

(DIS)EMBODYING FAT BODIES:
ERASURE AND RESISTANCE IN CYBERSPACE AND THE CLASSROOM

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Abstract: Dominant anti-fat narratives written into and by the medical field, fashion, in virtual spaces, and the physical spaces we inhabit have disembodied fat people in their own stories, not allowing fat bodies space to write themselves. Just because that space has not been allowed, though, does not mean it cannot be made. This dissertation will look at how that space has and can be made. The field of fat studies has been growing, both in general and within rhetoric and composition. This dissertation will add to this conversation by focusing on making space for fat bodies to write themselves. I will begin by viewing classroom furniture through the lens of critical posthumanism. As part of Foucault's "learning machine," this furniture is designed to help separate students into discrete, interchangeable units. I will argue that this has an especially negative effect on fat bodies but also negatively affects the classroom as a whole, creating resistance across connections within the classroom. Next, I will examine avatar creation programs in virtual worlds, where fat bodies are treated as non-default, designing fat bodies can be cumbersome, and in some cases, fat bodies do not exist at all. After that, I will look at how fat bodies have been decomposed by anti-fat PSAs and how women making up what I call Fat Instagram have been using their bodies to recompose their bodies. I will propose a design ethic that forwards identity and inclusion to help with this and similar problems. I will end by discussing how this work informs pedagogy and propose a course that forwards identity, the rhetoric of online movements, and the interplay between bodies and space while including students on the design end of the course.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Fat bodies have long been denied space to write themselves. Instead, they have been written, overwritten, and decomposed. Sabrina Strings argues that fat was associated with the supposed sensualness and excessive appetites of Black bodies, a supposition that existed to support notions of white supremacy. Thus, the maintenance of white supremacy necessary to justify slavery, theft, and genocide was extended to the maintenance of thin white bodies. Fat bodies were written as a site of moral failing, slothful and gluttonous. The echoes of this narrative of moral failing were carried forward into the medicalization of fat when journals settled on an accusation, “obese,” to describe fat bodies, a word that came to English through French from the Latin for “on account of having eaten.” Once medicalized, fat bodies were not only written as diseased but also written in the popular consciousness as the cause for diseases to which they merely correlated. Fat bodies were written as one of the primary causes of ill health and their elimination the cure. As weight loss became a moral imperative, any attempts by fat bodies to write themselves were overwritten by medical experts insisting that long term weight loss was not only possible but also a simple matter of calories in-calories out. When fat bodies were elevated to the level of epidemic, they were decomposed, rendered inhuman in countless news reports as what Charlotte Cooper calls “Headless Fatties.” Fat bodies can, are, and have been writing themselves, however, making and taking the space to do so wherever they can.

In this dissertation, I will discuss three spaces in which fat bodies have had limited space in which to write their own bodies, spaces where I believe space can and has begun to be made for fat bodies to write themselves. First, fat bodies have, for far too long, been denied the physical space in the academy necessary to write themselves through full participation. In addition to other forms of discrimination, the physical spaces themselves create a hostile environment for fat bodies. Through what Foucault described as a “learning machine” (147), fat bodies are disciplined, told they do not fit and that not fitting is their own fault. When fat bodies are denied the space to write themselves in classrooms, it is not only fat bodies that suffer but also the learning community as a whole. The physical pain and shame experienced by fat students creates resistance across the connections within the classroom, and important contributions are lost. Second, avatar creation programs used in virtual worlds have often denied users the space to write fat bodies or provided only limited space. This has meant that, with the exception of those with the programming knowledge to modify (mod) these spaces, fat people were denied the space to write themselves and others were denied the opportunity to play as and perhaps begin to empathize with fat bodies. Fat people are not the only ones who have been denied the space to write themselves, however, and Justine Cassell’s feminist design principles (304) provided inspiration for design principles that forward identity and inclusion that may help make space for fat bodies. Third, from its origins in text-based spaces of the web, where bodies were hidden on the other side of the screen, to the often carefully curated spaces of contemporary social medium platforms, fat bodies have often been, as Jeannine A. Gailey would put it, hyper(in)visible; either or simultaneously invisible or/and hypervisible, assumed not to exist or met with disgust. Within these spaces, fat women have been working to claim space to write themselves, to recompose their bodies that have been decomposed by anti-fat narratives.

The field of fat studies has been growing, both in general and within rhetoric and writing studies. Erec Smith's 2018 book *Fat Tactics: The Rhetoric and Structure of the Fat Acceptance Movement* looks at the history of fat acceptance, examines the movement's rhetoric and tactics, looks at anti-fat rhetoric online, and argues for the importance of narrative in the movement. His focus on grand narratives and use of Jonathan Smucker's "narrative insurgency," what I understand as attempts to disrupt metanarratives by finding some common ground, informs my discussion of classroom ecologies in chapter 2. Where he highlights the need for finding a "we" when crafting narrative insurgencies, I focus on broadening the "us" in my discussion of classroom furniture. His exploration of anti-fat rhetoric from trolls online also highlights the sometimes-dangerous cesspool through which fat bodies must wade to make the space to write themselves online. Todd Harper's 2020 article "Endowed by Their Creator: Digital Games, Avatar Creation, and Fat Bodies" looks at avatar creation programs and argues for fat bodies in those spaces. My analysis of avatar creation programs is informed by his articulation of the ways in which, even when designed to include fat bodies, avatar creation programs tend to frame fat as non-default. He also directly confronts the question of technological limitations, noting that limitations do exist, but the bodies that developers choose to prioritize within those exposes what those developers value. In the 2017 article "Fatshion¹ as Activism," Katie Manthey interviews the fatshion blogger Lolly, which informs my reading of Fat Instagram, highlighting some of the possible motivations behind the posts, and explaining why fat activism often centers around clothes and fashion. In her chapter, "Fat Embodiment: The Case for Ethical Reading," in the 2018 book *Oppression and the Body: Roots, Resistance, and Resolutions* edited by Christine Caldwell and Lucia Bennett Leighton, Manthey vulnerably recounts her own story of becoming

¹ A mashup of the words "fat" and "fashion" referring to fat people's engagement in fashion culture.

fat, judgmentally reading others' bodies, and having her body read judgmentally by strangers to advocate for ethical reading of bodies. Her chapter highlights the ways in which a fat person's internalized fatphobia can be directed outward just as easily as it is directed inward, informing my discussion of the problems that arise when space to write themselves is extended to fat bodies up to a point, but no further.

This dissertation will add to this conversation by focusing on making space for fat bodies to write themselves. Chapter 2 will add to Hetrick and Attig's contribution to the 2009 *Fat Studies Reader*, "Sitting Pretty: Fat Bodies, Classroom Desks, and Academic Excess," by looking at Foucault's learning machine through a critical posthumanist lens. I will examine how desks not only create a hostile environment for fat bodies but also create resistance across connections within the classroom. In chapter 3 I will argue, like Harper, for the inclusion of fat bodies in avatar creation programs and add a design ethic that will make that inclusion more likely. Smith analyzes the rhetoric of anti-fat trolls and Lolly recounts her own experience as a fatshion blogger to Manthey. Chapter 4 will add an analysis of fat bodies using their bodies to write themselves on Fat Instagram, broadening the focus of Manthey's conversation with Lolly and looking at how fatshionistas resist in the face of the trolls Smith discusses. Chapter 5 will offer a pedagogy built around making space for bodies to write themselves and propose a first-year writing course in which this pedagogy could be carried. All of this will bring making space for fat bodies to write themselves into the field of rhetoric and writing studies in ways that connect, expand on, and add to current scholarship about fat rhetoric. It is the making of space, how it has been made and how it can be made, that will add to the field by pushing beyond how fat bodies are written, the problems with the ways they are written, and the need for narratives. This dissertation contributes by examining how space can be made for fat bodies to embody their

own narratives and write themselves. It is my hope that this work can also be used for other bodies that have been denied space to write themselves to examine how space can be made for them to write themselves.

While he does recognize the importance of what he calls local stories, Erec Smith focuses on global stories, grand narratives, and metanarratives in his discussion of narratives. While making space for fat bodies to write themselves necessitates the dismantling of anti-fat narratives, I do want to refocus on Smith's local stories which I read as similar to Aja Martinez's "counterstories" in that they center lived experience, but for Martinez they are not just valuable activist work but also legitimate academic methodology. While my own counterstory comprises a relatively small portion of the work done here, I will, over the course of this dissertation, share some of my lived experience, stories of my interacting with the world, stories that make up the larger story that defines my sense of self. These stories will illustrate points I make and illuminate my connection to this project, but they're also an attempt to share the lived experience of one fat person, just one of the lived experiences often ignored when fat people are talked about. Even more so when people are talked about in general and fat people are left to dangle just outside the boundary of what is meant by "people." Like Martinez, I see this relaying of my lived experiences not just as anecdotes but as an important methodological inclusion within this work.

By ignoring these lived experiences and the conclusions drawn from them, fat people have often been denied the freedom to embody the stories, narratives, and rhetoric about their bodies. I am fat, and I will never not be fat. I have been denied the freedom to embody the stories about my body. When I was diagnosed with gout, a condition I believe may have been caused by a diuretic prescribed to help lower my blood pressure, I was treated to a lecture about my diet

and exercise habits by the physician's assistant at the urgent care clinic. She never inquired about my diet or my exercise habits. I was not allowed space to tell my story about my going to kickboxing cardio classes regularly and how I had recently lost weight after gall bladder removal because I was constantly nauseated and anything with a high fat content, healthy or otherwise, brought on a bout of diarrhea. That space was squeezed out by the narrative already written about my body. I was fat. I had gout. Both must have been my fault. Once my primary care physician and I were able to get my digestive system sans gall bladder under control and I regained the weight I lost, I visited my urologist for a check-up. I was treated to another lecture, this time about how to walk for exercise and that eating broccoli was good. He had simply looked at my chart, seen that I had weighed less the last time I was there, and constructed a narrative from existing parts. He wrote my body as not only slothful and gluttonous but also lacking knowledge of basic life skills, like that walking and vegetables were good things. He also wrote my body as easily changeable, like walking every day and eating broccoli was going to magically do what I had tried and failed to do with more extreme measures so many times before.

These are two small stories of times my body was written without me, two stories among all the times I suspect my doctors neglected to look further into my symptoms because they assumed they were caused by my being fat, eating too much, or being sedentary, or the times I suspect I was not taken seriously because of my weight, or the times that professors questioned the validity of this work because they had already written my body as one that was not deserving of respect and dignity but as one that needed to lose weight. However, simply talking about having been denied the freedom to write my own body would be to write my body as lacking agency. Writing this, I was reminded of the phrase "freedom is not given, it is taken." I tried to

find its source, but it has been uttered with some variations by many thinkers, activists, and revolutionaries. Searching, I found it written on a T-shirt in an online store, encircling the face of the anarcho-communist Peter Kropotkin. Maybe he said it first, but they did not have the shirt in my size. Perhaps they were worried that the face of the author of *The Conquest of Bread* would be read differently on a fat body.

Fat bodies need space. This is true in a practical, physical sense. All bodies need space to exist, and fat bodies need a little more space in their Peter Kropotkin T-shirts. Aside from just a little extra physical space, fat bodies need space to exist as themselves, space they have often been denied. A body given space has the opportunity to write itself, an opportunity to frame the narrative around itself, a chance to control the messaging, even if that messaging isn't always received in the intended way. A body not given space is overwritten, often replaced by a relative facsimile, one that carries many of the markers associated with the original, but one written not by the original, but by other bodies, bodies that do not and cannot fully understand the original and may even be hostile toward it. This is what has happened to fat bodies as they have been denied the space to write themselves. They have been continually overwritten, creating a palimpsest. As fat bodies have been denied the space to write themselves, attitudes and justifications shifted, but underneath the writings and rewritings, the original exists, fighting for space to come to the fore.

I am fat, and I long to be the fat body which, though overwritten countless times, is still visible, fighting through layers of effacement and tangled strings of letters for the opportunity to embody the writing of myself and, in so doing, help make space for other fat bodies, some with stories more poignant and profound than my own. It is out of this desire that this dissertation grew, but it has not been easy. My body has been, for so long, denied space, written by others,

disembodied and decomposed. As my body was squeezed out of sight by words that were not my own, those words wheedled and burrowed their way into my brain like skuttling little bugs exploiting the smallest of crevices, and just like skuttling little bugs, they've been ever so hard to root out. To be fair, not all the little bugs skuttle about being fat, but the dominant narratives about fat bodies map so perfectly onto the bits and pieces of negative self-talk that I've collected over the years. As I try to write myself, "you're not oppressed, you're just fat." As I try to write about making space for fat bodies, "you're too fat and lazy to ever get this done, and even if you did, no one would read it; it'd sit around, accomplishing nothing, just like you." My hope is that this dissertation will shoo other's skuttling little bugs and begin dismantling the dominant narratives about their bodies, and in suggesting ways to make that space and examining ways that space has been made by others, that it will help still more find the space to write themselves.

The language of fat studies has yet to be mainstreamed, so a primer may be necessary. The word "fat" has been reclaimed by those working in fat studies as a neutral descriptor, like tall or short. There is still, however, a lot of discomfort surrounding a word that has been so maligned and has been weaponized against fat people, so it is not uncommon to see some who are starting to do work toward fat acceptance express discomfort with the term. It can be easy to default to scientific terminology since the detached, objective language of science seems safe. The word "obese," however, is not a neutral term. It is an accusation. The word comes from Latin to English via French and can be translated as "to have eaten." It presumes personal responsibility for the maligned adipose tissue. In addition, use of this medical term lends credence to the medicalization of fat, a view of fat in which doctors and "experts" control the narrative surrounding fat bodies, denying fat bodies the space to write themselves. Euphemisms like "big boned" serve the dual function of communicating that fat bodies are negative—even

mentioning them is taboo—and of erasing the existence of fat bodies, as in “she’s not fat, she’s just big boned.” Both deny fat bodies space to write themselves by pushing them out of the conversation.

Terms that do not directly name fat also run the risk of being co-opted and appropriated. Body positivity, for example, was a term that originated in the fat activism in the middle of the twentieth century to name the subversive political position of fat people feeling positive about their own bodies. Cheryl Frazier and Nadia Mehdi write that “the movement created an important space for fat people to communicate and commiserate with one another and advocate for better healthcare, fair treatment in employment, and a more fat-friendly society” (15). The term has been co-opted and appropriated, though, and largely de-radicalized. Fat bodies are no longer the center of the body positivity movement as they have been pushed to the margins or pushed out altogether, just as they have often been in writing about their bodies. Frazier and Mehdi go on to write that “participants of the movement often claim that fat people who participate in the ‘body positivity’ movement are potentially dangerous and irresponsible as their participation is ‘glorifying obesity’” (21). The modern body positivity movement tends to be centered around beauty and self-love for bodies that fall just outside of the limits of previous beauty standards.

While self-love is certainly valuable, the body positivity movement emphasizes extending beauty standards rather than on seeking justice for systemically oppressed bodies. Frazier and Mehdi argue that

“the current ideology behind the ‘body positivity’ movement violently undermines the aims of the *original* movement. The original movement allowed people who were told their bodies were wrong or unacceptable to carve out space to seek equal treatment in

society under the law. In contrast, the contemporary ‘body positivity’ movement promotes bodies which society does not attack in the first place” (18, emphasis theirs)

To be clear, dismantling beauty standards is an important feminist project, but instead of being dismantled, it seems they are simply being extended. This has allowed the movement to be appropriated by companies such as Dove, and Kyla N. Braithwaite and David C DeAndrea’s findings suggest that this commercialization has negatively impacted the movement’s positive aims. Meanwhile, fat people suffering under systemic oppression, being denied access to adequate healthcare, facing discrimination in the workplace, and finding no protection under the law in the United States, with the lone exception of Michigan, have been forced out of a movement that they started.

It is important to note that, while fat bodies are not nearly as malleable as dominant narratives about them suggest, the built environment, i.e., the parts of our surroundings designed and built by humans, are malleable. As built environments shift, the range of bodies that conform to it shift as well. This is especially evident in the rise of plus size fashion. Clothing lines like Torrid have made fashion more accessible to a wider range of sizes, and there has been a shift in fashion as there are more retailers marketing to fat people. Just as with the contemporary body positivity movement, however, there is an upper limit, a size beyond which bodies much shrink in order to be given the space to write themselves. The experience of fat women above a size thirty are still overwritten, both by thin culture and now by smaller fat women. It is notable that the fat spectrum used by some fat activists to describe differences in size are defined mainly by clothing sizes. In her blog post “Fategories—Understanding the Fat Spectrum,” Linda G. lays out points on the spectrum by clothing size:

Small Fat: Below a US women’s 18, or in the 1x – 2x range,

Mid-fat: Between a US women's 20 – 24 or 26, or 2x – 3x,

Large Fat: US women's 26 to 32, or 4x – 5x,

Superfat: Women's size 26 and up; may have an upper limit or not, depending on who is using this label and how they choose to employ it

Infinifat: Women's US size 32 – 34 and above, or may be used as a variant of super fat

Death Fat: ...can refer to fat people of any size who wish to use the term to reclaim their "morbid" fatness

In this blog post on her website, fluffykittenparty.com, Linda G. provides further definition, goes into the history of some of these terms, and talks about how and why these terms are used by fat activists. With the exception of Death Fat, all of the terms center on lack of access to clothing.

