arrive at school, I have to go to
the library to retrieve a chair that is suitable for me to sit in during my first period class; unfortunately, I do not fit in the desks that are provided for the students in the classroom. Instead of leaving the chair in the classroom for me, each night, the janitor returns the chair to the library. I imagine him cursing me under his breath the whole way. There are several reasons why I think he does this, or at least my cynical fourteen year old mind has a couple of ideas. I think he might share the same amount of empathy for me as the bus driver—zero. Another possibility might be that there needs to be a certain number of chairs in the library every morning for some unknown reason. Honestly, I’m not sure why this happens, but it does, and it’s horrible. It’s mortifying for me to wheel this chair through the crowded junior and senior hallway each and every morning of the school year.

Embarrassed by this seating situation, I often retreat to the back of the classroom, and as the other students file in, catching up on last night’s episode of *Laguna Beach* or the varsity boy’s basketball game, I sit, dejected, in the back of the room—I can’t help it. It is a pretty deflating way to start the day. I can’t connect with my fellow classmates. I’m already so far removed from them, so separated. I literally don’t fit in.

The bell eventually rings and class begins. We are reading John Gardner’s *Grendel*, and the discussion has turned to the characterization of Grendel’s mother. As some of the students shout out descriptions, such as ‘fat’, ‘lazy’, ‘pig’, ‘oaf’, I cannot help but wonder to myself, “What about ‘loving’? She did love her son.” I know if I stand up for Grendel’s mother, everyone will think to themselves that it’s because I don’t want to be picked on or thought of in those negative and demeaning terms. Every time someone calls out another vilifying descriptor, I can’t help but feel like they are hurling their insults directly at me. It is only 8:30 a.m., and I already want to go home.
I am all too familiar with these monikers. I have been called ‘fat’ and ‘lazy’ and ‘pig’; one time I was even referred to as an ‘oaf’ by an older kid at a youth church meeting. I feel as though the other kids look at me and snicker, but I’m not sure if this is really happening or if I am imagining it. My guess is that it is, in fact, occurring. I know it’s only natural. I’ve been caught starring at someone with one leg or a blind person utilizing a seeing eye dog, but I’m just overweight. I guess technically I’m obese. Who’s counting? Everyone apparently.

One time my brother snapped at a kid in the hallway who he overheard talking about me. I know my brother was simply looking out for me, but the spectacle it caused has haunted me since that day. I deal with teasing and pretending not to overhear whispered insults all of the time; I think my brother just struggles with the fact that I don’t turn around and shut it down immediately. Truthfully, he might also be a little concerned about what my weight and the fact that we are brothers might do to his image at school. But I am a total pro at ignoring things and people. I feel like I have a kind of unwritten pact with everyone in the world. I’ll stay out of their way, and I can only pray that they stay out of mine.

Not that I believe I deserve disrespect, but I have certainly grown accustomed to it. One of the most challenging aspects of being an overweight teenager is understanding the yearning to fit in, coupled with the benefit of making someone else the target of scrutiny. I have spoken to my therapist about this. Did I mention that? I go to a therapist. Another banner idea from my mother, but one of which I am actually a fan. Maggie talks a lot about Adlerian psychology and birth order and me being a middle child. She helps me see things differently. I find her fascinating, and I wish I could talk to her everyday, not just once a week. Maggie is someone I can talk to about my true feelings; I can be completely honest with her, and she really listens to me, I can tell.
Anyway, we got into this discussion once about bullies and name-calling and why people act the way they do. When I think about our talk—and I have to recall *it* or something similarly profound that Maggie has spouted at least once a day—it really helps me get through rough times and see things from another perspective. Utilizing this tactic helps me calm down, and I actually feel bad for some of my classmates. I don’t always feel bad for the cheerleaders or the jocks, the super-elite popular kids, but the kids who have a fair bit of acne or the kids who trip in the hallway or the kids who come out of the bathroom with toilet paper stuck to their shoe—those kids are the kids with whom I sympathize. I can almost understand why they chuckle when I walk by and say, “Hope there is some food left in the cafeteria.” In these instances, Maggie reminds me that bullies often bully in an effort to not be bullied themselves. She says that if an individual is available to become the subject of bullying and they instead choose to bully, then they are removing themselves as possible victims. Bullies are actually individuals with very low self-confidence, she explains. Isn’t she great? I’ll let that sink in as we continue the torture that is my school day.

Physical Education is next, and we are currently half way through the unit on swimming—my most dreaded gym activity. The best thing about swimming at school is that it is a relatively short endeavor because it takes about twenty minutes for the parquet gym floor to retract and reveal the icy pool. By the time we get in, we are only in the pool for about fifteen minutes. I don’t even know why we have to do it—it’s probably some state mandated thing. I actually love to swim. Hello, water? Weightlessness? At the lake with my brothers or at the pool at my grandparents’ apartment complex, it is not so bad—I’m with people who know me and love me and are somewhat accepting. But at school, in front of the other students, I would
take being the last kid to finish the mile or the first kid out in a game of dodge ball over this travesty.

Shortly after gym is lunch. I should be relieved to take a break and sit, without scrutiny, at a long benched table in a spot that’s meant for three people and talk with my friend Artie. When it’s warm we can go outside and sit anywhere we want on the lawn, but it’s cold today so we are all relegated to the lunchroom. I’ve known Artie since kindergarten; he’s in a similar situation and neither of us were particularly thrilled with the idea of starting high school. Leaving the comfort of middle school and being thrust into a huge high school was unnerving to say the least, but right now, we are halfway through the year and the prospect of summer vacation and becoming sophomores and no longer being the lowest men on the totem pole seems very appealing.