Linda G. argues that "Access to clothing that fits is an entry point to understand the larger picture of lack of accessibility that fat people face as they move up the size spectrum. The larger someone is, the more barriers they face in their daily lives when trying to participate in mundane life activities and navigate the world." She also recognizes, though that the use of women's clothing sizes excludes men and some non-binary people.

While body positivity and plus size fashion may have decreased the lack of access to clothing for people lower on the spectrum, people higher on the spectrum still face the same lack of access. The push for more inclusive clothing was effectively de-radicalized as it was folded into the commercial interests of corporations, corporations that have begrudgingly begun mass producing clothing for larger bodies, using their more inclusive practices to boost their brands' images. Mass production for the higher end of the spectrum where fewer people reside is not as profitable, though, so while we who can fit into a size 30 or lower gush over Aidy Bryant's Old Navy commercial, the political will to advocate for clothing access for everyone shrinks. Just

like clothing, more inclusive practices and design in other industries still tend to have an upper limit that falls short of the upper limit of human bodies. Naming fat by using terms like fatshion instead of plus-size fashion or fat positivity instead of body positivity may not be a panacea against co-option, but it may make it more difficult to forget the radical nature of these movements. At the very least, it will scare off would-be appropriators who want to extend beauty standards while clinging to their internalized fatphobia.

Now that I have outlined the importance of using the word fat instead of using medical terminology, euphemisms, or avoiding the term altogether, and in so doing explained its use in this dissertation for those who are being introduced to the field of fat studies, I want to turn my focus to some of the important discussions in the literature surrounding fat studies that have contributed to this dissertation. The social model of disability helped to inform my understanding of how the built environment affects fat bodies, and on a personal level, helped me begin to think of those environments not fitting my body rather than my body not fitting those environments. This helped me begin to accept my body. Because of this, I want to outline some of the literature exploring the intersection of fat and disability that has informed my work. So many women of color have made profound and consistent contributions to the fat acceptance movement, without which I might still be dwelling in the anti-fat narratives that once engulfed me. Those contributions and the work of other scholars of color permeate this dissertation, informing my work to some degree at almost every level. Because of this, I want to outline some of the literature exploring the intersection of fat and race that has informed my work. Fat women have done the bulk of the work in the fat acceptance movement and the bulk of the intellectual labor in fat studies. Despite being assigned male at birth, I benefit greatly from their work. They have informed my understanding of fat studies from the very beginning, normalized doing scholarship

in this field, and lessened the discrimination I face for my fat body daily. Because of this, I want to outline some of the literature exploring the intersection of fat and gender that has informed my work.

Fat and Disability

Commonalities exist between disability studies and fat studies. Both are engaged in a battle to claim space, not only extra or modified physical space that may be needed, but also the space to write themselves. Both groups are denied space not by their impairments, or not only by their impairments, but by a culture and physical spaces that are built to exclude them. Both have had their bodies heavily overwritten by medical communities that form or provide justification for larger societal attitudes toward their bodies, and both have struggled for representation, for space to write themselves or, at the very least, to be written by those who have had similar experiences. Despite these commonalities, there has been a reluctance to pool resources and work toward shared goals. In 1997, Charlotte Cooper asked a question in the title of her article for *Disability and Society*: “Can a Fat Woman Call Herself Disabled?” She notes her reluctance to use “disabled” to describe herself: “There is an uneasy sense that by appropriating the label ‘disabled’ fat people are invading and colonising the achievements of disabled people, forcing an all too familiar and uncaring disempowerment” (33). I want to believe that my own reluctance to claim disability comes from a similar place and not simply from internalized ableism that I have yet to root out. In “Disability Studies Gets Fat,” Anna Mollow speaks to a reluctance of disability scholars to embrace fat studies, locating that resistance not in a fear of being invaded but in the same fatphobic attitudes found everywhere else, saying “Fatness, in other words, scares us more than disability” (199). This echoes Richardson et al’s 1961 study, “Cultural Uniformity in Reaction to Physical Disabilities,” which found that, when shown images of children with

varying disabilities, children consistently ranked the images of fat children as the ones with whom the least wanted to play.

Cooper argues, however, that this hierarchization runs both ways, saying that, “In size acceptance communities I sense a palpable fear of disability, and a determination to separate and constrain disabled people as ‘other’” (34). By positioning people with disabilities as objects of charity, sometimes volunteering “to do volunteer work for the Cerebral Palsy Association” (Hernandez as quoted by Cooper 34), fat people can gain positive publicity and experience a sense of superiority that is difficult to find anywhere else. In their qualitative study, “Fatness as a disability: questions of personal and group identity,” asking seven fat people about disability, Nathan Kai-Cheong Chan and Allison C. Gillick found that these fat people “saw fatness as insignificant in the hierarchy of disabilities” and “did not want the further stigmatization that accompanies the label ‘disability’” (241). So while Charlotte Cooper’s reluctance to claim disability is tied to fears that she might be colonizing, others view fatness as benign when compared to (other) disabilities and are afraid that the stigma they’ve internalized about people with disabilities will be mapped onto them.

This maps well onto Stacy Bias’s “12 Good Fatty Archetypes.” as several of the categories use health and ability as ways to demonstrate not being one of the bad fatties characterized by news outlets, reality television, and anti-obesity PSAs. Bias sees this good fatty, bad fatty dichotomy as arising from capitalism’s insistence on productivity. She argues that “there is a mandate for self-sacrifice and for caring for our bodies in a way that maintains their productive and reproductive potential. So basically, we are meant to be strong, able-bodied, heterosexual, and sexually desirable.” Bias developed her archetypes as a way to explore the different ways in which people attempt to claim the privilege afforded to productive bodies.

These good fatty archetypes function similarly to respectability politics, following the logic that individual fat people can gain acceptance in dominant groups by being good enough to earn that acceptance. For example, the Fat Unicorn is the mythical fatty who is fat despite being in perfect health and not engaging in any of the behaviors associated with fat bodies. As Bias puts it “if they exist, then logically fatness can’t be universally declared a ‘bad thing’.” People may claim this identity to varying degrees by running 5Ks, posting photos of their super healthy food, or sharing how incredibly well their last medical exam went. People who share publicly are also held up as evidence that fat, in general, should not be maligned. The (f)Athlete, meanwhile is “assumed to be highly disciplined,” and is evidence that fat doesn’t equal lazy. These good fatties use their identities or are used by others as a counterargument against the personal responsibility narrative, asserting that it should not be assumed that anyone is fat due to unhealthy eating or a sedentary lifestyle. Furthermore, those espousing these archetypes use it as a shield against criticism, and on some level, many fat people see themselves as embodying one or more of these archetypes to some degree. Even if they are not really into fitness or exceptionally athletic, they are still physically capable and, therefore, should be immune to some of the criticism directed at them.

Lucy Aphramor sees a correlation between including fatness in disability and the way that psychological distress has been incorporated. In “Disability and the anti-obesity offensive,” she notes that “psychiatry has historically employed dramatic, often dangerous interventions of dubious scientific merit, from insulin coma to lobotomy, a history of weight loss reveals a plethora of harmful quasi-scientific interventions” (900). She also argues that both may “lay claim to a plural and situationally (in)determinate identity that can include disability, but that doing so carries the risk of invisibility” (898). Being encompassed within disability studies has

the potential to elide the specific challenges faced by both people who are psychology impaired and fat people, and people in both groups may claim status both within and outside disability, depending on the situation, specific types of discrimination they may face, and the ready availability of accommodations.

Informed by these scholars' contributions, I include disability in my work and acknowledge where relevant that the same apparatuses and design choices tend to affect some disabled people in much the same way that they affect fat people. I also want to recognize that the challenges faced by fat people and people with disabilities can be very different just as challenges faced by people at different points along the fat spectrum and people with different disabilities can be very different. People who use wheelchairs, for example, will also have difficulty navigating classroom spaces. Those spaces may communicate to them that they do not belong, but they will not generally communicate to them that not fitting is their fault and that they must change if they want to fit. Likewise, people with disabilities who do not use wheelchairs or other technologies for mobility may not have any difficulty navigating classrooms just as many small fats and even some mid-fats may not. I use terms like "non-default bodies" where I think fat and disability intersect and terms like "fat bodies" where I am less aware of the intersection or where I want to highlight challenges or resistance specific to fat bodies.

Fat and Race

Within the fat acceptance movement, there has been a tendency to center the voices of white women, which is especially disconcerting given the racialized nature of fat stigma. In her 2019 book *Fearing the Black Body: The Racial Origins of Fat Phobia*, sociologist Sabrina Strings notes that fatphobia in the United States has its roots in the slave trade, in stereotypes about the sensualism and excessive appetites of Black women, and makes the case that this fear

of the fat Black body was used to police the bodies of white women. As she puts it, “The discourse of fatness as “coarse,” “immoral,” and “Black” worked to denigrate Black women, and it concomitantly became the impetus for the promulgation of slender figures as the proper form of embodiment for elite white Christian women” (6-7). Both anti-fat narratives and the cult of thinness described by Sharlene Hesse-Biber, then, can trace their roots to the racism used to justify the horrific institution of slavery. These anti-fat narratives are then repurposed to justify violence against Black bodies. Anna Mollow argues that fatphobia is a continuation of a double bind—that Black people simultaneously need the protection of white slave owners because they are prone to disability and that they are well suited to labor and unhurt by beatings from slave owners because of their physical strength. Mollow notes that this same double bind is at work today as “fatphobia and ableism function as weapons of antiblack violence” (105). In “Unvictimizable: Toward a Fat Black Disability Studies,” she analyzes the rhetoric justifying Eric Garner’s murder by New York City Police. Eric Garner’s fat is used both to justify the use of an illegal chokehold by Daniel Pantaleo, since his size made him more of a threat, while simultaneously deflecting the guilt of Pantaleo and the officers who stood by and watched him die, arguing that he would not have died if he had not been so fat. Just as the racism directed toward Black bodies during slavery was then used to write anti-fat narratives, anti-fat narratives are now used to justify violence against Black bodies.

The bodies of fat Black women have also been used to assuage white guilt in the form of the Mammy archetype as outlined by Courtney Patterson-Faye in her article “*I Like the Way You Move*’: *Theorizing Fat, Black and Sexy*.” Patterson-Faye says of mammy, “She is scripted to be the ultimate caretaker; she not only knows how to rear children and clean households, but she also relinquishes the definitions of femininity and sexuality to be defined by white men (and

acted out by white women)” (927). The desexualized fat Black mammy was used to assuage white guilt both by masking rampant sexual abuse perpetrated against enslaved people and also by presenting the visage of a Black woman happily serving the white family that enslaved her. Just as the bodies of fat Black women have been used to justify slavery by drawing attention away from the horrors of that institution, they have also been used to justify continued economic and political disenfranchisement. In *Black feminist thought: Knowledge, consciousness, and the politics of empowerment* Patricia Hill Collins discusses the use of another archetype, the welfare queen, a fat Black woman used to justify cuts to social programs. The sensualism and excessive appetites written over fat bodies due to their association with Black bodies has been written over the bodies of Black women due to their association with fat bodies, writing the fictional welfare queen as greedy and overly sexual, birthing as many children as possible to collect as much welfare as possible. Collins also argues that disproportionate rates of “obesity” have fueled what she calls the “New Racism,” in her book *Black Sexual Politics: African Americans, Gender, and the New Racism* focusing on supposed innate moral shortcomings, many of which map perfectly onto stereotypes about fat people. Fat was once seen as a moral shortcoming because of its association with Black bodies, which the racism used to justify slavery wrote as morally inept. Now fat is used to justify the belief that Black bodies are morally inept because of their association with fat, which anti-fat narratives have written as a moral shortcoming.

It is also worth noting that, while fat Black women’s bodies have been weaponized to police white women, appease white guilt, and perpetuate systemic racism, they have also historically been a site of resistance to western standards of beauty. In her book *The Embodiment of Disobedience: Fat Black Women's Unruly Political Bodies*, Andrea Elizabeth Shaw argues:

The West has required the ideological erasure of both blackness and fatness as a means of gaining aesthetic acceptability, and these cultural and literary representations of the fat black woman suggest that her body primarily functions as a site of resistance to both gendered and racialized oppression because that body has been the historic locus of assaults against black womanhood. (2)

Shaw notes that cultures of the diaspora have historically resisted the requirement of slenderness placed on women's bodies and examines the representation and performance of fat Black women as they continue to resist. It was this historic resistance and her participation in the continuation of that resistance that made Lizzo the Times' Entertainer of the Year for 2019. Another place where fat Black women and fat women of color more generally resist the requirement of slenderness is cyberspace, particularly social media platforms like Tumblr and Instagram, as I will explore in chapter 4. In her article, "Fat People of Color: Emergent Intersectional Discourse Online," Apryl Williams analyzes the Tumblr page Fat Women of Color as a fat accepting space of color that allows users to share images and comments without fear of judgment and can have conversations specific to the intersection of fat and race that might not have room to flourish in spaces dominated by white women. It was earlier spaces like Fat Women of Color that gave them space to write themselves, and having that space, they have been able to push to make fat activism more intersectional and have made space to write themselves in spaces like Fat Instagram.

I should also note that I found other scholars' writing on race helpful for theorizing making space for fat bodies even when fat bodies were not the focus of their work. Lisa Nakamura's discussion of passing in *Cybertypes: Race, Ethnicity, and Identity on the Internet*

was helpful to discussing the effects of passing as straight sized² in spaces where bodies can be hidden. Sue Hum's "'Between the eyes': The racialized gaze as design' was helpful for discussing the idea of perceptual habits, our tendency to see in received ways that can make even well-intentioned attempts at advocacy go awry. Designers, then, might get trapped in modes of perceiving, unable to see why someone would want to navigate a virtual world through a fat avatar. Kristin Arola's "It's my revolution: Learning to see the mixedblood" draws on her embodied experience as someone of Finnish and Ojibwa heritage to argue that online identities are a "complex ecology of meaning" (214), work that helped me better understand both our interactions on social media and through avatars in virtual worlds as so much more than mere performance. Asao B. Inoue's work on anti-racist writing assessment ecologies pushed me to look not just at lessons or assignments but also assessment as a necessary component of any pedagogy designed to begin dismantling the learning machine. I am deeply indebted to these and other scholars of color whose activism and scholarship surrounding race have informed the concepts argued for in this dissertation.

Fat and Gender

Fat women have done the bulk of the work resisting anti-fat narratives and advocating for fat acceptance. They have also borne the brunt of fatphobic discrimination and oppression. In his 2007 study, Robert Crosnoe found that fat adolescent girls are less likely to attend college than straight sized girls, especially if their secondary education is in a school with few fat girls, but found no such discrepancy for adolescent boys, regardless of context. Christian Crandall found in a 1995 study that parents were less likely to help their fat daughters pay for college as compared to straight sized daughters and sons of all sizes. In their 2004 longitudinal study,

² A term used for people who are not fat, people whose access to clothing is not at all limited, or if it is, it is not limited on account of their being fat.

Charles L. Baum II and William F. Ford found that, while all fat people earn less than their straight sized counterparts, the discrepancy between fat and straight sized women is significantly greater. Jennifer Bennett Shinall found in her 2014 article that a potential reason for this greater discrepancy is that fat women are much less likely than straight sized women to work in public facing jobs, which tend to pay more than physical labor, but no such discrepancy exists for fat men. From secondary education through higher education and on to the workforce, fat women routinely have less opportunity and face greater discrimination than fat men. S. Bear Bergman, a trans man who described his gender as butch in the chapter “Part-time Fatso” for 2009’s *The Fat Studies Reader*, notes some distinct differences in his own lived experience. He observed that when others interpreted his gender as male, he wasn’t seen as fat, or at least not too fat. He could find clothes in his size and eat ice cream in public without getting shouted at. When his gender was interpreted as female, though, he was seen as fat. It was very difficult to find women’s clothing in his size that didn’t leave him looking shapeless and he would face harassment on the street when interpreted as female.

In this dissertation, I draw heavily from women and non-binary scholars to help shape my thinking about making space for fat bodies. My discussion of Fat Instagram wouldn’t be possible without the women of Fat Instagram, nor would it be possible without the discussions of fatshion from Catherine Connell, Lauren Guerrieri and H el ene Cherrier, Anu Harju and Annamari Huovinen, Katie Manthey, and Apryl Williams. All of these women analyzed and theorized spaces occupied by fat women across social media platforms. They gave me so much of the framework and language I use for reading spaces like Fat Instagram. Kathleen LeBesco was hugely influential in not only this dissertation but also in my understanding of fat studies as a discipline and my relationship to my own body. Her work looking at fat text-based spaces where

fat could easily hide was especially helpful in my early conceptualizations of the question of fat avatars. Justine Cassell's principles for feminist software design were the inspiration for my design ethic that forwards identity and inclusion.

In my discussion of classroom furniture, Sandra Bartky's discussion of internalized shame functioning by anticipating and repeating negative commentary without the need of an outside source was helpful for my discussion of shame in the classroom. The critical posthuman theory that Rosi Braidotti argues for in "A theoretical framework for the critical posthumanities" and "Posthuman Critical Theory" helped me articulate the need to maintain focus on the unjust hierarchies that work in posthumanism can sometimes hide. Katherine Hayles discussion of the history of posthumanism in *How We Became Posthuman* helped to broaden my understanding of the theory and articulate the link between the liberal humanist subject and default bodies. Bridie McGreavy's article with Nathan Stormer, "Thinking Ecologically about Rhetoric's Ontology: Capacity, Vulnerability, and Resilience," informed my view of agency, seeing it rather as capacity within a classroom ecology. Braidottie, Hayles, and McGreavy were all critical to establishing the framework for my critical posthuman approach to classroom furniture.

Chapter Previews

In chapter 2, I will focus on classrooms, where the need for space for fat bodies to write themselves is often physical. I will examine how classroom desks operate within Foucault's concept of the learning machine, treating students as discrete, interchangeable units that move through the machine rather than as unique and diverse individuals. These components of the machine enforce an acceptable range of variation by punishing bodies that fall outside that range with both physical pain and the shame of being on display. Classroom desks send a clear message to fat students that they don't belong, and if they want to belong, they are responsible

for adjusting the size of their bodies. I will argue that, despite these separate and separating apparatuses, the classroom is an always already profoundly interconnected space, but the attempt to force students into a mold of discrete interchangeable units creates resistance across connections that adversely affect not only those students who fall outside of the acceptable range but also the classroom as a whole. I will then look at potential paths forward for students and educators wanting to push back against the learning machine and its insistence on discrete interchangeable units.

In chapter 3, I will analyze the rhetoric of avatar creation programs for virtual worlds. Just as thin bodies were the assumed default in text based virtual worlds, the avatar creation programs in nearly all virtual worlds default to thin bodies. While some of these programs do allow for the creation of fat avatars, others do not. Some virtual worlds, like Animal Crossing, contain NPCs³ who are coded fat but deny users the ability to make their avatars fat. Others use the same program for both avatar and NPC design, creating entire worlds where fat people do not exist. These avatar creation programs deny fat users the ability to create avatars that resemble their irl⁴ selves, forcing them to play through avatars with bodies that are assumed to be preferable to their own. They also deny straight sized people the opportunity to play as fat characters, an act which could be problematic but could also help foster empathy for fat people irl. These programs also send the message to all users that fat is an undesirable trait that need not be included in worlds of human design.

As a possible path forward, both for avatar creation programs and other spaces that presume straight sized bodies as the default, I will argue for a design ethic that forwards identity

³ NPC is an abbreviation for non-player character, i.e., the characters inhabiting a virtual world that are not controlled by a player.

⁴ A common abbreviation of “in real life” that I’ve decided to leave lowercase to reflect its origins in chat rooms and text messages, where capitalization is rare, and to signify the tongue-in-cheek way I’m using it.

and inclusion, highlighting the recursivity of those two concepts. Following the example of Justine Cassell's principles of feminist software design, I will propose four principles of this design ethic: claiming the right to look beyond our perceptual habits, developing a broader empathy, designing to enable robust identity exploration and identity play, and promoting intentional inclusivity on the design end. Through these principles, designers will be encouraged to think about the identities of a more diverse set of users and how those identities will respond to design choices in world. As a result, I believe a more diverse set of users will be inspired to design themselves, which will create a set of designers who are more apt to think about the identities of a more diverse set of users.

In chapter 4, I will look at the work being done on the social media platform Instagram to recompose bodies that have been decomposed by anti-fat narratives. The medicalization of fat bodies and the reporting on and subsequent moral panic over the "obesity epidemic" culminating in a slate of anti-obesity PSAs have written fat bodies as gluttonous, lazy, and lacking in self-control. These PSAs, in chorus with messages from the weight loss industry, write fat bodies as malleable, personally responsible for being fat, and personally responsible for their own transformation to thinness. Fat content creators on social media platforms like Instagram, however, have been using their bodies to recompose their bodies. While some content creators rely on discursive text to counter anti-fat narratives, others opt for a more non-discursive approach centered around visual images of their own bodies. Through fatshion, these content creators often operate within the language of fashion while defiantly opposing fashion's mandate for thinness by flaunting their fat. Focusing on clothing, a topic that has been fraught with anxiety for fat people, they have also been able to create a sort of fat citizenship, allowing some

people who may have been reluctant before to expand their awareness of systemic anti-fatness and opportunities for resistance.

Using proximity to fashion to amplify the message also raises some issues. Doing so can evoke some “good fatty” archetypes and sometimes elide class issues that might make fatshion inaccessible to some. Gaining this proximity to fashion also requires the use of social media platforms whose algorithms and business practices can be deeply problematic. Using social media in this way, however, gives fat activists unprecedented control over their message, and using fashion as a vehicle for that message gives them access to audiences that may be difficult to reach with more discursive methods. I argue that this is at least in part responsible for creating a culture receptive to someone like Lizzo, a rapper, singer, and flautist who rose to fame in 2019, using her music and body to spread a message of radical self-love. In short, the work of fat content creators, especially women, trans people, non-binary people, and people of color, on social media platforms, including Instagram, has helped to mainstream the concept of fat acceptance.

In chapter 5, I will draw on my experience as an instructor to examine ways composition classrooms can help create space for fat bodies to write themselves. Composition as a field has long recognized the validity of the writing students have done outside the classroom, often using writing on social media platforms as an example. I recognize, however, that in my own teaching, I have too often failed to help students unpack the rhetorical efficacy and importance of that writing. I will argue that using case studies like Fat Instagram can help students see that social media posts that they may have come to think of as frivolous or vapid, like fa(t)shion posts, can, in aggregate, serve a very important rhetorical purpose.

I will also argue for the need to forward identity and inclusion in class design, which can be challenging given the dangers if students feel compelled to share aspects of their identity that may not be safe to share in the classroom. I believe, though, that if care is taken, forwarding identity can not only help students begin to think about their own identities as writers and scholars but also give students who feel safe space to write themselves, discovering things about themselves and normalizing aspects of their identity for the other students in the room. To forward inclusion, I will argue for allowing students a greater role in course design and the assessment of their progress. This will offer students the opportunity to introduce perspectives that instructors, in their own positionality, may not have been able to properly see.

Lastly, I will argue that instructors do what they can to contribute to the dismantling of the learning machine. This could include refusing to use spaces that are designed with efficiency rather than pedagogy in mind. This can also include declining to rank students, allowing them to assess their progress toward their goals and communicating that it is ultimately their goals they should be working toward, not ours. Rather than normalizing the idea that some people are more worthy than others or normalizing the idea that the focus of their education should be on how their ranking positions them in service to capital, this would center student growth and reacclimate them to their desire to learn and contribute. Of course, dismantling the learning machine that is so deeply embedded in and intertwined with our institutions will not be an easy task, and it will ultimately take much more than some composition instructors turning to ungrading, but it could be a starting point.

CHAPTER II

FAT DESKS

Ashley Hetrick and Derek Attig open their contribution to the Fat Studies Reader with the sentence, “Desks hurt us” (197). My own pain and discomfort in classroom desks and my belief that others must be having similar experiences was the exigency for my own journey into fat studies. I first began thinking critically about classroom furniture during my first semester as a graduate student. I took three courses that semester. My Literary Criticism and Theory course met in a conference room in the English building. There was a long rectangular table with enough room between the table and the walls for me to walk behind classmates seated in cushioned, high-backed chairs on wheels. I don’t remember ever being uncomfortable in that room. My Creative Writing-Fiction instructor had arranged for our class to meet in a historic home off campus. We would workshop stories in a formal dining room around an antique table with lots of leaves that we would insert and remove each week and a cover that would protect the wood from scratching pens. I was a little apprehensive about sitting in the old wooden chairs that surrounded the table, but after a few weeks without incident, the chairs had gained my trust.

My History and Development of the English Language course met in a more traditional classroom, with rows of chairs attached to fixed writing surfaces. Rather than a small writing surface set to one side, these desks had a large writing surface attached by bars that ran along the floor so that students could enter from either side. The space between the edge of the writing

surface and the back of the chair was too small for my body, and the width of the writing surface didn't allow me to sit to one side or the other. I did my best to learn the International Phonetic Alphabet and Old English, Grimm's Law and the Great Vowel Shift, with the constant pressure of a rigid writing surface pressing into my abdomen. It was the contrast between these physical spaces and my experience in them that provided the impetus for my seeking out Fat Studies as a field, where I found the work of Hetrick and Attig, who were troubled by classroom furniture in much the same way that I was.

The "us" in "Desks hurt us" whereby Hetrick and Attig refer to themselves also evokes a shared experience of fat bodies in academic settings that resonated with me. It is my goal in this chapter to expand that "us" without losing sight of the original "us" by examining classroom furniture through a lens of critical posthumanism forwarded by scholars like Rosi Braidotti. Hetrick and Attig astutely focus on the hidden curriculum present in these classroom desks, inculcating students with "middle-class⁵ values of restraint and discipline" (22)⁶, including which body types are acceptable and which are unacceptable. Adding to the still nascent conversation on the role of our institutions' physical spaces in the education of students who are fat, this chapter will trace the function of these desks as separating apparatuses in a learning machine that divides students into discrete units to either be rejected or advanced as marketable commodities. I will argue that this separating function is never quite successful because students are always already profoundly embodied and enmeshed within these learning environments, as are their

⁵ Class is not central to Hetrick and Attig's argument, but since they do highlight the link between socio-economic class and fat phobia, it is worth mentioning that fat phobia is also strongly linked to race, as Sabrina Stings argues in her 2019 book, *Fearing the Black Body: The Racial Origins of Fat Phobia*.

⁶ I would argue here, and I think Hetrick and Attig would agree, that to say that restraint and discipline are valued by the middle-class is not to say that the middle-class is more restrained or disciplined or even place a higher value on restraint and discipline. Rather, I would argue that the physical markers of the middle-class, i.e., thinness, are framed as products of restraint and discipline rather than as products of privilege and markers of poverty, i.e., fat, are framed as failures of restraint and discipline rather than products of systemic oppression.

instructors. While these apparatuses are enmeshed in these environments, however, they generate resistance across certain connections within these environments. It is my assertion that, while students who are fat and other students with non-default bodies are affected most acutely by this resistance across connections, the entire classroom ecology is adversely affected by this resistance, but the hyper(in)visibility of fat bodies often prevents these effects from being observed.⁷

In moving from how fat bodies are affected to how the entire classroom is affected, I acknowledge that rhetorical studies' broader turn toward the embodiment and materialism of posthumanism has not been unproblematic. Moving from specific bodies to bodies in a more abstract sense and the environments in which they exist tends to elide the unjust hierarchies in which those bodies exist. Cary Wolfe envisions posthumanism as allowing us "greater specificity" (xxv) in discussing humans, bodies, and lived experience because it allows us to consider these in the context of the complex environments they inhabit. That specificity is often lost, however, in the abstraction necessitated by theoretical work, i.e., there are no fat bodies, queer bodies, bodies with disabilities, bodies affected by race or class, just bodies. Thomas Rickert and Alexander Reid, for example, both have a great deal to say about bodies and their relationship to and interactions with their environments and the technologies that connect them. While I feel their work can be used to illumine the contexts that allow Wolfe's "greater specificity," any specificity about bodies and the power dynamics between bodies is largely absent from these works. Because of this, the bodies discussed in these texts are abstracted from

⁷ Jeannine A. Gailey coined the term "hyper(in)visibility" to describe the paradox of fat bodies being simultaneously hypervisible and hyperinvisible. While the inability of desks to adequately accommodate fat bodies makes those bodies hypervisible in classroom spaces, fat stigma renders the needs and feelings of people who are fat hyperinvisible. As the negative effects that desks have on students who are fat are rendered hyperinvisible by fat stigma, the larger effects on the classroom ecology are also rendered invisible.

any lived experience and, therefore, default to bodies that look like Rickert and Reid: white men. It is possible that the reputation of posthumanist rhetorics being a field saturated with white men arose not only from the number of white men working in this field as compared to other fields but also from the bodies discussed defaulting to white men. These issues are not new to the humanities, though. N. Katherine Hayles reminds us that “the liberal humanist subject . . . has historically been constructed as a white European male” (4). It should come as no surprise then that the move to posthumanism retains the white European male as it’s default. What can be frustrating when reading work on embodiment is the feeling that bodies are *finally* being talk about, but real bodies are often abstracted out along with the inequities and injustices that exist between them. In “Posthuman Critical Theory,” Braidotti argues that “The crucial ethical imperative is to refuse to conceal the power differentials that divide us” (22), and this is what makes work like Hetrick and Attig’s so important and provides the impetus for my expanding on that work. Centering the tangible and physical material realities of specific bodies in specific spaces can, I believe, highlight those power differentials and re-concretize the bodies abstracted by scholarship on embodiment.

I will begin by exploring how desks are an example of the mechanization of education, a mechanization intended to increase efficiency, but such efficiency comes with human, non-human, and environmental costs. I will outline how the design of these desks—non-adjustable, rigid structures—stems from a philosophy of education that views students as individual, interchangeable parts within what Foucault calls a “learning machine” (147). In this machine, desks function to give order to and increase the efficiency of what Nedra Reynolds notes is often “crowded, inadequate building space” (28). Within this model, students are discrete units that move through the machine, are inspected for comprehension and retention, and either approved

or rejected. In the process, fat bodies are not only hurt in the form of physical pain inflicted on them but also insofar as that physical pain affects their functioning within the learning machine that is the gateway to the increasingly limited opportunities for upward mobility. These desks represent and enact the physical and violence of a machine in need of dismantling.

I will then draw from posthuman theories of rhetoric to show that the learning machine has been trying to force the always already profoundly interconnected into a mold of discrete interchangeable units within a separate and separating apparatus. This forcing creates resistance across, and in the worst cases severs, many of the connections that are essential to education. While this resistance adversely affects existing classroom ecologies, however, it also affords us the opportunity to rethink our relationship to the physical spaces we inhabit and to those who share those spaces with us. Drawing from fat studies and fat pedagogy scholars, I will begin tracing potential paths forward. First, just as will be discussed in later chapters in relation to Fat Instagram and avatars, the mere presence of fat bodies where they are assumed not to belong can be a powerful political act. The asserted presence of fat bodies refusing to conform to the strictures of a learning machine that refuses to accommodate them has the potential to reverberate through the web of connections enmeshing classrooms, institutions, and the learning machine as a whole. In chapter 3, I will discuss how, distressingly, this assertion of presence is sometimes made impossible within digital worlds due to the design of avatar creation programs. In chapter 4, I will discuss something like this happening through the work of fat women on platforms like Instagram, helping to produce the conditions in which Lizzo could become entertainer of the year. Second, the web of interconnections enmeshing our classrooms and universities can be harnessed to help forge affective connections between and among both students and non-students who are fat and those who are not, similar to the ways in which the

web of interconnections on social media platforms has been harnessed by Fat Instagram. I also believe that building on the work of Hetrick and Attig by helping students to critically examine the physical apparatuses of the spaces they inhabit can profoundly affect our ability to change these spaces to better accommodate non-default bodies.

Fordist Roots⁸

Rows of individual chairs with attached writing surfaces have been so ubiquitous for so long in both secondary and post-secondary education that they are nearly synonymous with the concept of classroom. This, combined with the tendency to center human subjects as rhetorical actors, has partially obscured the role that furniture plays in our writing classrooms. What Thomas Rickert says of tools and equipment, situated in the Heideggerian concept of *forehaving*, applies here: “when they are part of an ensemble supporting our everyday thought and activity, there is little reason for them to show up for sustained theoretical attention” (18). This is not to say that no attention has been paid to classroom furniture. Jerry Farber, whose work was later picked up by James Berlin and Geoffrey Sirc, outlines how the arrangement of desks in the classroom interpellates students into the role of passive receivers of knowledge (24), the same passive receivers later echoed in Paulo Freire’s banking concept. This is certainly one of the roles that desks play, and composition instructors have expended a good deal of mental energy on how best to subvert the student-teacher relationship that the furniture in their classrooms suggests, especially when that furniture is bolted to the floor. This critical attention, though, has focused mostly on the arrangement of furniture with the physical form of individual pieces of

⁸ I borrow this term from Aldous Huxley’s dystopian novel *Brave New World*. I use it to draw attention to the ways in which educational institutions are structured according to the principles of Henry Ford’s assembly line, and I intend it to retain its dystopian connotations. For a more thorough critique of Fordist ideology, see Antonio Gramsci’s essay “American and Fordism” in his *Prison Notebooks*.

furniture only considered insofar as it allows or prevents rearrangement. Hetrick and Attig's work is a notable exception.