Our situations are similar in the fact that we are both outcasts, not really blips on the social radar at our school. Artie is an only child; he lives on my street, just a couple of houses down from ours. He is taller than me, he weighs about a hundred pounds, he likes loud death metal music, and he wears a lot of black clothing and big ugly Coke bottle glasses. Artie is big into those computer games wherein you create avatars and you can basically be whoever you want to be. Needless to say, Artie’s favorite avatar is a blonde hunk that gets all the online babes and is picked first to be on everyone’s team. IRL (“in real life” – computer speak) he sails through the halls ignored and undetected. I think Artie is hysterical, and we never talk about anything particularly deep, which is what I like most about him.

At the beginning of the school year, some cheerleader told her friends as I walked by that I was the reason they removed the soda machines from the cafeteria. As Artie and I sat a few tables away, she went on and on about wanting a Diet Coke. All of her disciples were laughing
and looking over at me. I don’t really know what they were hoping to achieve by doing this.
Did they want me to break down crying? Should I have done my run/hustle/shuffle to the
bathroom? Would turning around and telling them to leave me alone shut them up? Doubtful.
“Don’t listen to her,” Artie said. “She doesn’t know you.” In that moment I thought about
Maggie and her wise words. I smiled at Artie, he rolled his eyes, and we trudged on.

Since that day at the beginning of the year, I haven’t really looked forward to lunch or
eating in front of people in general. Don’t get me wrong—I understand the risks and difficulties
associated with obesity. I hear about them all of the time. Even though Jackie, the nutritionist I
started seeing last year, attempts to be supportive, she is really just confirming that there is
something wrong with me. I see a nutritionist, did I mention that? You’ll never guess whose
idea it was to start seeing Jackie. This is, of course, a twice monthly hour of torture that I endure
at my mother’s behest. I think she thought I was going to be somehow saved by this woman, the
plastic fruits and vegetables that litter her desk that would be better suited to soothe teething
toddlers, her healthy food pyramids, and her diet and exercise journals.

Every time I sit down to talk with Jackie, I feel as though she is saying to me, “Why can’t
you do this? Why aren’t you normal?” She thinks she is giving me all the answers—the keys to
unlock the thin person I am dying to be—but it’s just not that simple. She is looking at me and
thinking, “There is something wrong with you, Charles.” “No kidding,” I want to say, but I try
very hard not to make her the enemy—she is simply the messenger of society’s message. We
both know this. I try not to look at the clock when I am in her tiny office. Maggie dislikes
Jackie on my behalf, even though I never really tell her that I don’t think I am getting anything
out of seeing her. “Wacky Jackie” Maggie calls her.
I am used to this though, the Jackies of the world. I am also used to ‘fattie’, ‘lard ass’, ‘America’s growing epidemic’. Even in my own home, I can’t really escape stereotypes and judgments. My brothers eat the same things that I eat, but they do not have my ‘problem’. Unlike me, they look ‘normal’, and as a result, they are seemingly ‘happy’. I know that they feel bad for me, especially my older brother, Paul. He’s always been my protector in a lot of ways, but I don’t want to be a burden to him. I never want my weight to become a problem for him, to affect him or his life in a negative way. I never want him to feel like he HAS to stick up for me.

My younger brother doesn’t really pay much attention to me. He doesn’t really pay much attention to anyone but his friends, so I don’t really take offense to his aloofness—he’s that way with my whole family. He can’t really see past himself and his own life, although sometimes I get the feeling he might be worried that he will become like me, that I have a disease he can catch if he’s not careful.

I can tell my brothers try to pretend not to see my fatness. They try to act as though I am like them in every way, but in truth, I am not. They are athletic and physically fit. They can eat sweets and lay around all day, drinking sugary sodas in the summertime and riding their bikes to our neighborhood pool with their shirts off. They are on the swim team. I love to swim, but I could never join the team. My brothers never ask me if I want to go to the pool; they stopped inviting me a while ago. I don’t really mind—it was getting awkward. They ask, I come up with an excuse. I sometimes would hear Paul arguing with my mom before they head out the door, confirming to her that they did ask me and what are they supposed to do if I say I don’t want to go? My brothers and I do other things that don’t require physical exertion—we play video games and board games, we go to the movies and get there early so I can sit at the end of a row.
in one of the bigger seats normally reserved for someone who needs to park their wheelchair next to it, we order pizza and stay up all night watching television, we have fun together.

However, on Halloween, I go to Artie’s house; for the past couple of years, I have retreated to Artie’s for the holiday. We hand out candy to the young kids. Artie has a huge dog named Brutus, and when he comes to the door, some of the kids run away before we can even dole out the treats. I go to Artie’s because I learned my lesson in fifth grade that Halloween is not for me; at least according to my mother, it is not for me. After traversing our entire neighborhood for hours, amassing pillowcases filled to the brim with every type of sugary confection imaginable, my brothers and I stopped at home to use the bathroom. When I came out, my haul was nowhere to be found. My mother told me she was going to hold it for me. The pillowcase was laundered and placed back on its shelf in the linen closet, but I never saw even one Twizzler. I asked her about it once—when would I get my Halloween candy—and she told me she would put a couple of pieces in my lunch. She never did, and I didn’t bring it up again.