Though Foucault doesn't spend much time talking about desks specifically, we can hear the functioning of desks in ordering classrooms and putting principles of discipline that governed the military and factories, namely interchangeability and surveillance, to work in schools:

In discipline, the elements are interchangeable, since each is defined by the place it occupies in a series, and by the gap that separates it from the others . . . By assigning individual places it made possible the supervision of each individual and the simultaneous work of all . . . It made the educational space function like a learning machine, but also as a machine for supervising, hierarchizing, rewarding (145, 147).

Foucault recognizes that learning does happen in these spaces, but so does psychosocial hierarchizing as the students who function best according to the desired outcomes of the machine are rewarded. Looking at post-secondary education through a Foucauldian lens as a learning machine in conjunction with Paulo Freire's banking model, we might conceptualize the university as a sort of bottling plant. The students are like bottles, moving along through the machine, being filled with knowledge, experiences, and ways of seeing and understanding the world. Then, at the end of the line, they're given a cap and label before being sent out into the world where what they have been filled with is used or consumed.

Hetrick and Attig use this Foucauldian concept of discipline to look beyond arrangement and focus specifically on how the physical elements of the machine affect students who are fat. They read these desks as "seek[ing] to both indoctrinate students' bodies and minds into middle class values of restraint and discipline, and inscribe these messages onto the bodies that sit in them" (197). For Hetrick and Attig, the desks not only hurt students who are fat, they tell them

that they do not fit. The middle class values here are a cultural milieu pervaded by the narratives that decompose fat bodies, and these desks write fat bodies clearly as being culpable for not fitting, placing the burden to adjust on students who are fat, not on the machine or its apparatuses. The backs and sides of chairs, the edges of the writing surfaces, and any bars that may connect them both write and enforce the boundaries of what is acceptable within this machine. The desks amplify and reiterate the narratives about fat bodies that students who are fat have carried with them into the classroom: that they are not disciplined enough, that they have failed, and that they will not belong until they have substantially altered themselves.

These desks become instruments of fat stigma, stigma that, as Amy Erdman Farrel puts it in *Fat Shame*, “divides people into those who belong and those who don’t, those who are praised and those who are mocked, those who merit first-class treatment and those who are expected to accept second-class, inferior status” (5). Heather Brown’s observations were similar. She said of the students she interviewed that “not fitting into the too-small desks created in participants a heightened sense of being sent a not-so-secret message” (14). This message was that they did not fit either in the desks or in school and that the not fitting was their fault. As Erving Goffman notes, “stigma” originally referred to visible marks on the flesh meant to signify the acts of their bearer that the bearer’s society found particularly egregious, but the word has shifted to refer specifically to the disgrace associated with such marks rather than the marks themselves. These desks can reinforce stigma in a way that evokes the word’s original meaning, however, as they cut into and mark flesh. This stigma is asserted forcefully with acute pain and sustained discomfort, written in flesh with lingering indentations, discolorations, and sensations. Desks don’t just hurt, they enforce the will of the learning machine by hurting.

In addition to the pain and lingering marks, classroom furniture frequently puts students who are fat on display. The narrow steel rods that commonly support and connect chairs and writing surfaces leave much of the bodies occupying these desks open to view. Jerry Farber points out that, in most classroom arrangements, “You can’t see the faces of those in front of you” (24). You can, however, see their bodies, especially those bodies that transgress the boundaries of their allotted space, creating an effect not unlike the bodies decapitated by the camera’s frame in so many news reports on the “obesity epidemic,” i.e., Charlotte Coopers “Headless Fatties,” which I will discuss more in chapter 4. The rigid boundaries of each student’s allotted space, enforced by these desks, provide a visual measure for surveilling bodies, dehumanized by the arrangement of these desks, encouraging students to police themselves. Jeannine Gailey coined the term hyper(in)visibility to refer to the paradox often faced by people who are fat: that they are simultaneously hypervisible and invisible. Because the stigmatized part of their identity is impossible to hide, students who are fat are hypervisible even as their need for space to write themselves remains invisible to many. They are visible enough that, as Corey Stevens reports, it is not uncommon for strangers to comment on their bodies, and even when no one is commenting, there is always a feeling of being judged.

The judgement for transgression against the learning machine, however, does not always come from without. Students who are fat internalize the narratives of a deeply fatphobic society to the same extent that students who are not fat are infected by it. They see how their bodies have been written, and that writing is difficult to shake. Sandra Lee Bartky argues that shame “requires, if not an actual audience before whom my deficiencies are paraded, then an internalized audience with the capacity to judge me, hence internalized standards of judgment” (227). The feeling of being on display, evoked by physical reminders of transgression, can be as

damaging as actually being on display. Fat students have had the writing about their bodies read to them far too often, and in the absence of others to read it, they begin to recite it themselves. Brown, writing about her participants' responses, notes that "their experiences often made them question the validity of their assertions and their right to belong on campus, especially when they felt they were being judged as bodies rather than as learners." (14) These desks decompose students' bodies, writing over the way they may have written themselves, writing not only that they do not belong but also that everyone knows that they do not belong, whether or not the thought has actually occurred to anyone else in the room.

This shame has a silencing effect. With most non-metaphorical machines, a part that does not fit can bring operations to a noisy halt, but students who are fat are kept silent by the internalized shame they bring with them. Drawing on Foucault's concept of discipline, Lynn Worsham argues that "shame is an especially effective instrument for keeping people in place, for transforming social relation into a psychological symptom" (109). Life is ordered less by the threat of punishment from above and more by the threat of judgement from peers. That judgement is based on cultural ideology that purports to keep the machines running smoothly. When someone exists outside of the default, considerations and accommodations need to be made. While these considerations and accommodations contribute to an effective learning environment, they are often read by the machine as enemies of interchangeability and, therefore, as enemies of efficiency. Because of this, fat bodies are decomposed, written as pathologized and judged, especially since their non-defaultness is thought to be within their power to change. With shame, that decomposition becomes internalized. Students who are fat are silent about their suffering because they blame themselves for their failure to fit in a machine that never had any intention of accommodating them. One of Brown's participants put it this way:

I mean, I wouldn't go to anyone and be like, "Ah! Fuck you! The desks are small!" I probably would've just felt a little more uncomfortable or probably would have become a little more introverted if I would have realized that no space particularly fit me or was welcoming to me. There was definitely a standard you were supposed to fit into (14). Because students who are fat are convinced that they are the problem, not the desks or the people making decisions about furniture, they turn inward. To express anger, a justifiable response given the situation, would be to make themselves vulnerable to attack. As Farrell notes in "Deep Listening," confronting people with the injustices surrounding stigmatized bodies can produce a reaction called "stigma threat" (62). When confronted with the idea that a deeply held stigma might be false and unjust, there is a tendency to lash out or shut down. Students who are fat who have dared to speak up, even when approaching the issue more diplomatically than the appropriate "Ah! Fuck you! The desks are small!," are likely to be met with the type of unproductive responses that will encourage them to remain silent in the future.

My responses to fat shame tend to be similar to Brown's participants. Even though I encountered Hetrick and Attig's work and started thinking critically about furniture, I am still reticent when expected to sit in furniture that does not fit. I may move or ask to be moved, but I will often suffer in silence, just as I am silent when comments are made that I find inappropriate, assuming that the speaker did not really mean it that way, or worse, that they did mean it that way and it may not be safe for me to speak up. I can remember one graduate class in which the professor, a straight sized woman, used a phrase that she likely assumed to be benign. She talked about "cutting away the flab" in a piece of writing. This phrase and its variants are relatively common, but in that moment, I was acutely aware of the way this phrase was using bodies, specifically fat bodies, as a metaphor. Flab was something bad that needed to be cut away before

writing could become good. Feeling the presence of my body in that space, it was as though the professor was suggesting that the piece of writing was like my body. It was fat and, therefore, bad. It needed to lose the excess weight before it could be good. There was part of me that wondered whether, when she looked at me, she felt that my flab needed to be cut away or burned off before my body should be given the space to write myself, before I would be worthy of dignity and respect. Noting similar instances of negative internal dialogue in her participants, Brown refers to “a cascade of negative self-thought” (15). This cascade metaphor resonated with me. When that professor used bodies like mine as a negative metaphor, my head began buzzing as my mind folded in on itself, and any connections I had had to the other people in that classroom were severed. The discipline of the learning machine, carried out in part by classroom desks, had made me hypervigilant to any sign that I did not fit, did not belong, even in this classroom with relatively comfortable chairs around a long table. Bodies like mine that do not fit become constantly aware of their not fitting whereas the bodies that do fit not only need not be aware of their own fitting but also need not be aware of how others fit and how not fitting might affect them. That professor continued the class, and if she noticed my reticence, may have attributed it to any number of reasons unrelated to my fit or her metaphor. I do not know, though, because I heard nothing else that was said during that class period, saw no other gestures. I did not learn, did not contribute, and did not speak up.

While the separate and separating physical apparatuses of the classroom function to isolate students within the machine, they can also function to separate students from the machine altogether, not just for the remainder of a lesson, as was my experience, but permanently. Nedra Reynolds argues that “Universities are centers for learning but are also organized to keep many outsiders from feeling welcome” (141). Campuses accomplish this in a variety of ways,

including difficult to find visitor parking, poorly marked buildings, the long distances between buildings, and accessible entrances that are off to the side of buildings or hidden. Another way is through the lack of seating that is comfortable and usable by all bodies. While the “outsiders” can be non-students, they can also be new students, who Reynolds notes, “often feel a sense of alienation or displacement on a college campus” (158). Add to that the experience of new students whose allotted space doesn’t fit their bodies, and it is little wonder that students who are fat are less likely to complete their degree (Fowler-Brown et al.). Desks hurt students, make them uncomfortable, tell them they don’t belong, and keep them from feeling at home in a classroom.

Classroom Ecologies

The learning machine that works to separate students into discrete units, praising those who fit and conform to expectations and ruthlessly grinding down those who do not, continues to enjoy the good will of those who occupy it in large part because, on an institutional level, we still view education through a liberal humanist lens. We still view students and instructors as autonomous subjects exercising their will inside and outside the classroom. Works like Rickert’s *Ambient Rhetoric* resonate so strongly, though, not because they introduce us to something new but because they name what has always been. Students and instructors have always already been embodied and enmeshed in these learning environments, profoundly interconnected to each other and the physical structures they inhabit. Rickert gets at this interconnectivity by seeking to decenter the human as autonomous individual in rhetoric. For Rickert, “ambience connotes the dispersal and diffusion of agency” (16), not only through other humans but also through the non-human. Nathan Stormer and Bridie McGreavy want to move away from the term agency altogether because for them, it “refers to a state of being in action, exerting power” (5), and is difficult to decouple from the autonomous subject. For both Rickert and Stormer and McGreavy,

the non-human is not a passive object to be acted on but an active participant in rhetoric. Furthermore, Rickert's redefinition of Kairos, that it is less being ready to seize the spatiotemporal moment and more attuning to the spatiotemporal moment that we dwell within, echoes Stormer and McGreavy's concept of capacity, which "is a relational concept of potential" (5). Both arguments forward an ecological view in which the capacity for action is afforded by an environment of which the potential actor is a part. For example, my capacity for self-advocacy has been afforded not only by the existence of fat activism and scholarship and my interaction with those texts, but also by an environment that provides some assurance of safety, some promise that advocacy will be heard and may lead to change, and provides an impetus for self-advocacy, an articulatable act of aggression, micro or macro.

While Rickert focuses largely on the relationships between the human and non-human within this ecology, I read Alexander Reid's "virtual-actual" as looking toward the relationships between humans through the non-human. For Reid, consciousness emerges from the connections to and across technologies, from one of the oldest human technologies, language, to the electronic devices that we more commonly associate with the term "technology" today. Far from the autonomous liberal humanist subject or the discrete and interchangeable individuals that are central to the learning machine, Reid sees consciousness itself as inextricable from the connections between minds facilitated by the intersection of our bodies with technology just as Rickert and Stormer and McGreavy see rhetoric as inextricable from the ecology that surrounds us. These posthumanist approaches share an ecological view in which the human and non-human components are always already profoundly interconnected, with no component able to claim the role of autonomous subject. Individuals have the capacity to act, but only that capacity that is afforded by their ecology and that depends on an individual's ability to attune to the ecology they

inhabit. This ecological view undermines the idea of students as discrete units that is the learning machine's central conceit. The learning machine seeks to separate the inseparable in order to reward and punish these discrete units, but rhetoricians have persuasively argued that students and instructors are profoundly enmeshed within ecologies and with each other. The machine's rewards and punishments are not earned by autonomous subjects and do not only affect their intended targets when meted out.

Looking at these desks through the lens of Reid's virtual-actual can help us gain a clearer picture of how they adversely affect classroom environments. For Reid, consciousness exists where the body interfaces with the technologies that connect us, and we can read classroom furniture as technology that is intended to augment connection. As I discussed earlier, the way that classroom furniture attempts to mold and direct those connections says a lot about the philosophy of education that drives the learning machine. We might take Reid's virtual-actual a step further and think of technologies not only as augmenting connections but also creating resistance across them, and those technologies can augment some connections while resisting them simultaneously. By offering students a writing surface and a place to sit, these desks can augment the connection between the students, their instructor, their notebook, and their textbook. When non-default bodies occupy classroom spaces, however, that same furniture can also act as resistors, limiting the connectivity with the rest of the environment.

Just as pain and shame discipline within the learning machine model, pain and shame cause resistance within classroom ecologies. By pressing into flesh, desks create a painful sort of hyper-enmeshment, and this connection between student and desk pulls focus away from connections to the instructor, learning materials, and other students. In addition, as students are enmeshed in their environment, the fatphobia and fat stigma that these desks write onto the

students' bodies is also written into the connections between students. These damaging narratives can act like a runaway app, running in the background, sapping battery and occasionally coming to the fore, forcing other apps, other cognitive processes, other connections into the background. These narratives can be present to some degree even with accommodating furniture, but inadequate desks provide a constant and inescapable reminder of these narratives. In accommodating furniture, fat students are more likely to be fully present, fully enmeshed within the class. However, in addition to making students who are fat feel disconnected from the rest of the class, internalized shame can limit the capacity of students who are fat to absorb new material, complete in-class assignments, and participate in class discussions.

Like my experience after the “cut away the flab” comment that I discussed earlier, I’ve had other experiences where fatphobic narratives worked like a runaway app, resisting and disrupting my connections to the classroom. I had one graduate course in which the instructor had assigned periodic blog posts, and with each round, she appointed a group of students to lead the discussion about those blog posts. I do not recall the exact topic, but I had found some connections between the readings and my work in fat studies. This was not uncommon; I was able to work my interest in fat studies into many of my courses. Sometime before this particular blog discussion, however, one of my classmates had posted an article on Facebook that sought to decompose fat bodies. The article was essentially an angry rant in which the author stated all of the usual concepts about energy imbalance and traded in negative stereotypes about people who are fat. The student who had posted this article was thin, and rather than contest the way fat bodies were being decomposed by that article, they seemed to agree with the author’s conclusions. I was normally loquacious in class, but when I walked into the classroom that day, I did not feel emotionally safe discussing the contents of my blog post. I was silent. As my

classmates discussed, I was silent. When the conversation seemed to stall, I was silent. When another one of my classmates, one I considered and still consider a friend, one who had been assigned to lead the discussion, tried to invite my input, I subtly shook my head and remained silent.

Brown noted similar reluctance to participate in class discussion from her participants. They often felt the need to over-prepare before they answered, felt that speaking would draw attention to them and their bodies, and felt that assumptions would be made about the relationship between their bodies and their intellect. If we believe that each student brings valuable insight to the classroom, then we must believe that the silencing of any student hurts the entire class. Students who are fat do not exist within unidirectional connections but within an ecology of connections. Desks and the fat stigma that students and instructors carry with them into the classroom do not just limit a student's capacity to be filled with knowledge or to act, it limits the capacities of the entire classroom ecology. What questions do not get asked because some students are reluctant to draw attention to themselves? Which directions of a discussion topic do not get explored because some students are not quite able to give the discussion their full attention? Which potentially productive objections are never raised because students have internalized the decomposition of their bodies, come to believe dominant narratives that suggest their discomfort is inconsequential? Returning to Rickert's ambience, which he describes at one point as a "relational concept of potential" (5), we might read technologies that create resistance over connections as limiting that potential. Not only is the capacity of students who are fat limited but the capacity within the classroom ecology is also limited. Every question not asked limits the capacity of other students to ask follow-up questions. Every discussion direction not explored limits the capacity of other students to push further or follow branches in that direction.