We never talk about how I didn’t go trick or treating the next year, and now I’m too old to go anyway. When I told Maggie that story she did her classic “Maggie thing”. Maggie’s thing is the “But maybe…”. First she agrees with me; she concurs that my mom taking my candy was cruel and unfair. The fact that my mom never brought it up again and probably threw it right in the trash was mean and wasteful. It hurt my feelings that she behaved that way; she could have talked to me, told me why we couldn’t at least go through what I could keep and what I should probably give to Paul and my younger brother. Then Maggie says, “But maybe…”, and I hear things that might possibly be from my mom’s point of view. Maggie says that maybe my mom just got so flustered seeing all that candy and worrying about me eating it all that she just did what she thought she had to do. Maybe my mom just loves me so much, and she thinks she
is helping me by taking away the temptation. I don’t know what I would do without Maggie. She helps me see other points of view which I desperately need at times, especially when dealing with my mother.

However, it’s not always easy. Talking to Maggie, listening to her rationalizations, trying to see other sides, looking to understand why people say and do the things they do, it doesn’t always work. I get jealous. I envy my brothers and their easy living. They don’t feel sluggish and out of breath after taking a hike through the woods. They don’t get the stares and feel rejected by others in the way that I do. They are on the team; they don’t cry in their rooms after their basketball games, wishing they were out playing on the court instead of sitting on the sidelines. They don’t have to see a nutritionist, a therapist, and an endocrinologist like I do. They do not cause my parents distress and discomfort at the mere sight of them. Their physicality is not the subject of conversations in the dark—conversations that are assumed private but are quite audible through the thin walls of our old house. They do not get picked last in gym class. They are not made to feel inadequate by their teachers, a nuisance by the school administration, and a statistic in this country’s war against obesity. They are not forced to be weighed by our mother in the mornings. They do not get a bag of carrots for dessert or a handful of grapes after school. They do not feel marginalized, alone, and scared. They do not wish they were someone else.

Last year when I was in eighth grade, I was riding somewhat of a small cresting wave. I was about to graduate from middle school. I was going to be at the same school as my brother Paul. I was looking forward to seeing a friendly face besides Artie’s a couple of times a day. Even if we didn’t have time to talk, just seeing him in the hallway, laughing with his friends, making out with his girlfriend against her locker, the familiarity of him, would definitely put me
at ease. It was after Christmas, a couple of months to go until summer, and then my mother dropped a bomb on me—a singing, dancing bomb.

My mother was insistent that I try out for the spring musical. “Charlie,” she said out of the blue, “You need to get involved in some things at school. It is not good for you to exist on this island by yourself.” I couldn’t believe that she was suggesting that I do this. Why now? I can only assume she was reading some kind of “tough love” literature or saw something on TV about how great it is to force someone you care about out of their comfort zone to help them grow. When I stomped into Paul’s room and told him about it, he just stared at his computer. He told me that she was trying to help in her own way, that maybe I should just do it. What?!?! She must have gotten to him and asked him to encourage me to go for it. Traitor.

I fought on a daily basis to stay out of the spotlight. I barely spoke. I answered in class only when called upon which my teachers rarely did after a while because I always answered correctly. No need to challenge me—I paid attention, I aced all of my projects and papers, I got 100% on all of my quizzes and tests. I just didn’t feel the need to interact. I liked to get through the day without incident. Even walking through the halls could be anxiety inducing at times. I hated bumping into people as I made my way from class to class with my backpack and my oversized coat—a coat which I had to hang in a closet in the main office everyday because I could not shove it into the small locker at my old school. Coat or school books? Hmmmm…

I don’t like attention—my mother knows this. The spring musical? Was she crazy? She was expecting me to go from zero to hero by taking to the stage in the twelfth hour. What did she expect me to gain? In her mind, everyone would applaud, and I would finally be accepted. Forget that I could barely carry a tune outside of the shower—my mom claimed I had the voice of an angel. Forget that standing in front of my peers just begging to be judged is quite possibly
my greatest fear. She wanted me to volunteer for this embarrassment? I want to make my mom happy, to have her not worry about me; I would do almost anything to achieve this. But trying out for the spring musical was just asking too much.

I asked my father if I really needed to pursue my mother’s insane Broadway dream, and he told me that it would make her so happy to see me involved in something sponsored by the school. It seemed that there was no way out of this one. “I’m sure there is a part that would fit you,” he said. Exactly, I thought, ‘fit’ me. Was I about to do this? Was I about to try out for the spring musical and throw myself at the mercy of the drama department and anyone else who might wander into the gym at 3:30 p.m.? I shouldn’t have been sweating this so much. I would never be given a part. I wasn’t really worried about that. None of the drama folks would want me around. They ignore me during school—it’s not like they are going to make me part of the chorus and invite me to IHOP after rehearsals. I just needed to get through the audition process, suffer whatever horrible ordeal it would surely provide, and placate my mom per the norm.

I attended the tryout, and I was met with unspoken resistance and shock. No one, most of all me, could believe I was there, but there I was, signing in at the card table stage left (Ugh, I can barely stomach theatre terminology). The director looked astonished when I walked out onto the stage about forty-five minutes later. “Yes, can I help you?” she asked. As the other students awaited my response, I told her that I was there to tryout for the musical. “Oh. Great,” she responded, with a perplexed look on her face. I couldn’t look out into the audience in the gym so I stared with laser precision at the backboard of the basketball hoop opposite the stage.

The laughter, whispering, and snickering were unavoidable—it was audible so it ricocheted off of every wall and hit me like a ton of bricks. I’m not kidding when I say it was loud. LOUD. I wasn’t dreaming. When I first walked in to the gym, there were maybe thirty
students milling around. About an hour later when I was set to take the stage and be humiliated, it seemed that there was close to one hundred people present. My fellow students had shown up en masse to watch me fail. I squeaked out a tinny rendition of “Amazing Grace” and huffed off of the stage. Did I say dreaming before? It was a complete nightmare.