Every objection not raised limits the capacity of other students to challenge their own assumptions and grow from those challenges.

Tuning Classroom Ecologies

Neither people nor ecologies are static. Both Rickert and Casey Boyle touch on a concept—for Rickert it is attunement and for Boyle it is tuning—that I believe astutely describes our relationship to our ecologies. Rickert sees attunement as “not an I fitting into the world in order to do, say, and make, but an I-world hybrid” (xviii). Attunement is not a means to agency, to more effectively asserting one’s will. Instead, Rickert talks about “invention attuned less to seeking advantage over or success against an audience than to working with what an audience and a material situation bring forth” (91) and later says “ambience guides, calls, or suggests according to our ability to attune to our emergence in the situation and thus attend to the situation's inseparability from our sense of I-ness” (112). This attunement suggests an always already hybridity or enmeshment, granting us not agency but capacity within what is brought forth. It is the classroom ecology, then, that brings forth the capacity for us and our students to act and influence the ecology.

Rickert never explicitly discusses how this attunement might function for non-default bodies in environments that might be hostile. Adapting to environments imbued with stigma and separating apparatuses that seem as rigid, fixed, and inevitable as desks presents a host of challenges. These challenges are not a side effect of the learning machine but one of its functions as it seeks either to force students who are fat to adapt by physically altering their bodies or to force them out of the machine. It could be said, then, that classroom desks function to limit the capacity for non-default bodies to attune to classroom ecologies. It is not only the human bodies in these ecologies that can attune and adapt, however. Andrew Pickering calls us to recognize the

“reciprocal tuning of people and things” (172) that takes place within the context of practice, and talking about writing in multiple modes, Boyle argues that “Each of these multiple environments offers occasions for ‘tuning’ not only a writer to an ecology of media but to help tune that ecology as well” (541). For Pickering and Boyle, we do not only attune to an ecology but also tune that ecology. This “reciprocal tuning” offers some hope for fat bodies within hostile ecologies as their presence can alter the environment. As rigid, fixed, and inevitable as they may seem, this tuning can even affect classroom furniture. If we read desks as physical manifestations of Pierre Bourdieu’s “structured structures predisposed to function as structuring structures” (32), we can see how they are structured by the ideology of the learning machine and are predisposed to structuring the bodies that occupy them. However, these structures may also be structured by the presence of students and instructors who are fat, especially when they are consciously resisting the silencing narratives about their bodies. Though anecdotal, I have been told that my writing about the issue of classroom desks has played a role in the selection of furniture for at least one refurbished classroom. Perhaps, then, the structuring or tuning of the furniture in classroom spaces can be accelerated by exercising our capacity to be a vocal presence, by our efforts to make space to write our bodies with our bodies.

This idea of reciprocal tuning would also help explain Robert Crosnoe’s finding that, while adolescent girls who are fat are less likely to attain a college degree, adolescents from schools where there is a higher percentage of students who are fat are less adversely affected. Just as Kathleen LeBesco and Stefanie Snider note that proclaiming or displaying fat is a political act, which we will explore further in chapters 3 and 4, the presence of fat bodies in these schools seems to have a destigmatizing effect. The capacity of students who are fat to tune their environment increases with numbers. Likewise, the capacity of fatphobia and fat stigma to tune

students who are fat with internalized shame decreases as the number of fat bodies increases. One way that those of us who are fat can effect change, then, is by taking full advantage when we have the capacity to be visibly and unapologetically present, to take those moments when we are invisible as opportunities to assert our visibility and those moments when we are hypervisible to assert a positive view of ourselves—in short, to make space to write our own bodies. This, like Braidotti’s proposed transdisciplinary approach to critical posthumanism, “requires intense defamiliarization of our habits of thought, through nomadic encounters that subvert the protocols of institutional reason” (“Posthuman Critical Theory,” 20). Instead of moving between and around departmental structures, however, our nomadic journeys take us through the unaccommodating physical spaces and the protocols we must subvert are those of a learning machine steeped in fat phobia and fat stigma, protocols that say we should not be here or, at the very least, ought to exist in a state of constant apology for our failure to fit.

By being visibly and unapologetically present in classroom spaces, faculty meetings, and other places on campus, we might approach what fatshionistas have done and are doing by being visibly and unapologetically present in fa(t)shion posts, as I will discuss in chapter 4. I do not think this is the only thing we can do to tune our environments away from the fat stigma programmed into the learning machine and bolstered by its insistence on discrete, interchangeable units. We can also take a more direct, more discursive approach like the Fat Instagrammer @yrfatfriend, whose micro-essays clearly layout the issues faced by fat people and what allies can do to help rather than harm. I believe that we can work toward tuning our environments toward the profoundly enmeshed ecologies that they have always already been, reducing the resistance across connections, by discussing these issues directly with students and colleagues. Classroom desks do a great deal of teaching, teaching about what types of bodies are

acceptable in these spaces, what types are not, and lessons taught are continually reinforced as they are internalized. Internalization ensures that these lessons will be taught anew every time a student who is fat inhabits a space that refuses to accommodate their body. If, however, we can take advantage of our capacity to teach our students to interrogate these spaces, recognize their connection to and through these spaces, and expect these spaces to be accommodating, then these lessons can spread to and transform these spaces.

These lessons cannot happen, though, without recognizing and forwarding the lived experience of actual, physical bodies. By expanding on the work done by Hetrick and Attig by examining these desks through a critical posthumanist lens, I hope that I have drawn enough attention to the lived experience of the students who are fat that inhabit our classroom spaces to begin to re-concretize some of the bodies that are often abstracted in scholarship on embodiment. I have tried to venture further from the relative safety of the abstracted theoretical body through the vulnerable work of incorporating my own positionality far beyond a pausing recognition in the introduction. Just as Hetrick and Attig did with their opening sentence, “Desks hurt us,” I have tried to bring more of my physical, whole, and lived self into this work. If this can be normalized and pushed farther than what little I have done here, if fully embodied narratives about the lived experience of the physical bodies can be normalized as legitimate and important academic work, classroom ecologies will be more able to be tuned in all sorts of wonderful and accommodating ways.

In the following chapter, I will examine spaces in which that tuning is in some ways more difficult specifically because it is more difficult to bring one’s physical, whole, and lived self into the work in a way that is felt by others sharing that space. Without the programming knowledge to mod avatar creation programs, it can be difficult or impossible to create fat avatars,

leading to virtual worlds in which fat bodies exist rarely or never. These avatar design programs communicate that fat bodies do not belong. Even where fat avatars are allowed, users are first offered the option to re-create a default body, so fat bodies are tolerated but not encouraged. These design choices can act as a sort of safeguard against the type of tuning I hope to take part in within classroom spaces. Not only does it become difficult to tune these worlds to accommodate fat bodies but it also difficult for the internalized fatphobia of participants in these worlds to be tuned by playing through a fat avatar. To resist the design choices that have led to those low fat or fat-free worlds, I will suggest a design ethic that forwards identity and inclusion, a design ethic that can also be applied to classroom design.

CHAPTER III

FAT AVATARS

The previous chapter examined how fat bodies are not given the physical space needed to write themselves in classroom furniture. These bodies are written through shame, physical pain, and marks on their flesh as not belonging, and that not belonging is written as something they could fix if only they had the willpower. One way that fat bodies can make space to write themselves within classrooms, however, is by being visibly and unapologetically present, signaling to other fat bodies and the learning machine itself that they do, in fact, belong. In this way, it is possible to tune these environments to be more fat friendly. This method of tuning can be effective in other spaces as well, including, as I will discuss in chapter 4, some virtual worlds. Other virtual worlds resist this tuning by limiting the range of bodies that can be present, and I first began to think critically about these virtual worlds when I introduced one of them into the physical space of a first-year research writing course. I assigned my students a video project and wanted to introduce them to the concept of storyboarding. I introduced them to a web-based app called Storyboard That by creating a storyboard of me telling a class about storyboarding, and optimistically set out to create a convincing visual representation of my in real life (irl) self. Despite a fairly wide range of character customization options, however, one aspect was inalterable: body size. I am fat, but any visual representation of myself in this program had to be thin. This difference was drawn into relief when I presented my storyboard to my class and two

versions of me were visible to my students: an avatar me and an irl me, a thin me and a fat me. I felt in that moment that the thinness of the avatar threw a spotlight on the fatness of the irl me, that my students might have been noticing for the first time just how fat I am. I was also afraid that the thinness of the avatar would be read as an attempt to hide my fat or to suggest that I would prefer to be thin or see myself as a thin person trapped in a fat body. I am generally confident and comfortable in front of a class, but in that moment, I was neither confident nor fully present.

My students may have thought nothing of this cartoonish character in a freemium app,⁹ a digital alternative to hand drawn stick figures, and if I were to teach that assignment with that program now, I would likely use it as a moment to teach students about the affordances offered by programs, about design, and how dominant narratives both shape and are shaped by design choices. Instead, the shame of being on display and contrasted with my avatar trapped me in my own head, and I robotically carried on with the lesson about a program that was not designed to allow someone like me to write myself the way I see myself. It did not allow space for me to present a fat positive image to my students. Instead, fatphobic narratives may have prevented developers from even considering the option to adjust body size, only allowing me to create a thin avatar that could be read as a tacit approval of those same fatphobic narratives. After this experience, I started thinking more critically about the software applications I was bringing into my classroom and the effects those apps might have on my students. How many of them had felt similar feelings when they were unable to write the visual representation of their bodies in a way that resembled their own irl bodies? How many felt that same shame while working with their story boards in class, having their irl body juxtaposed with their avatar? How many of them had

⁹ Freemium is a term used to refer to apps and games that are free to use but offer additional features that come at a cost.

thought it was normal or okay to work in a digital environment in which fat people did not or could not exist?

This is why decisions about which customizable features to include in avatar design programs for virtual worlds matter. Without the programming knowledge to mod programs, fat bodies do not have the space to write themselves and are too often written out of existence. In this chapter, I will argue for the importance of a design ethic that forwards identity and inclusion, one that encourages an awareness of what is often said, what is often left out, and who is often excluded in design decisions. To work toward this design ethic, I look to work done by scholars theorizing user interactions with computer generated spaces (deWinter & Vie, Johnson, Messinger et al., Ulmer). While I want to make clear that I do not wish to equate fat stigma with gender or racial inequality, I believe scholars looking more specifically at gender and race in these spaces (Arola; Kennedy, Middleton, & Ratcliffe; Nakamura; Nielsen) introduce applicable concepts. I will also look to fat studies scholars who speak more specifically to the composing and decomposing of fat bodies in cyber space (Harper, Kargbo, LeBesco, Snider). In approaching this conversation within my own identity as a fat person, I hope to bring avatars and design thinking to the growing field of fat rhetoric, drawing attention to the overlap between fat rhetoric and digital studies. Second, in articulating a design ethic that forwards identity and inclusion, I hope to draw attention to the recursivity of these concepts, that in designing in ways that are inclusive of underrepresented identities, those identities are invited to take up design and work towards inclusivity in ways that may elude some identities in their positionality.

My hope is that this design ethic will have applications outside avatars and virtual worlds, but I will explore the exigency of this design ethic within avatar creation programs for virtual worlds, a move which I hope will help lay the groundwork for later discussion. I will start

by troubling what is often meant by “virtual” and “avatar” and the distinction often drawn between what happens in computer generated spaces and irl, a distinction that devalues the lived experience of people with bodies that diverge from the default (i.e., white, male, able, thin, heterosexual, middle class, etc.). I will then turn my attention to design, offering a critique of some common avatar creation programs and arguing that design choices made in virtual worlds, including choices about how users avatar into these worlds, can have a profound impact on irl identities and interactions. After looking closely at the effects of design choices, I will turn my attention to design thinking and suggest some principles of a design ethic that forwards identity and inclusion. These principles are:

- claiming the right to look beyond our perceptual habits
- developing a broader empathy
- designing to enable robust identity exploration and identity play
- promoting intentional inclusivity on the design end

I hope that these principles will prove useful, but as James Purdy says “Design projects require multiple hands and minds, and a design thinking approach to writing makes such collaboration standard, accepted, and unquestioned” (633). My hope, then, is that these principles will be taken up, criticized, and reworked to better meet the needs of those looking to make space for fat bodies and other non-default bodies to write themselves.

I will discuss pedagogical implications more in chapter 5, but I do want to note here that the principles I suggest can also inform the design of classrooms, programs, and curriculum. If we see ourselves not just as teaching content but also as training future citizens, then a design ethic that forwards identity and inclusivity will prove invaluable. Kristie Fleckenstein points out that “Teaching writing as a means of social change inevitably requires dealing with identity: its

constitution, its options, and its possibilities. For, if there is no agent of action—individual or collective—how, then, can there be any action?” (Affording New Media, 240). In the context of the classroom, this means that employing a design ethic that forwards identity and inclusivity could make it easier for students to pick up that work themselves, practicing such a design ethic in ways that may have eluded us in our own positionality.

Why Virtual Worlds Matter

Whenever existing words are used to describe rapidly evolving technologies, their definitions can be complicated. As Claire Lauer points out, one of the ways a definition is developed is by determining what the term is not. Virtual worlds are not material, at least not in the way we sometimes define material. We cannot reach out and touch a virtual tree or taste virtual fruit. In this sense, virtual is neither physical nor made up of matter in an arrangement that we can interact with in the same way we could the non-virtual. It is from this negation that we see the conclusion made that a virtual thing is not real, not important. Facebook friends are not real friends, online activism is not real activism, and text conversations are not real conversations because they are neither physical nor arranged in time and space in a way that conforms to earlier experiences of friendship, activism, and conversation. It is worth noting that the claim that virtual spaces are not real is often used to dismiss the experiences of non-default bodies online, e.g., online harassment of women during Gamergate, or to dismiss the efforts of those without power to effect change, e.g., use of social media to work around traditional media or politics in social justice campaigns. The claims that virtual spaces are not real, then, may not always be made in good faith, but the claims are made all the same.

When we look past the fact that virtual trees do not offer the same sensory experience as real trees, though, we can see that virtual worlds are very much made up of matter. Just as David

Sanford Horner points out that consciousness is the result of physical processes within the brain, virtual worlds are the result of physical processes within computer hardware. They are the firing of electrons within servers, lasers reflecting off discs, so many positive and negative values represented as 1s and 0s transmitted through wires and over WiFi. We interact with them, touching keyboard and mouse, peering through screens like windows as though these visual manifestations continue on beyond the edges. And when we consider that the physical irl objects we interact with are made up mostly of the space between atomic particles, it becomes difficult to argue that the physicality of irl objects is somehow more significant than the things we call virtual. In this sense, virtual worlds quite literally matter, and they matter in the context of this conversation because the web of our interactions with them effects both them and us, culturally and individually. Cultural narratives are written into their design and the narratives written by their design are written back onto the culture. Nowhere is this more evident than in the non-default bodies that are assumed to not matter in these supposedly immaterial spaces where dominant narratives, formed in these spaces and through irl prejudicial hatred, can turn into online bullying and doxing¹⁰, both of which pose an irl threat.

Why Avatars Matter

One method for understanding the interaction between people with non-default bodies and virtual worlds is to look at the avatars through which we interact with those worlds. This borrowed Sanskrit word “avatar,” was associated with the Hindu god Vishnu descending in material form to fight evil. It is used to describe users’ explorations into virtual worlds, sometimes wielding godlike powers to, as Messinger et al. point out, shape the very worlds with which we interact. My focus here, though, is primarily on the relationship between avatars and

¹⁰ Doxing is the practice of publishing someone else’s private or identifying information online, such as a telephone number or home address.

identity. Eiko Ikegami notes, “In today’s context of cyberspace, avatars are digital representations of the self, technological artifacts that provide a three-dimensional graphic body as an anchor for communications in the virtual world” (1157-58). Ikegami’s definition works well for the avatars she’s focused on and the ways in which I wish to explore the concept but does not encompass the full range of how we avatar. Lisa Nakamura recognizes alphabetic names and descriptions as playing a similar role, and we can avatar through anything from alphabetic text to two-dimensional images to three-dimensional graphic bodies. Ikegami’s anchor metaphor is especially useful, though, if thought of not only in contrast to lurking¹¹ but also as the thing that gives us a sense of belonging in virtual worlds. Gregory Ulmer goes as far as to describe the internet as a prosthesis, and avataring as the way that we enter into that prosthesis, arguing that, “Avatar as a concept may be and must be thought today, in that we already are avatar, or becoming avatar. We avatar (verb) online every day; we put our self into the prosthesis of the Internet” (xi). Whether social networks or MMOs—and in a less communal way, single player games like *Skyrim*—it is through the avatar, or by avataring, that we not only announce our presence and join in shaping these virtual worlds but also immerse ourselves within and allow them to shape us. We might say, then, that when we avatar, we project an aspect of (our) identity into a virtual world, and it is through them that we matter, gaining both importance and materiality in these worlds, and it is through them that virtual worlds matter to us.

In addition to the different alphabetic, visual, and dimensional forms these avatars can take, they can also take different forms in relation to the irl self. In image-based virtual spaces, players have to inhabit a visual body, but the player and their irl body remain anonymous.

¹¹ A term commonly used to describe the act of observing a virtual world without interacting substantively or making one’s presence known.

Kathleen LeBesco recognizes the appeal of this anonymity: “For some subscribers, it is the anonymity of cyberspace that is most attractive: the fact that they exist on-line as only words detached from their bodies frees them for less self-conscious reflection about the nature of their embodied experiences” (Revolting Bodies, 179). For people who often experience stigma irl, virtual worlds offer a space where they can explore a default identity, and as Harper notes, “In games, unlike in life, being body-normative is easy and requires very little effort” (275). Despite the ease and allure that interacting as a default identity, however, taking advantage of the anonymity of virtual worlds in this way often comes with a price. Nakamura refers to this use of anonymity, hiding stigmatized irl aspects of identity, as passing: “‘Passing’ is a cultural phenomenon that has the ability to call stable identities into question . . . but the fact remains that passing is often driven by harsh structural inequities, a sense that it really *would* be safer, more powerful, and better to be of a different race or gender” (31). Just as I was afraid that the avatar I created to teach story boards might be read as a tacit approval of fatphobic narratives, passing in other spaces reinforces those narratives, that fat ought to be viewed with fear and disgust not boldly embodied in spaces where doing so is not necessary.

The decision not to pass may carry some risk, but it can also be an effective way of challenging the structural inequities that Nakamura references. Harper notes the importance of being allowed to exist in these spaces: “If we want a future where fat bodies of all kinds can exist, then we need to be given the ability to exist—on a fundamental level—in these digital spaces and virtual worlds” (276), and I would also argue that, in order to be given the ability to exist, it is important to make use of that ability when it is offered. As I will discuss in chapter 4, the content creators of Fat Instagram challenge dominant narratives by making space to write their own bodies with their bodies, and the use of a fat avatar can make space for fat people to

write their own bodies. Lebesco talks about instances of non-default avatars in text-based environments like the ones Nakamura writes about: “In a language-only space where nobody can see your hips, your belly, your legs, to say that you are fat is a strong, meaningful political gesture that declares that fat will not be erased” (182). This political gesture can be read as operating similar to the “flaunting fat” discussed by Gurrier and Cherrier (286), which I will discuss further in chapter 4. It is a refusal to hide in virtual worlds, and when we interact through text or designed avatars, hiding can be all too easy. Stephanie Snider echoes LeBesco when she says, “The visual representation of fat and fatness, for good or bad, is a social justice issue entwining the personal and the political” (Introduction, 116). Just as using images that celebrate the fat bodies that are their subjects in virtual worlds like Instagram, creating a fat avatar can be a powerful political statement if undertaken by fat individuals with an interest in creating positive representations.

The same anonymity that allows passing can also afford opportunities to explore identities, an affordance that can be limited by design. Ikegami points out that, “The anonymity of the avatars in SL gives real-life people the possibility of experimenting with new aspects of the self” (1166), and these aspects can represent subtle changes or drastic departures from the irl self. Also looking at *Second Life*, Jennifer deWinter and Stephanie Vie discuss avatar customization as an aspect of that virtual world: “Some users may fashion avatars intended to mirror their real-life personae, while others may deliberately play with identity through markers of difference” (316). In addition to mirroring and difference, I would add a third category, “abstraction,” in which users attempt to represent aspects of identity through non-anthropomorphic objects or concepts. Abstraction is used mostly in virtual worlds that are text based or that allow users to upload an image to act as their avatar like many popular social media

platforms. For this discussion, however, I will focus on mirroring and difference and note that users will employ both—across virtual worlds, in different instances within the same virtual world, or even within the same avatar¹².

The ability to represent the self either through resembling one’s physical self or playing with other aspects of identity is an important aspect that is in many ways unique to virtual worlds. While identities are far from static irl, the possibility for exploring identity through a different body within virtual worlds is unique. Ikegami puts it this way: “Although a person will naturally display a different aspect of the self in a public space depending on the kind of network relationships with which the person is temporarily located, the possibility of using avatars allows the self to project a differently *embodied* image to a public” (1158-1159 emphasis hers). In these virtual worlds, we are unbound by limits that physiology and the expectations associated with physiology place on identity formation. Ikegami points out that, “Using avatars allows typists to cross various categorical limitations that are hard to ignore in real life” (1179). For example, a common iteration of identity play in virtual worlds is playing as another gender. Playing with gender identity in a virtual world is often relatively easy, a matter of choosing one box and not another. Doing so outside those virtual worlds, however, can be quite difficult and often requires a great deal of commitment.

As someone who is an AMAB¹³ non-binary person, it is, as Ikegami puts it, “hard to ignore” my masculine build. I am also acutely aware that presenting more feminine comes with social, professional, and sometimes even physical risk. In virtual worlds, however, I was able to

¹² It is worth noting that this intermingling of mirroring and difference can be used to project a sort of ideal self, or a self that a user thinks others will find ideal. This can be used in sometimes misleading ways in all virtual worlds but can become especially problematic in dating apps where the mingling of mirroring and difference can be used to mislead potential matches.

¹³ Assigned Male at Birth

explore aspects of my feminine identity that I hadn't yet come to terms with outside of that virtual world¹⁴. *Animal Crossing: New Horizons* (hereafter simply *Animal Crossing*) for the Nintendo Switch was especially helpful. Finding, buying, and designing clothes was one of my favorite parts of the game, and before I realized that I was non-binary, *Animal Crossing* was a way for me to try feminine styles and explore femininity in a space that did not carry the same risks as doing so irl would have. Even when interacting with others in the virtual world of the game, I was within a space where identity play is normal, so I could present feminine without having to answer the types of questions or endure the types of looks that I experience irl. While *Animal Crossing* did allow me to explore more feminine ways of presenting, though, the avatar creation program doesn't allow for adjustments to body size. I was able to explore aspects of my identity that I had not yet fully accepted were there, but I wasn't able to write those explorations onto a body that resembled my own. This would also have been especially difficult in other spaces, as Harper notes about his exploration of multiple avatar creation programs: "It was across the board easier to make a fat playable male character than to make a fat woman in every game except *The Sims 4* and *Dragon's Dogma*" (273). So even among virtual worlds that, unlike *Animal Crossing*, do allow for some variation in body size, it is much more difficult to find ones that allow for the creation of fat feminine avatars.

The results of identity explorations through avatars don't just stay in virtual worlds; there is a circular flow from brain to fingers to keyboards through wires and on wifi waves to servers and back interpreted by screens sending light to eyes and finally back to the brain. Matthew S. S.

¹⁴ Note here that I am not trying to equate the sort of identity play that goes on in virtual worlds with the experience of irl identity. Virtual worlds are not yet sophisticated enough to allow one to experience the physical realities of another identity, nor are they yet immersive enough to give one the experience of an identity that is lived every day and cannot easily be escaped. Perhaps the best we can hope for is a strengthened ability to empathize with those whose irl identities are different from our own, but identity play in virtual worlds also has the potential to complicate our notion of identity and of self.

Johnson speaks to this phenomenon: “the odd fact that an entirely constructed identity is not necessarily a false one . . . such constructed identities have the potential to become, with time and use, as much a part of the self as any other naturally occurring or socially assigned identity” (63). For some, this may mean coming to identify more with the avatars through which they connect to virtual worlds, and for me, it may have helped me to realize that I am non-binary. At the very least, looking back at all the times that I’ve chosen to explore virtual worlds through female avatars helps to quiet the impostor syndrome that sometimes comes up for me surrounding my being non-binary. This flowing back and forth can also trouble the concept of irl identities. For Ikegami, “the world of socializing avatars questions our very notion of identity as fixed: perhaps the identity of a person or collectivity is not a preexisting entity but is fluid, revisable through interactions with others within the space of a digital public” (1158). Just as interacting through irl bodies with irl communities shapes who we are, so can interacting through avatars in virtual communities, and it can sometimes be easier to see this shaping through customizable avatars. It is this shaping and the way it can illuminate the changes brought about that make the identity play afforded by virtual worlds potentially so important.

Identity play, though, is not the only way through which we can better see and shape ourselves. Even when mirroring irl identities, avataring is “complex and dynamic” (deWinter and Vie, 316). Scholars like Mirzoeff (*How to See the World*) and Maboloc have noted that the images projected online are often more what the user wants audiences to see than an honest and vulnerable representation of the self. This could help explain why some fat people choose to play through straight sized avatars and why the developers might assume that no one would want to play through a fat avatar. But what we want an audience to see can have plenty to say about us and the complex negotiation of the irl identity that is being mirrored, which is why it’s important

for users to have the space to write themselves. Kristin Arola argues that “Seeing online identities not as bracketed costume but instead as material expression encourages an examination of online identities as part of the complex ecology of meaning and not merely as an isolated snapshot of performance” (214). Whether a selfie taken with attention to angle and background, a carefully crafted three-dimensional anthropomorphic graphic body, or a photograph of objects that help give life meaning, the decisions about what to show and what to hide in virtual worlds can both mirror and contribute to the negotiations of identity happening irl. Avataring grants me the opportunity to remake myself in a virtual world, a process that can help me better understand and remake myself irl, but without adequate space to write myself, it may hinder my understanding of myself and others’ understanding of me.

The visual appearance of avatars can also affect the way that users interact through them. Yee and Bailenson use the term “proteus effect,” named for a shape-shifting god of Greek mythology to describe the effects of altered self-representation via avatar on user behavior in a virtual reality environment. In their experiments, users responded to a series of tasks differently based on the perceived attractiveness or height of their avatar. The way users act through their avatars in a virtual world is affected by the way they anticipate other users will respond to the visual appearance of their avatar. I experienced something like this when playing *Skyrim*, even though I had no reason to believe that aggressive NPCs would alter their attack patterns based on my appearance. One character I designed was a large, muscular Nord, and when I played as that character, I tended to prefer close proximity melee attacks with heavier weapons. When playing as a small, lithe Breton, I tended to prefer stealthy ranged attacks. I knew that the design of my avatar wouldn’t impact gameplay in any meaningful way, but I tended to use the skillset at which I might expect an irl person with a similar physique to be most adept.

The proteus effect could have strong implications for users whose avatars reflect non-default bodies. The anticipated prejudice against non-default bodies could alter the ways users interact in those spaces. Not allowing for non-default bodies, then, denies users the ability to mirror with their avatar and interact with a virtual world in a way similar to the way they interact in irl environments. It also denies users the ability to explore a different identity with their avatar and note how it affects their interactions. In either instance, not allowing for non-default bodies limits an aspect of avataring that Ulmer sees as essential: “Avatar is not a mimetic of one’s ego, but a probe beyond one’s ownness, as a relationship with community, with the Other” (117). When avatar creation programs fail to allow for non-default bodies, they prevent users from probing in directions that could be productive. Since exploring identities in virtual worlds has the potential to not only foster the broader empathy our design ethic will call for but also draw irl identities into focus, not designing for certain bodies in avatar creations programs denies users the opportunity to learn certain things about themselves and the communities with which they interact.

Toward a Design Ethic

Work toward a design ethic in relation to virtual worlds means first recognizing those virtual worlds not as given but as designed, and to think of that designing as having important implications both in that virtual world and irl. Beth Kolko notes that: “At some point, a designer has to decide which details in virtual space to render, and these decisions include the details of bodies” (180). Developers are working within limits of their own, limits imposed by memory and processors. The type of near photorealistic characters that we see moving in a so close to natural way in big budget films are only ever possible in virtual worlds through cut scenes. That level of detail simply is not possible during gameplay. And even within a more cartoonish aesthetic, like

that used in *Animal Crossing*, developers won't be able to provide all of the detail that they might like. It is troubling, however, when they do not allow for a characteristic that is as common in real life as fat bodies. Harper notes that, "In and of itself, choosing what to include or exclude due to technological or resource limitations is an unavoidable exigency of the process, but these choices can and do reveal gaps and biases that are then widened and even reified by their subsequent distribution into the culture" (275). Some choices must be made, but the fact that the same choice, the exclusion of fat bodies, is made so frequently, points to this choice not being a neutral one.

This erasure of characteristics is all the more troubling when a characteristic that isn't allowed for, like fat, is a site of real life stigmatization and discrimination. Majida Kargbo argues that, "Absence is never merely absence; we are produced by both that which is excluded and included" (163). By excluding fat bodies, *Skyrim*, *Storyboard That*, and *Animal Crossing* reify negative notions about fat, notions that say fat (people) is (are) bad, fat (people) is (are) not pleasant to look at, and fat (people) ought not be allowed. Harper goes on to say that, "we cannot continue to throw out fat bodies when they are technologically inconvenient, as Insomniac Games did with *Sunset Overdrive*. It may be that we need a game world where a fat body is the modular core around which the character creation system is built, rather than a limited range of options that is immediately and problematically marked as deviant" (276). Just as the desks I discussed in chapter 2 are designed with straight sized people as the default and make fat students' time in those spaces very uncomfortable, virtual worlds are often built with straight sized bodies in mind. And just as designing classrooms for fat students wouldn't necessarily negatively affect the comfort of straight sized students and may actually augment it, designing

virtual worlds with fat bodies in mind would not have to preclude thin bodies the way that designing for straight sized bodies is often used as an excuse for not including fat bodies.

In this way, the move from alphabet to images in virtual worlds has restricted the possibilities for identity exploration. Nakamura says this of text-based virtual worlds: “Internet users represent themselves within it solely through the medium of keystrokes and mouse clicks, and through this medium they can describe themselves and their physical bodies any way they like; they perform their bodies as text” (35). With the move into three-dimensional virtual worlds, however, those without enough programming knowledge to mod these worlds surrender some of that freedom of expression to the developers. As Kolko says, “There is tremendous implicit power in designing visual representations of bodies from which people select their ‘selves’” (184). The developers programming virtual worlds have tremendous power over the range of expressions, and thereby identity explorations, within the worlds they create, and they don’t often make space for fat bodies to write themselves. Harper found that, “even the most nuanced avatar creators studied were haunted by an imagined body normativity. These systems mark fat bodies as idiosyncratic or deviant from an imagined norm, construing them narrowly and offering fat players little room for play in their construction” (260). He found a particularly egregious example in Insomniac’s *Sunset Overdrive*, noting that “Fat bodies were entirely absent from this game that promised ‘full control’ of a designed character” (260). These developers have the power to offer a wide range of choices and often do their best to do just that, but they wield the power they have over a world that will be shared and shaped by users to exclude fat bodies.

Some avatar creation programs, like the one in *Second Life*, do allow for fat avatars, but the way the process is laid out still says something about the dominant narratives at play. As

Harper notes, “the most notable considerations raised by the games in this sample come not just from the options that are available to the player, but often from the rhetorical framing of those options” (273). I experimented with making an avatar that resembled myself in *Second Life*, just as I had in *Storyboard That*. The first thing that stood out was that the default avatar, the one on display before any modifications were made, was thin. Harper found the same thing in his exploration of avatar creation programs: “In almost every game I looked at, the first character model the player is presented with when the system opens—the one the developers show first—is typically a body type the character creation system goes on to frame as ‘Normal,’ ‘Default,’ or ‘Average’” (273). To choose to create a fat avatar, then, is marked a deviant act. In addition, the process involved in that deviation is often clunky, making creating a fat avatar difficult and frustrating even when it is possible. In *Second Life* the attributes I needed to manipulate to make a body that resembled mine were spread out over several categories, including “Body,” “Torso,” and “Legs.” After an abandoned attempt, I started over with “Body Thickness.” After adding body fat and experimenting with muscularity features to add thickness, my avatar didn’t seem much closer to what I wanted. I was already feeling discouraged with the process when I decided to play with “Belly Size” and found the limits of *Second Life*’s ability to render clean, realistic images. In short, while *Second Life* does have an advantage over the avatar creator in *Skyrim* that does not allow for fat avatars, the interface has not been designed in such a way that makes doing so easy or appealing.