My mom was ecstatic when I got home. She wanted all of the details. I tried to shine it on for her, but I felt awful. I just wanted to go upstairs and dive into my Egyptian cotton oasis and never come up for air. As expected a couple of days later, I found out there was no part for me. I was awarded with a position on the set crew; for weeks after school I built faux brick walls and painted trees and scenery. When the weekend of the musical rolled around, I was told I wouldn’t be donning all black and moving trees and balconies around in the dark. The powers-that-be claimed it was because they already had enough behind-the-scenes help, but the unspoken truth was that I just wasn’t going to move fast enough—my movements were too labored. They thought I would screw something up. I sat in the audience with my mom and pointed out all of the set pieces I had a hand in creating. She nodded politely and clapped like a fiend at the end of every musical number.

When I recounted this story for Maggie, she marveled at my strength. She reminded me that I got through it—something that must have seemed impossible at the time. She tells me it was in the past, no amount of recounting it, hating my mom for it, wondering if anyone else who was there at the time ever thinks about it—none of that will change it. It happened. I’ve got no choice but to move forward from it. Again she does the “Maggie thing”—maybe my mom was trying to help in her weird way. Maggie reminds me that my mom operates from a place of helplessness when it comes to me; she grapples and struggles and does what she thinks is best. Maggie knows that I love my mom, that’s why I tried out in the first place and stuck with the
whole process. Before we ended that appointment, I’ll never forget how she shrugged her shoulders and said, “Huh. The things you do for love, I guess.”

This expression infuriates me, but I don’t tell her that. Does my mom truly love me? If she did, she would have never put me through the try-out or any of the other harebrained ideas she’s concocted over the years in her attempt to help me with my weight struggles. Wouldn’t my mom sense my uneasiness and try to protect me and shield me from embarrassment and humiliation? What I really want, what I am desperate for, is for my mom to come lay in my bed with me, to hold me, to tell me that I should stay home from school, that we should hole up in my room and watch trashy television all day. Just once, I want her to comfort me and look at me like she really loves me, that she gets me, that she can see through the layers of fat to her son. I want to feel like I am precious to her. I don’t want to be a problem for her, something for which she is constantly trying to find a solution. I don’t want her to be tired—I want her to relax and for us to just enjoy being with one another. I want her to stop searching for answers, just be with me.

I tell Maggie that all of the time. Sometimes we call my mom “Mama Bird”. I like when we talk like this. Like swimming, the idea of flying is so appealing to me. Soaring, freedom, floating in the air—it resonates with me and just talking about it makes me feel lighter. I imagine I am a baby bird. We, my mother and I, are comfortable in our nest. My mom has plied it with the softest, coziest ribbons and feathers and paper she can find. She works tirelessly. I wish we had more time together to admire our vantage point from high up in the trees. While I chirp and beg, she nervously scans the skies for predators. She just can’t relax. She is doing what comes naturally to her. Although she is a good mama bird, she doesn’t notice my damaged
wing. She is just so desperate to push me out of our nest, and she is hoping against hope that I take off and fly.
VII. “Me, Myself, and I”: My Story

I pledge allegiance to my fatness and that of which I am comprised, and to the embodiment of my own being and that of who I am, one person, indivisible, deserving liberties and justice as all.

I am a fattie—always have been, always will be. Regardless as to how my weight has fluctuated throughout my life, fat is me; fat I be. I have lived the majority of my life deemed overweight; yet, I have also been underweight and for a short time, was actually considered to be the appropriate weight. I lived near death as a bulimic anorexic for over a year—quite a terrifying experience. I lost my hair where it should be and grew it in other undesirable places. Along with this odd hair growth came depression, promiscuity, and substance abuse. Oddly enough and contrary to what I thought thinness would deliver, I was the most scared during this time. While I always cared too greatly for what people thought of the physical space I was consuming, it was during this time in my early twenties that I was the most timid.

My mother tells me that as a child, I was quite shy, hesitant to engage with others. I was content to fade into the background, yet as a chubbetta (a term used to describe a fat person presented to me by my father), this was a difficult task. Physically, I couldn’t do it, but emotionally, it was a piece of cake, literally, a piece of cake, and I turned to this cake on a regular basis. I cannot pinpoint when and how my overeating began. I have tried to, considering that there was a moment in time when I realized that sadness and pain would commence if I ate an entire bag of chips washed down with the sweetest sweet tea one could imagine. Filling a space, a void, I had inside myself began at an early age, but the trigger is hard to identify. The
trigger, however, I have found is society—the world in which we live—and school was my foray into this existence.

The school system influenced me in a major way. I dreaded going to school, not just because it was an unsafe refuge away from my family but because it presented itself as a place of scrutiny and continuous observation. As a fat kid, I didn't want to be observed and critiqued—I wanted to be left alone. I wanted to disappear.

The role of the school since its inception has been to classify, sort, and divide. According to Spring (1972), education is the agent of social control and the school system the force by which normalcy and acceptability is disseminated. Individuals are viewed as natural resources, and the system praises the abandonment of the self and the adherence to the whole. Knowledge and learning is standardized, as too are the acceptable images of the physical body. Cookie cutter cutouts are perpetuated by a system that praises likeness and ostracizes individuals who do not fit inside the predetermined pattern. Deviation from this model is unacceptable; deviators are shunned. This thought is extremely troubling to a student who does not fit in, both physically and metaphorically. When the individual is unable to fit or shape the mold, stress and angst are felt all around. For me, dealing with this meant suiting up, disguising it, with extra layers of padding and protection. I often cringe at the idea of school being compared to a battleground or our schools equated to war zones, but as a fat kid, I was armored, heavily, for the struggle that awaited me inside the walls of the education system.