The decisions made by these designers are not random, but are grounded in ideology, even if the relationship between their decisions and that ideology is not always conscious. Kolko says, “These avatars are what I would call visual aphorisms, and like verbal aphorisms, they reveal what a culture takes to be ‘self-evident truths’” (183). Sometimes that aphorism is an

expression of the user, but all too often, it is an expression of the developers. That critique should not end with the design of virtual worlds, however. Sue Hum argues that even well intentioned developers are limited by their perceptual habits, habits that are “formed by a lifeworld’s inherited meaning systems” (209). She goes on to say that, “Perceptual habits not only interpellate, influencing the manifestation of that designer’s subjectivity, but also circumscribe the potential of Design to enact transformation in each lifeworld” (209). Just as users work within a range of customizable features that is limited by developers’ choices, developers work within a range of design choices limited by how they see the world around them, and how they see the world around them is often unconscious, inherited and internalized without their knowledge or consent.

Sue Hum centers her discussion of perceptual habits around the racialized gaze, but the concept might port¹⁵ well to the gaze through which fat bodies are viewed. Developers are operating within perceptual habits surrounding fat, i.e., they have a habit as seeing fat as bad, unhealthy, and undesirable. They have a habit of viewing fat bodies with disgust and/or pity. When they look at a fat body, they see a lack of willpower, they see the cardinal sins of sloth and gluttony. Developers may be well intentioned. It may be that they do not design for fat bodies because they do not want to encourage the negative behaviors they associate with fat bodies. It may be that they want users to interact in their virtual worlds through an avatar that seems attractive and capable, things that they do not think fat bodies can be. It may also be that they do not want users to experience the sadness that they see as being an inextricable aspect of being fat. Furthermore, just as Hum argues happens with the racialized gaze, attempts by developers to

¹⁵ Port is a term used in computer programming to describe the use software in an environment other than the one for which it was designed. Using it metaphorically here, we might think of the concept of perceptual habits as the software and racialized gaze (original) and fatphobia (alternative) as the environments.

advocate for fat bodies might end up trafficking in many of the same negative stereotypes, only framed with pity rather than disgust.

How developers see, and how we see, is constructed by both irl and virtual interactions with culture. Mirzoeff argues that what we see is not only a passive function of culture, but is controlled by the powerful. He says, “The right to look is not, then, a right for declarations of human rights or for advocacy. It refuses to allow authority to suture its interpretation of the sensible to domination, first as law and then as the aesthetic” (The Right to Look, 476-477). For him, the right to look is a right to see past the dominant narrative. The dominant narrative, often actively reinforced by those in positions of authority, is that fat is both bad and curable, and those in authority not only profit from selling (ineffective) cures but, as I argued in chapter 2, also benefit from the efficiency of systems designed to accommodate a narrow range of bodies rather than to serve all bodies. The right to look is the right to see past those perceptual habits, to see fat in a way we have not seen it before, to be open to and search for new possibilities of what fat could mean. For me, claiming this right to look followed a path from making excuses about fat bodies to claiming that losing weight is impossible to finally seeing that, even if a person is fat for no other reason than their own decisions and behaviors, and even if a that fat person could adjust those decisions and behaviors to become thin, they are still worthy of love and respect now. They still deserve to be represented and accommodated now.

Claiming the right to look, though, does not magically free us from the ways we have been conditioned to see the world. Our perceptual habits were formed to hide structural and systemic inequities, and people who benefit from those inequities are persistently working to reify and reshape perceptual habits behind which they can hide those inequities. These perceptual habits not only affect how we see non-default identities but also haunt how we see default

identities. That there are default identities is evidence of these hauntings. Tammie M. Kennedy, Joyce Irene Middleton, and Krista Ratcliffe introduce the concept of haunting in relation to whiteness. We are haunted by that default and all it brings with it, the unstated assumptions and performances of coded behavior. Just as ghosts are often described as haunting unwelcomed inhabitants of a house that the ghosts see as their own, the hauntings of default identities are at their most visible and aggressive in the face of an unwelcome inhabiting or challenge. Hence, the white supremacy that had been deniable as a seldom seen specter—a passing shadow or motion seen out of the corner of an eye—began to rematerialize when challenged by the election of Barack Obama and is now fully, undeniably, terrifyingly visible. Claiming the right to look, then, must be a continual process. Just as we have learned just how inaccurate were the declarations that we live in a post-racial United States following Obama’s election, this process of continually claiming the right to look has no ending point. Looking, however, is only part of the equation. The effort to effect change must include not only critiques of design and critical engagement with the culture that limits ways of seeing but must also move past criticism and toward positive action. To combat the erasure of non-default bodies in virtual worlds, I will move from a critique of the design of avatar creation software toward a design ethic that forwards identity and inclusivity.

In order to work toward such a design ethic, it could be helpful to start by looking at design thinking and how it is similar to and different from the type of thinking commonly taught in writing classrooms. James Purdy compares the steps for design thinking outlined by the Institute of Design at Stanford—Understand, observe, define, ideate, prototype, test—with some general steps in the writing process—research, analyze audience, brainstorm, write rough draft, share and revise (628). He identifies heavy overlap between the first item in each list and the last

four, but sees no clear analog in the writing process for “observe,” a process by which designers observe members of their intended audience to see how they interact with objects or spaces like the ones they are designing. We could argue that observing takes place over a lifetime, often unconsciously, by observing how different audiences tend to react to certain types of writing, but this doesn’t quite line up with the intentional and temporally limited observation in design thinking. Jay Aquino, however, collapses the first two items of design thinking to a single concept: empathize. It is empathizing that I think is often not made explicit enough in the writing process. We might think of empathy as asking how our choices will make others feel, and it is possible to make choices based on how it will make others feel without having their best interests at heart. I think, though, that the empathy Aquino is arguing for and the empathy I want argue for goes beyond knowing how it will make others feel to feeling how it will make them feel, which would, I hope, guides us toward making choices that we feel will benefit others.

In the context of design thinking, however, empathy tends to have a narrower scope. While the tips Aquino offers, like “listen” and “build relationships” could certainly lead to the sort of broader empathy that can function as a moral compass, this design empathy can also be limited to a specific audience and end goal. For example, listening and building relationships with their target audience (presumably young straight men) with the end goal of designing games they enjoy might have led to the development of things like breast physics and the effort to improve on them since their introduction in 1992 (Hernandez 2015). A broader empathy, one that might have led to a greater focus on developing complex and varied female characters that acted as more than eye candy, could only be developed by looking beyond the target audience to those audiences that were being excluded.

Part of the difficulty in developing this sort of broad empathy through strategies like “listening” and “building relationships” is that the relationship remains designer-to-client, and when it comes to the design of virtual worlds, one end of that relationship is still assumed to be overwhelmingly straight, white and male even though that assumption has long been inaccurate, and empathizing fully across differences marred by structural inequities can be difficult if not impossible. Developing a design ethic that forwards identity and inclusion, then, requires that inclusion extend to the design side. This is reflected in the principles of feminist software design proposed by Justine Cassell:

- transfer design authority to the user
- value subjective and experiential knowledge in the context of computer use
- allow use by many different kinds of users in different contexts
- give the user a tool to express her voice and the truth of her existence
- encourage collaboration among users (304-305)

The second, third, and fourth principles speak to the broad empathy and inclusivity that has traditionally been lacking in the design of virtual worlds, and the first one speaks to the problem of inclusivity in design. If users had design authority, then the design choices should represent the range of identities interacting with these virtual worlds.

As we have seen with avatars, however, the design authority of users is limited by the design choices of developers, especially when those users do not have the programming knowledge to mod virtual worlds. Danielle Nielsen recognizes that this vision of user designed material worlds has failed to materialize, saying “In reality, complete player control . . . within commercial games is impossible, and only players who build and program their own games and share them with select groups of people have complete control” (47). On the surface, allowing

users to customize avatars does grant them some design authority, but this authority falls well short of the control Cassell envisions. Most users lack the technical skills to accept that level of design authority even if it were offered, and anyone who has watched a large number of people try to edit a Google Doc simultaneously knows that such a transfer of authority can yield chaotic results. If transferring design authority to users is infeasible, then the best way to ensure inclusivity in design would be to promote intentional inclusivity on the design side. There are a number of initiatives aimed at training underrepresented identities in programming. Perhaps we can aid these initiatives by asking questions about who is designing the virtual worlds we interact with and favoring those that seem to practice a more intentional inclusivity.

Though the argument here has focused primarily on the erasure of fat bodies in avatar design in virtual worlds, my goal has been to work toward a design ethic that forwards identity and inclusivity across identity markers and that might be ported to other design modes. In the spirit of what Purdy calls a “forward orientation” (620) in design thinking, I want to suggest some possible principles of a design ethic that might grow out of the critical work done here. First, borrowing from Mirzoeff (*The Right to Look*) and Hum, designers should continually claim the right to look beyond perceptual habits. To do so, they and I must be willing to continually question what we think we know and trace that knowledge back to its source. We must look past the curtain of that knowledge and face our own ignorance hiding behind it. It would require that we be aware of our own irl identity and how it positions us in relation to the communities for which we design. This might also require us to challenge structures in which we have found a great deal of comfort, perhaps without realizing it, and that seem inseparable from irl institutions that we hold dear.

This principle is difficult in practice since we are often blind to our own perceptual habits. It can start, however, with listening to not only what underrepresented voices might say about our designs but also what they say about other designs. When we find ourselves or others complicit in designs that exclude or mishandle underrepresented identities, it will be important to move past the urge to assign guilt or blame and focus instead on the ways in which we are accountable for working to dismantle them (Ratcliffe 2005). Examples of this defensiveness have been exhibited by *Halo*'s franchise director, Frank O'Connor (Orry, 2015), and the director of *Metal Gear Solid V: The Phantom Pain*, Hideo Kojima (Schreier, 2015), when they were questioned about design decisions about female characters that seemed to be pandering to straight male audiences. Rather than attempting to justify exclusionary design choices, we should use criticism and reflection to guide us toward more inclusive designs in the future.

Second, pushing beyond commonly used principles of design thinking, designers might work to develop an empathy that is broader than target audiences and end goals. This means listening to and building relationships with not only the people for whom they and I design but also the people who have been excluded due to identity markers or financial concerns. If we believe the work we are doing is beneficial, then we might consider what it would take to make our designs inviting, accessible, and meaningful to people who exist outside the range of our target audience. This would require us to ask not only what it would look like if we were designing for them as well but also why we have not been asked to design for them. What structural inequities have excluded them from this design relationship and how might we challenge those structural inequities?

Developing a broader empathy might also mean changing the way we talk about audience analysis. When we talk about analyzing audiences with an eye toward rhetorical efficacy or

profit potential, we objectify those audiences. We make them the people *to whom* our designs will be delivered or marketed. Instead, we might think about potential audiences and how their inclusion can *affect* our designs. If we view audiences narrowly, looking only at the audiences for whom we have designed in the past, then our designs will resemble what we have designed in the past. If, however, we expand our view of audience to those that have previously been excluded from our analysis, then our designs have the potential to move in profoundly different directions. This should destabilize the way we think of audience analysis and, in so doing, destabilize the way we design in productive ways even if these new directions are unsettlingly unfamiliar. Striving for a broader empathy, then, can positively affect creativity, and allowing broader audiences to guide our designs will not necessarily limit persuasiveness or profitability. A narrow empathy led some to assume that a super hero film with a woman or Black protagonist could not be profitable since the target audience, white men and boys, might struggle to relate to those characters. This was proven very wrong, however, with the success of films like *Wonder Woman* and *Black Panther*,¹⁶ the types of projects which would previously have been considered too financially risky.

Third, we might design to enable robust identity exploration and identity play. At its core, this means rejecting design features that interpellate users into predetermined subject positions, whether forcing them to interact as an assumed default identity or fixing them into an identity based on some aspect of their irl self. This means consciously and intentionally seeking out the hauntings (Kennedy, Middleton, & Ratcliffe 2017) of default identities, those places where users are asked to perform in a way that conforms with an arbitrarily determined convention or

¹⁶ *Wonder Woman* was the first major superhero film to feature a solo female protagonist and grossed over \$800 million worldwide and *Black Panther* was the first major superhero film to feature a solo protagonist of color and grossed over \$1.3 billion worldwide. Both totals provided by Box Office Mojo.

standard. This can be accomplished by designing for greater interactivity and customizability. This might also mean handing over some of the control of our designs. In virtual spaces, this can take the form of more robust customization features for avatars and the spaces they inhabit or making these spaces easier to mod. In less interactive designs, this might take the form of deliberately disrupting the expectations of dominant gazes. In a space like a classroom, as I will discuss in chapter 5, this can take the form of allowing students space to determine their educational path and what they will need to produce to demonstrate progress along that path.

Lastly, we might recognize the limitations of our own identities, that from our positionality, we cannot see fully beyond our perceptual habits, fully empathize with differing identities, or expose all the ways in which default identities haunt our designs. For this reason, it is important to promote intentional inclusivity on the design end. This can take the form of training future designers who don't fit the default, but it should also take the form of including non-default designers in creative processes. For this to work, it has to go beyond just seeking input; we have to be willing to de-center ourselves and hand over design authority. We have to be willing to place ourselves in the consulting roles that we so often ask non-default identities to occupy. And, of course, this must also include fair compensation for the central role we allow non-default identities to take not just in the form of payment for the work done but also in the form of access to the long term, stable careers that default identities often enjoy.

These principles can have a profound positive impact well beyond achieving a communicative purpose or exceeding an audience's expectations. They can help us expose the hauntings of various default identities and put us on the path of exorcising these ghosts. I argue that these principles can be ported to other conversations of identity, inclusivity, and design. What would these mean for identities other than the ones I have focused on? What would these

principles look like in the design of other texts, in the design of classes, departments, offices, and institutions? How might destabilizing how audiences are analyzed destabilize texts and institutions in potentially productive ways? I also recognize the limits of my positionality, that there are aspects of design, identity, and inclusivity that I cannot see from where I stand. I invite readers, then, to take these principles up, to reshape, add to, or replace them with a forward orientation aimed at creating solutions to problems of which I am not yet aware.

In the next chapter, I will turn my focus to the work being done in virtual worlds where the ability to upload images offers more flexibility in the visual representation of bodies. While I think it would be inaccurate to say that the designers of social media platforms like Instagram use a design ethic that forwards identity and inclusions, I would argue that the content creators of Fat Instagram have come closer to this ethic by designing a space within a that virtual world that is intentionally intersectional and allows for more radical discourse. On social media platforms like Instagram, Tumblr, and Twitter, fat bodies have made space to write themselves in ways that may have required programming knowledge in other virtual worlds. What has happened on these social media platforms is indicative of what could happen in virtual worlds that employ avatar creation programs if programmers employ a design ethic that forwards identity and inclusion. Not only would it transform those worlds but I argue that it would also spread transformative potential outside those worlds, tuning both virtual worlds and the irl worlds that users avatar from just as work to make space on social media platforms has influenced the space made for fat bodies to write themselves outside of those platforms by increasing access to clothing and making possible the year of Lizzo.

CHAPTER IV

FAT INSTAGRAM

For just under four minutes, MTV's 2019 Video Music Awards were transformed into an unabashed and unapologetic celebration of fat women of color, a musical homily on radical self-love. The classically trained flautist, rapper, and singer known by her stage name, Lizzo, came out in a long coat and was soon joined by her primarily plus-sized back-up dancers in front of a giant inflatable butt. As she transitioned from her mega-hit "Truth Hurts" to "Good as Hell," the lead single from her debut EP *Coconut Oil*, the coat came off revealing a bright yellow leotard, and she was joined by more plus-sized back-up dancers wearing leotards printed with blue sky and clouds, a transformation that was radiant with significance. Whereas the long coat hid her flesh in the way that so many fat people, especially women who are fat, have been taught to hide theirs, the luminous leotard was exactly the type of garment that women who are fat are not "supposed" to wear because they cannot "pull it off" or "nobody wants to see that." This was a transgressive act, not an assertion of beauty or worth but a proclamation that those things should be presupposed, that there should be no need for anyone to apologize or justify being visible in any outfit. When Lizzo took a break from singing to preach, "It's so hard trying to love yourself in a world that doesn't love you back, am I right? So I wanna take this opportunity right now to feel good as hell because you deserve to feel good as hell! We deserve to feel good as hell!" it

was a sermon she had already delivered by shedding the coat that was hiding her body and being visibly, undeniably and enthusiastically present on that stage.