As a fat teenager, life was a constant negotiation. I was always trying to hide who I was, where I was, pulling shirts this way and that, disguising fat—the undesirable. I didn't deserve love, neither do you, if you're fat. I didn't belong, neither do you, if you're fat. I didn't deserve respect, neither do you, if you're fat. But you do, and so did I, but I didn't get it. And although
these ideas existed within me, it was society who presented them to me. The school I attended reinforced them. My own mother told me they weren't true, but her mere acknowledgement of them confirmed their existence. I realized that I was onto something. I figured this out—this, this is the life of a fat person. This is the life that people try to avoid at all costs. People despise this life more that being poor, homeless, or alone. Add those concepts to fatness, and you've got yourself a double, triple, possibly quadruple whammy.

In my mid-thirties I developed uterine cancer which is considered the fat women’s cancer—one of the cited causes of uterine cancer is obesity. So not only was I fat, but now I had cancer. I had to undergo a complete hysterectomy that I guess could be credited for saving my life; however, I will never forget the assumptions that the oncologist made regarding my future. As my mother and I sat with him at a round table in a small office, he said these exact words: “You weren’t planning on having children, right? Do you even have a partner with whom you would consider the possibility of freezing your eggs? It’s quite an expensive process, and I only suggest it to people who may visualize the potential of surrogacy in the future.” Of course I wanted to stand up at that moment and ask him if his assumptions were due to the fact that I was an unmarried, fat woman or because he was just a complete asshole...or both. But then I quickly realized that he has no idea what this is like. I mean, sure, he could have been fat at one time in his life—he certainly wasn’t now—but couple that fatness with learning that as a woman, you are unable to bear children—well, that he definitely couldn’t understand. I didn’t resent him for his questioning because I understood his ignorance. I actually felt a little sorry for him. He was functioning at quite a disadvantage. He would never understand this, and I think many people expected him to comprehend on some levels. He was a doctor, and he spent every single day of his working life telling people that they had cancer and then using his state of the art daVinci
machine to remove it. He saved lives—physical lives—he wasn’t taxed with unpacking or even considering my emotional response to this news.

Approximately four years ago, I was diagnosed with Type 2 diabetes which is another disease typically associated with obesity. I did my best to ignore this diagnosis, but I was eventually put on medication and required to monitor my blood sugar quite closely. While I took the medication, I disregarded the monitoring of my sugar levels, hoping that the medication was the appropriate fix. Despite the fact that my doctor told me that I needed to change my diet and begin “eating like a rabbit”—that was literally what she said—I ignored her advice, chalking it up to an attempt to blame my fatness for yet another health impediment. She pulled out her BMI chart and reviewed the height to weight ratio in which I should have been residing. She told me that I needed to also begin exercising, and she gave me a referral for a nutritionist. I went to visit the nutritionist on a few occasions. She was a really nice woman who was actually very informative; however, she wasn’t really telling me anything I didn’t already know. At one point I remember thinking to myself, “Oh really, you’re not supposed to eat the entire box of macaroni and cheese by yourself in one sitting?” She had models of appropriate portion sizes sitting on her desk, and she often referenced them during our conversations. They looked more like a dab of peas or mashed potatoes that one accidentally spills when trying to get from the serving bowl to one’s plate. I didn’t find this beneficial, and I typically fictionalized the daily food logs she asked me to complete and bring to our weekly sessions. Just like everything else I was required to do as a result of my size, this just made me feel worse about myself.

I was able to ignore this diagnosis for quite some time, until I realized one day that I could not focus on my students sitting in the back of my classroom, and I certainly couldn’t make out the letters on the bulletin board. They were blurry and then clear and then blurry again.
I eventually went to the eye doctor, and as I had been warned, my blood sugar issue was now affecting my eyesight. I had very high ocular pressure—the early stages of glaucoma. I was told to come back again in 6 months, but I never returned. I conducted my own research and learned that there was really nothing they could do for me. I had to get my blood sugar under control.

I had also begun to experience waves of extreme light-headedness. I thought it was anxiety, as I had certainly suffered from periods of extreme unease in my lifetime; however, there was a pattern associated with this faintness, and I quickly figured it out. Oftentimes, after lunch, I would be standing in front of my classroom, and I would feel very uneasy on my feet. I had been teaching for over 8 years at this point, and this was a completely new phenomena. I remember the first time it happened—I leaned forward and grasped the student’s desk in front of me. He looked at me, asking if I was okay, and I did my best to play it off as though I had just lost my balance. In truth, I had lost my balance, but I had almost lost consciousness as well.

Type 2 diabetes is embarrassing. As mentioned, it is a fat person’s disease, just like uterine cancer. If an individual is fat, the last thing he or she wants to do is admit to a Type 2 diabetes diagnosis. “Oh, Gram developed that, but it was much later in life, like when she was in her 70’s,” my father told me when I finally had to come clean about the diagnosis. He stared at me with quite a look of disappointment—I was mortified. I had told my sister that I had no intention of telling him about it, but we were staying at his apartment, and he overheard me explaining the monitoring process to my mother, as she had just walked in on me pricking my finger. I know he didn’t mean to express his disappointment, but I was no stranger to this sort of love. He didn’t want me to be sick, he didn’t want me to struggle, but what he didn’t realize was that his disapproval of me and my size was painstakingly detrimental and upsetting to me.
Last year I was informed that if I did not do something about my blood sugar, I was going to lose a limb. The doctor literally asked me if I was willing to go without a foot. I was flabbergasted, and I was pissed. “How dare this bitch,” I thought to myself. She sent me to see an endocrinologist who essentially told me the same thing. They enrolled me in a “Managing My Diabetes” course, and pretty much told me that if I did not follow through with the course, they would no longer refill my Metformin and Invokana prescriptions—medications I had taken for over two years in an attempt to control my diabetes. There was something that seemed so wrong to me about this threat, for they were the ones who had made me become reliant on these drugs. Nonetheless, I felt helpless in this situation, so I met with the nurse and attended the course.

Again, it was a barrage of messages like “don’t deny yourself the pizza, but only have one slice,” and “turn off the television, and go for a walk.” I always despised these suggestions because first of all, they were much easier said than done, and second of all, these were not fixes for the problem. I wasn’t fat because I ate a second slice of pizza or watched an extra hour of television; I was fat because I ate the whole pizza and didn’t move a muscle for an entire day, and these were not mere decisions I made because I felt like it—they were conscious reactions to something much deeper in my psyche. They were challenging to articulate, and in many ways, they belonged to me and no one else. I never got much out of these sessions because I always felt that others wouldn’t and couldn’t understand, and I tried very hard not to become angry at others for their inability to get it, to get me. And as my mother always pointed out, life was easier, in some ways, to not allow anyone to get me, to not allow anyone in.

During one of my sessions with the endocrinologist, she mentioned that she wanted to implant a small monitor under the skin of my back that would continuously read my blood sugar and would alert me when my sugar spiked. I will never forget how the nurse told me that when
the handheld device attached to it would vibrate, I would know that I needed to get up, walk around, drink some water, do something to lower my sugar level. She also said that I was going to need to begin taking insulin shots. This scared me because deep down, I knew that I was not going to do this. It was bad enough that I had to take the medication, but give myself a shot? I wasn’t going to answer to this illness, at least in the way that the medical professionals wanted me to. I inquired about natural remedies, and I asked about alternatives. They told me that I needed to manage my diabetes, and that every day, this would be a struggle. The nurse shook her head. The endocrinologist spoke so matter-of-factly: “Every day now, multiple times a day, obese individuals start insulin.” In seconds, she turned me into a statistic—a mere number. I accepted the prescription and scheduled my next appointment, but I canceled it. I went home and decided that I needed to make a change. I could not allow the medical profession that shunned me as a fattie and made me feel so small rule my life. I changed my diet, and I started to exercise.

I returned to the endocrinologist six months later. I had dropped approximately forty pounds, and although I had to endure significant hair loss as the result of my body’s response to my major weight decline, coupled with others’ never-ending shock at my weight loss, it was worth it. “Please check my A1C now,” I asked when I met with the nurse. I didn’t really say much, as I knew the results would speak for themselves. Plus, this was my own journey and no one was privy to it except, of course, those with whom I chose to share it. It had been a grueling process. I decreased my daily caloric intake, and I tried to cut out as many carbohydrates as possible from my diet. Initially, I lost the weight very quickly. What people around me didn’t realize was that I had eaten so poorly previously, that the change in my diet was monumental. I went from eating a box of pasta with sugar-filled processed pasta sauce to a salad full of veggies
and oil and vinegar dressing. The results were rapid and encouraging, fueling a journey which has brought me to where I am today. Of course, as a fattie, it is difficult to have individuals tell me how great I look—that is actually painful and hurtful and aggravating beyond belief—but I know that they do not mean harm—they are products, as we all are, of society’s favoritism of thinness. However, as an individual who will forever process this from a particular place, it is a challenge to not snap back and say, “What was wrong with how I looked before? Did I look that awful?” Of course, I refrain from doing so, but as I mentioned, I am a fattie, always have been, always will be.

My A1C numbers are currently within the normal range, and despite the weight I am, it is important for me to keep them there. I beat the diabetes, and just as my friend Molly often reminds me, I beat the cancer too. I’m sure my weight will continue to fluctuate—as all fatties know, this is an ongoing journey—but having lived on both sides of it, I am confident that I can reveal the obvious—society shuns fatness, and as a result, perpetuates its existence. It is hard, both physically and emotionally, to live as an obese individual in our world. A very close friend of mine who worked as a waitress for the majority of her 20’s and 30’s recently told me that everyone should have to work as a waitress, at least for one week of their lives. She had become extremely frustrated and cynical about the way in which people treat individuals in the service industry. “The best”, she says, “was when I worked at a diner on Sunday mornings. People would come in to eat after a church service, and they would be so rude and disrespectful to me, and all I could think was ‘didn’t you just come from mass…this is how you are going to treat me?’” Having experience after experience like this caused her to consider whether every person who frequents a restaurant should only be permitted to do so if they have previously worked in a restaurant. This is much like the experience of a fat individual. It is a challenge to comprehend
the plight of a fattie—to understand the way in which your attitude and response to their physicality, their person affects them—unless you have walked a mile in their shoes, unless you have taken the time to consider their perspective.

My journey as a fat person has brought me a great deal of pain and shame, but it has also made me the person I am today. I have tried to embrace my size, but it is difficult. I have tried to flip the switch—accept my fatness, wear a bikini, fight society’s scrutiny, be like fat activist, Marilyn Wann—but it is a challenge. Witnessing my fat students embark on this journey is troubling as well. I long to empower them, to encourage them, to impress upon them the importance of accepting themselves for who they are, but we are existing within a system—we are part of an institution—that praises thinness, sameness, and assimilation and shuns fatness, uniqueness, and difference. As William Ayers (2004) suggests, “Even when we think of ourselves as open-minded, we are in some large part prisoners of constrained definitions of society, narrow conceptions of human capability” (p. 140). Society teaches us to disregard any diversion from what is considered normal; and our education system perpetuates society’s ideals. However, it is essential to embrace difference, to embrace one’s size. It is the only way to change the paradigm in which we exist. It is the only way to expose the manner in which society demonizes the fat body.
VIII. Conclusion

Many teachers believe that overweight students are less motivated, less organized, and less successful than their average weight peers; they also assume that overweight students are more prone to suffer from emotional turmoil due to family stress and issues originating in the home. (Neumark-Stzainer, et al, 1999). Teachers tend to have lower expectations for overweight students based on their appearance (O’Brien, Hunter, and Banks, 2007). In fact, research conducted by Derek Peters and Ruan Jones (2010) revealed a repetitive pattern in the way in which future physical education teachers view overweight children. They discovered an overwhelming weight bias against overweight children, with teachers assuming that overweight students lacked motivation and the ability to partake in physical activities. A similar study by James Price, Sharon Desmond, and Cathleen Stelzer (1987) exposed that forty-three percent of schoolteachers and administrators admitted to weight stigmatization when interacting with obese individuals. Also, obese students, females in particular, are less likely to gain acceptance and attend a four-year college or university (Crosnoe, 2007). In fact, students who are deemed obese tend to accumulate less education, missing more days of school than their non-obese peers (Geier, Foster, Womble, McLaughlin, Borрадаile, and Nachmani, 2007); this can be credited to attempts to avoid severe bullying and bias they experience within the education system.

While issues surrounding the obesity crisis must be addressed, ending weight bias is key to this struggle. By the time an obese student enters high school, they have most likely fallen prey to social isolation and verbal assault from both their peers and adults; they most likely suffer from low self-esteem and poor body image. Bullying based on weight stigmatism is a serious issue facing our students. According to a study conducted by Puhl and Latner (2007),
students deem their obese peers to be lazy, stupid, unhappy, and ugly. According to the study, thirty-three percent of overweight females and twenty-five percent of overweight males admit to being bullied by their peers at school, and for obese students with significantly high BMIs, the number increases to sixty percent of students experiencing extreme teasing as a result of their size (Puhl and Latner, 2007). Teachers and fellow peers reveal significant bias towards obese students on a daily basis. It is important to recognize it and become cognizant of the detrimental effects it has on the individual. One reason that bullying continues to occur at such a startling rate is due to the fact that the efforts to eradicate it are typically reactive as opposed to proactive. According to Woolley, Quinn, and Meiners (2015), anti-bullying laws tend to address victims of physical harm, as opposed to actually working to eradicate the societal implications that promote and perpetuate the act of bullying. In their discussion of queer bullying, they suggest that “the curriculum of schooling—including what is present, formal, and sanctioned; what is ‘null’ or simply not included; and what is willfully suppressed—serves social-norming functions” (p. 353); the school system is utilized as a place to set the parameters for what is deemed normal, and when students reside outside of the acceptable parameters, they may fall prey to potential ridicule and bullying.

As educators, it is essential that we create a space that is safe for our obese students. Here I am referencing not only the physical space but the emotional and mental one as well. As Ayers (2001/2010) suggests, “Questioning everything in the environment, from the bottom up, is an important task for teachers” (p. 51). I currently have an obese student who, for the first week of school, entered my classroom at the beginning of every 3rd period and went immediately to my desk to take my chair. Initially, I was somewhat annoyed by this. Rolling it from behind my desk to whichever group he was sitting with on a particular day, not only caused upheaval to the desks
I had arranged, but also generated a scene in front of his peers—a scene which I quickly recognized he would love to avoid. In response, I now roll the chair to his group myself before he even enters. Of course I wish he was not singled out in this way, but it makes him more comfortable to sit in a chair without the restrictions of a metal desk. He told me that sitting for 104 minutes in the confining desks provided by the school is torture for him. And on days when he knows he has four block periods of having to do so, he often comes up with reasons to avoid school. The limitations of the physical space for this student and many like him are detrimental, and as educators, it is our job to right this wrong. No student should feel uncomfortable in a space that is intended to foster growth and exploration. If an individual is having a difficult time breathing due to being forced to squeeze into a desk meant to accommodate the ‘average’ teenager, how is he/she supposed to grapple with the meaning of existence, let alone how to diagram a sentence or determine a solution to a quadratic equation?

Just as health professionals necessitate training on how to deal with the avoidance of sending negative messages to patients, those in the education arena should receive a similar type of training. As Kevin Kumashiro (2004) suggests, “teacher education needs to involve challenging both the institutional practices that perpetuate an oppressive norm and our emotional responses to and discomfort with things that are queer” (p. 45). For instance, as educators, we must be careful not to allow the country’s obsession with the obesity epidemic—the fat student—to further weight-based stigmatism. As the education system focuses on including students’ BMIs on report cards, altering the foods offered in the lunchroom, banning soda pop and vending machines from school cafeterias, and mandating four years of physical education at the high school level, it is crucial that these attempts to decrease the obesity rate do not call additional negative attention to the students the system is attempting to assist. It is imperative
that these efforts to restrict students’ diets and influence the body makeup of individual students do not further perpetuate and highlight the negativity surrounding the fat body.

As educators, we are told that singling out any student based on his or her appearance is wrong; however, it is evident that this idea does not always apply to the fat individual, for it seems as though the fat student endures scrutiny to which other students may not be privy. As Ayers (2001/2010) suggests, labeling or identifying students in a singular fashion is problematic, providing only one vantage point from which to view and observe the individual student—typically, this viewpoint is one fueled by deficiency and difference as opposed to one which recognizes and celebrates strength. For instance, the inability to see beyond a student’s deficiency or size can impede the learning process. To move beyond these barriers, Ayers (2001/2010) promotes a series of questions to address regarding the ways in which to better know one’s students: “Who is this person before me? What are his interests and areas of wonder? How does she express herself and what is her awareness of herself as a learner? What effort and potential does she bring?” (p. 29). These questions assist in seeing beyond the physical make-up of the individual and his or her perceived deficiencies.

Fat students are ostracized and shunned by both their peers and those in authority on a regular basis. We must walk a fine line between acknowledging that obese students have a very different educational experience than their average weight peers, while simultaneously giving them the respect and attention that every student deserves. Just as accommodations are mandatory for students with learning, physical, and emotional issues, so, too, should consideration be given to the obese student, for the school building itself and the individuals functioning within the school may threaten the inclusion and recognition of the obese student. While obesity itself is an epidemic that warrants a fight, the obese individual should not be
shunned or diminished for his or her difference but rather recognized and accommodated. In fact, as Sapon-Shevin (2015) suggests, the teacher who acknowledges this idea does not “assume that diversity will be a ‘problem’ to be eliminated but embrace[s] differences as enriching the classroom environment and providing opportunities to teach about equity, voice, fairness, and social justice” (p. 727). Educators who are willing to recognize and embrace the multi-faceted identities of all students teach towards social justice on a daily basis. Issues arise when students are invisible or unseen for who they are and all they embody; in the case of the fat student, this can occur when a teacher is unable to see beyond the fatness. As Ayers (2004) suggests, “The first and fundamental challenge for teachers is to embrace students as three-dimensional creatures, as distinct human beings with hearts and minds and skills and dreams and capacities of their own, as people much like ourselves” (p. 142). It is greatly important for a teacher to push to observe and understand every student, in his or her entirety, for it is as important a part of the process of teaching as communicating the ABC’s.

Fat students sit in front of us everyday. We are clueless to the sorts of messages they are receiving from what we say or don’t say and what we do or don’t do. They are constantly processing the world around them through their fat experience. The hidden, outside curriculum of fatness resides not only within the individuals who comprise the education system but also within the system itself. It is possible that it resides in the lunchroom’s signage regarding the caloric count in the mashed potatoes, perhaps in the writing of a popular American author’s description of the obese native woman, perhaps in the enforcement of daily physical education classes, or perhaps in the skinny lockers that cannot accommodate an oversized winter coat. The curriculum of fatness exists all around us, and as educators, it is imperative that we are cognizant of the message perpetuated by the bombardment of ideas surrounding weight stigmatism. It is
essential that we challenge the oppressive forces which hinder the fat student. According to Kumashiro (2004), “Challenging oppression requires more than simply becoming aware of oppression, and this is because people are often invested in the status quo, as when people desire repeating what has become normalized in our lives” (p. 46). He explains that igniting change requires an individual to embrace difference, especially when it exists outside of their realm of understanding—it involves embracing the idea that anti-oppressive teaching requires individuals, students and teachers alike, to confront potentially undesirable learning processes that yield potential crises which should be neither averted or ignored. For parents, too, this is a crucial acknowledgement. In an effort to protect one’s child from the pain and anguish that society’s oppressive response to fatness evokes, parents, in particular mothers, too often try to fix their children in order to avoid the weight stigmatism presented by society. However, this often confirms to a child that something is wrong with him or her—something that requires alteration. Instead, as Kumashiro suggests, it may be beneficial for a parent to instead work through the oppressive attitudes put forth by society and embrace the fat identity of his or her child, trouble-shooting and identifying ways in which inclusion into society can and should occur, regardless of one’s size and without adaptation.

As adults existing within the education institution, we must set an example to end weight bias and bullying. It is negligent to refrain from doing so; we must embrace teacher activism to make a change. As Crystal Laura and Aisha El-Amin (2015) suggest, “teacher activists are charged with being politically astute educators…understandings of teacher activism are centered on issues of equity, access, oppression, and power” (p. 432). To the field of educational research, I welcome the sharing of the experiences of fat students, for only through hearing their stories will we understand their plight. While the quantitative studies surrounding
the obesity epidemic, particularly the ways in which it has been processed by the education system, are informative, it is the qualitative review of the lived experience that I believe adds most richly to the field. Encouraging students to share their voice and reveal their existence will assist in furthering our understanding of the hidden curriculum regarding the fat experience. Through a collection of personal narratives, we will hopefully begin to advocate and influence change. As a teacher, as a doctoral student, and as a member of this community, I have had the entrée to do this, and it would be amiss if I did not step back and support others in the same endeavor—if I didn’t encourage others, in particular, the students I encounter on a daily basis, to consider what it means to be fat, what it means to be stigmatized by peers, colleagues, and society as a whole, due to one’s size and physical makeup, then my endeavor here would be for naught.

As the portraits I have created are deeply embedded in my own experience as a member of the fat community, I believe that an area of further inquiry relates to the consideration of fatness through a lens which relates to race and culture. As a white teacher who works in a predominantly African American space, it would be a challenge to write about obesity through the contradiction of being an outsider as far as race is concerned but an insider as a member of the fat community, especially considering the variance of cultural acceptance of the fat body. I am interested in serving as an advocate for fat students, and as suggested, promoting anti-oppressive education as it pertains to the hidden curriculum of appearance in teacher education programs.
References


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