In the world of popular music, 2019 was the year of Lizzo. She was nominated for eight Grammy awards, winning three, was named Time Magazine's Entertainer of the Year, and her single "Truth Hurts" set a record for longest run at number one for a solo female rapper on Billboard's Hot 100 chart. Like some of her most popular songs, though, Lizzo has been a sleeper hit. Her success came after ten years of grinding, at one point living in her car. "Truth Hurts" was initially released in 2017 and "Good as Hell" in 2016. It was not until after "Truth Hurts" was featured in a scene in the 2019 Netflix original movie, *Someone Great*, that memes playing on the songs opening line went viral: "I just took a DNA test found out (insert phrase in place of *I'm 100% that bitch*)." While I think it would be fascinating to explore the effects of meme culture on the rise of Lizzo, I want to use this chapter to explore another explanation of the curious timing of Lizzo's fame. I will contend that the work of women, trans, and non-binary people who are fat on social media platforms like Instagram has created a cultural moment receptive to Lizzo's message of radical self-love. Just as Lizzo used her own body to emphatically state her message, people who are fat have been using their bodies to recompose their bodies. They have been and continue writing with and through their bodies to recompose bodies that have been decomposed by anti-fat narratives. These bodies not only compose and deliver counternarratives but also are the counternarratives.

The discipline of the learning machine I discussed in chapter 2 and the design choices that restrict the creation of fat avatars I discussed in chapter 3 both represent a sort of decomposition as both work toward creating spaces where fat bodies do not exist. In this chapter, I will look further at how fat bodies are decomposed by viral PSAs that medicalize fat. These

decompositions write fat bodies as gluttonous, lazy, unintelligent, incompetent, slovenly, and lacking in self-control. Furthermore, the weight-loss these PSAs are pushing for writes fat bodies as malleable, personally responsible for being fat, and personally responsible for their own transformation to thinness. Pending this transformation, fat bodies have been pushed to the margins, erased, rendered invisible despite their hypervisibility. Bodies that fail to adhere to what Sharlene Nagy Hesse-Biber calls “the cult of thinness” are barred from full participation in social, romantic, educational, and professional spaces. Fat people, though, have been and are working to recompose their bodies, constructing powerful counternarratives by asserting fat bodies into the spaces from which they have been barred. I will focus on the work of recomposition being done on the social media platform Instagram. Content creators on what I am calling Fat Instagram have employed a variety of rhetorical strategies to recompose fat bodies, including fashion posts, travel writing, memes, short textual statements, and micro-essays. In so doing, they have constructed an online space that, despite being public, provides a relatively safe space to engage in fat positivity.

Decomposition

In their introduction to the special issue, Phil Bratta and Scott Sundvall articulate a distinction between *body* and *embodiment* that will be useful for this chapter. The former operates as a noun and signifies that which is written, and the latter as a verb signifying that which writes. When we think about the context of fat, the fat body has been written over time with certain cultural attitudes, forming dominant narratives that are intensely fat-phobic. Fat bodies have been written as gluttonous, lazy, unintelligent, incompetent, slovenly, and lacking in self-control. New Mexico professor Geoffrey Miller exemplified these attitudes in a tweet in 2013: “Dear obese PhD applicants: if you didn’t have the willpower to stop eating carbs, you

won't have the willpower to do a dissertation #truth." While Miller was censured by the University of New Mexico (Ingeno), his words are indicative of the narratives written on fat bodies that would be nearly impossible not to internalize after spending any length of time in a fat phobic society. When we see a fat body, we see it through the lens of cultural attitudes built up over centuries, and the shading of this lens can be dark enough to prevent us from seeing the physical body before us and their humanity. This writing of fat bodies is exacerbated by the limitations placed on fat embodiment. In chapter two, I discussed how physical structures in the classroom can limit access to educational opportunities, thereby limiting opportunities for fat students to recompose their own bodies. In chapter three, I went into detail about how the design of avatar creation software can limit opportunities for recomposing fat bodies in some spaces. The structural oppression of fat people, born of and perpetuated by fat phobic narratives, limits access to education, employment, medical care, transportation, and clothing, which in turn hinders but cannot erase the fat embodiment through which fat people recompose their bodies.

While all bodies are written, when bodies are written with such negative narratives, they undergo a sort of decomposition. While the term decomposition has been used to articulate concepts around writing and writing instruction, Bratta and Sundvall use the term to refer specifically to the "marginalization, negation, oppression, and death" (1) that happen as a result of "rhetoric and writing studies' (RWS) inability or unwillingness to work with translingualism, cultural dialect, and code-mashing" (1). While the decomposition of fat bodies does not center on the dialects used and accepted in rhetoric and writing studies, they are also decomposed by dominant fat phobic narratives that reenforce structural oppression. One visceral way in which fat bodies are decomposed is through the visual decapitation of what Charlotte Cooper calls "headless fatties," which often appear in news reports about "obesity" and its corresponding

“epidemic.” In these reports, fat people are doing various activities with their heads just out of frame. This is done either to protect the identities of the people being filmed or, more likely to protect the news organization from any liability for using a person’s likeness without their consent. The effect of this decapitation by the camera’s frame robs these fat people, and by extension all fat people, of their humanity. As Charlotte Cooper puts it in “Headless Fatties,”

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

These bodies are decomposed by removing their humanity, by removing the features that we most readily identify as human. They are also decomposed by removing their agency. Headless fatties are not granted any control over how their bodies are portrayed or what is said about their bodies. Their embodiment is denied as their bodies are used for spectacle.

These news reports on the “obesity epidemic” are, of course, part of the larger medicalization of fat bodies, and several medical institutions have used social media to spread campaigns that rely heavily on fatphobia and fat shaming. On September 18, 2013, Children’s Healthcare of Atlanta via Strong4Life—a division that they classify as a “wellness movement” (What is Strong4Life?)—published a video on YouTube called “Rewind the Future.” The description they provide reads as follows: “Meet Jim—the character in our Rewind the Future video—he is a man whose life flashes right before his very eyes, unhealthy habits and all. The

choices you teach your child today become the habits they take into their adulthood.” The video begins with an overhead shot of Jim in a sweat stained polo, being wheeled on a gurney into the center of an emergency operating room. It then switches to Jim’s perspective as health care professionals place an oxygen mask on his face and begin discussing his situation:

Alright, what do we got?

Just came in. Heart attack. Five-nine, three hundred pounds, thirty-two years old.

How the hell does that happen?

The video then constructs a narrative of how that happened in the form of a series of brief scenes narrating Jim’s life from his perspective in reverse chronological order from the moment he began having a heart attack to his mother feeding him in a high chair as a small child. Some of the scenes, many of which last for less than a second, do include cliched positive memories like his graduation and birthdays, though the birthday scenes are focused on cakes and could be read as one of the causes of his being fat. Most of the scenes, however, are clearly negative, showing Jim struggling with everyday activities because of his weight, Jim or his parents engaging in behaviors that could have contributed to his weight gain, or attempts at intervention aimed at either ending the habits that could have contributed to weight gain or encouraging habits that could contribute to weight loss.

The final episode in the reverse chronological sequence features Jim’s mother feeding him fries despite the contestation of another adult female: “I still can’t believe you give this child French fries.” Jim’s mother responds, through clenched teeth and a forced smile, “I know, but it’s the only thing that’ll make him stop.” The video then speeds forward chronologically back through the episodes before cutting to a black screen with white text: “Your child’s future,” and returning to the overhead shot of Jim on the gurney with his shirt being cut off by a nurse and

more white text: “doesn’t have to look like this.” The video ends with a return to the black screen and more white text: “There’s still time to reverse the unhealthy habits our kids take into adulthood./We’ll show you how./Strong4Life.com.” Jim’s body, and by extension, the bodies of other fat people, are written by this PSA as slothful, gluttonous, inherently unhealthy, and blame is written on the bodies of both the bodies themselves and their parents.

“Rewind the Future” is, itself, problematic for several reasons. Two healthcare professionals in the reverse chronological sequence repeat the same phrase, first to Jim and then to Jim’s mom as he looks on, “You have to make a change.” This PSA relies heavily on appeals to shame and fear, appeals that are, by their nature, ethically troubling, and both the video and the description place the blame for Jim’s heart attack on the mother, reinforcing patriarchal structures by generating fear and shame in mothers who might perceive themselves or be perceived by others as not devoting adequate amounts of time and energy to the care and nurture of their children. Unfortunately, some of the commenters who had a problem with the mother blame in the PSA chose to refocus attention on personal responsibility with heavy doses of fat shame, like BlokeOzzie who wrote “If someone hasn't figured out that being a fat tub of lard is bad for you by the age of eighteen, and hasn't started to do something about it by then, don't blame the parent; blame the person themselves.” To challenge the “You have to make a change” directed on the mother, BlokeOzzie has simply focused on the “You have to make a change” directed at Jim.

“Rewind the Future” is not an isolated incident. It is only part of the larger medicalization of fat bodies, attempts by medical professionals and experts to write fat bodies rather than allowing those bodies to write themselves. Healthcare organizations have sought to extend the reach of their writing of fat bodies through the production of PSAs. In 2011, Strong4Life

published a series of billboards and corresponding videos. This campaign, the videos of which are listed on YouTube simply as “Warning Ads,” featured children in bleak black and white photography and with monologues drawing attention to hypertension and bullying, the latter in a way that directed the blame for bullying toward the child’s being fat rather than toward the bully or the culture of fat stigma that enables such bullying. The ads drew controversy primarily for their use of children in appeals to fear and shame. One video made explicit the implicit mother blame that runs through the ads as a fat boy asks the actress across from him on a set shrouded mostly in shadow, “Mom, why am I fat?” Many of the videos feature the phrase “Stop Sugar Coating It, Georgia,” which functions as a double entendre: in a literal sense, stop feeding children so much sugar, and in a figurative sense, stop trying to downplay children’s “obesity,” as though these children are only fat because no one has expressed the severity of the problem even though some of the children in the videos reference being bullied for their weight. The “Stop Sugar Coating” campaign had received a lot of critical attention, including a failed change.org petition (Turner), and was one of the campaigns used in a study gauging the intention of viewers to comply with messages in ads that they viewed as negative as compared to ads that they viewed as positive. Unsurprisingly, the viewers rated these PSAs as very negative and communicated little intention to comply (Puhl, Peterson, and Luedicke). When Strong4Life published “Rewind the Future” in 2013, they did so while fully aware of the criticism surrounding their earlier anti-fat campaign.

In *Image-Music-Text*, Roland Barthes argues that text can “anchor” an image, limiting ways that the image will be read (38-39). For instance, a roughly round, reddish shape could be any number of things, but if the text “tomato” appears beneath it, the reddish shape is anchored to the concept “tomato,” and an audience will tend to read the reddish shape as a tomato.

Likewise, the text that appears on the “Stop Sugar Coating It, Georgia” billboards anchors the way that these images of children will be read. The word “WARNING” in bright red and all caps beneath each photo makes it clear that these images of children are portraying something dangerous. The text that appears below “WARNING” further anchors the images of children, text like, “my fat may be funny to you but it’s killing me.” Not only are we not meant to see an image that elicits laughter but we are also not meant to see a child with a long and happy future. We are meant to see this child in the shadow of her own mortality. We are meant to see her decomposed.

Sociologist Catherine Connell witnessed the decomposition caused by the medicalization of fat when she submitted a guest blog to *Sociological Images*, discussing the Tumblr community *Fa(t)shion February*. Responses were as disheartening as they were predictable, focusing mainly on the medical decomposition of fat. An example comment she provides starts off like this:

Wait a second here, so we’ve now got a movement that is celebrating the physical consequences of food-addiction and trying to paint the disease of obesity as beautiful? You know a group of people that are even more marginalized than fat people? Methamphetamine users. Maybe they should start their own fashion movement that celebrates rotting teeth and emaciated, track-marked arms. (218)

Such a sickening response is only reasonable within the medicalized and ominous view of fat propagated by health care organizations like Strong4Life and the media outlets that follow their lead. As Connell puts it, “by framing fatness as an epidemic, the user is able to argue that the celebration of fatness does a public disservice, to fat people and to others around them” (219). This medical framing, decomposing fat bodies, enables and encourages painting images black

and white and slapping a bright red “WARNING” across them, and once an image has been painted that way, it can be difficult for others to see it clearly. Connell notes that “the disease and addiction frames set the terms of the debate and made it difficult for commenters to move the discussion beyond [that]” (219). When fat people and their allies are put in a position where they have to argue for the humanity of fat bodies, to argue that the bodies being decomposed by medical rhetoric are worthy of some modicum of love and respect, it is difficult to have more complex and nuanced conversations about recomposition of those bodies.

It is not impossible, however, to recompose fat bodies in a positive light. In *Rhetorics of Display*, Lawrence Prelli argues that images can similarly limit our verbal responses to text. The I Stand Against Weight Bullying campaign (Wann), which also featured black and white photos of fat bodies, was a direct and positive response to the Strong4Life campaign. Though it has been rightly criticized for not being intersectional enough, the campaign featured photos of fat women smiling, singing, and engaging in positive activities, the stark red text replaced by a softer fuchsia. The positive visual language in these images limits the range of responses. Likewise, an image posted by @mskristine on March 1, 2020 features her standing on a beach in an orange bikini and a flowing orange cover up that trails in the water. The white sand is clearly visible beneath the remarkably clear water that fades into a beautiful aquamarine as it approaches the horizon. There’s a smile on her face and her mirrored shades reflect her orange bikini as she stares to the photographer’s right. In a sense, this is the type of image that fat people are not supposed to post for fear of judgment. Beach pics are supposed to feature “bikini bodies,” after all. The glamour of this photograph, however, limits the reasonable verbal responses. The composition of this image clearly communicates that this is a woman who is successful, happy, and enjoying her life regardless of whether any of that extends beyond the cultivated and

captured moment. How could such a woman be lazy or unintelligent? How could such a woman be slovenly or unkempt? The composition of this image greatly limits the anti-fat stereotypes that can be repeated in response. This image recomposes fat bodies as successful, empowered, happy, put together. While a Fat Instagrammer cannot control the types of comments made underneath their photographs short of deleting unwanted comments or shutting down the comments section altogether, she can limit which responses to an image are reasonable through the composition of that image.

Contrast this with the headless fatties mentioned earlier. Not only does cropping someone's head out of an image draw attention to the body, but by removing the part of the body most likely to evoke a sense of empathy in the viewer, verbal responses that attribute a sense of humanity to the image are made less likely. When viewing a headless fatty in the context of a news report on the "obesity epidemic," one would not generally respond by saying, "actually, that person looks pretty happy," or "that person looks like they're struggling emotionally and I'm not sure that reports like this are helping." The range of potential verbal responses is anchored by the headless body, and while some might respond positively to those bodies, the images more often tap into existing fatphobia. In addition, being able to see someone's face might limit voyeuristic responses. Staring at and judging someone's body while their face is visible can evoke a twinge of guilt or a fear of being discovered, but removing the face makes guilt and fear less likely. It's worth noting here that, since *Rewinding the Future* is shot primarily in the first person, we only see Jim's face while he's unconscious in the hospital. Even when faces are shown in Strong4Life's PSAs, the sets, dialogue, and character portrayals create an overall tone that makes utterances of disgust or sympathy the most likely verbal responses. When given control of their portrayal and messaging, however, fat Instagrammers are able to show their

faces, control their settings, and show off all of the things that make them happy and human, anchoring the reasonable range of responses to their images.

Recomposition

Just as social media has been used to decompose fat bodies, it can also be a powerful tool for recomposing fat bodies by constructing counternarratives that resist dominant anti-fat narratives. One reason for this is that it allows users to create content free from some of the restrictions imposed by the gatekeepers of traditional media. There are parallels between the work being done by fat bodies on platforms like Instagram and what Kevin Michael DeLuca described in his 1999 article as “image events,” protests meant draw attention from traditional media outlets in which activists were “using their bodies to create compelling images that attract media attention” (10). Just as was the case with DeLuca’s image events, for many Fat Instagrammers, “The body is front and center in their arguments for it is the body that is at stake—its meanings, its possibilities, its care, and its freedoms” (17). Also, just as some of the activists DeLuca writes about “are enacting a defiant rhetoric of resistance” (17), and Fat Instagrammers enact a similar rhetoric by openly and unapologetically existing in a social media space that is open to the public.

One key difference between the image events of a media landscape dominated by television and the work done on Fat Instagram is the access activists have to the means to broadcast their arguments. As DeLuca points out, many activists in the television age were “Unable to buy time like corporations and mainstream political parties do, groups such as Earth First!, ACT UP, and Queer Nation ‘buy’ air time through using their bodies to create compelling images that attract media attention” (10). These groups were able to reach wider audiences with their bodies by enticing traditional media outlets through spectacle and disruption. By entrusting

the spread of their message to media outlets with which they had no affiliation, though, these groups had to relinquish some control over that message. As DeLuca puts it, “since these groups do not own their time, they know neither if they will be allowed to speak nor for how long. In addition, as radical groups questioning societal orthodoxies, they can expect news organizations to frame them negatively as disruptors of the social order” (10). Spectacle and disruption are still used to compete for attention and help speed up circulation on social media, but spectacle and disruption are not necessary prerequisites for appearing on social media. Also, by posting on social media, users do relinquish some control over how their message will be taken up and remixed, but with the ability to post their own commentary on their images and delete/block comments and commentors that they find offensive, activists on social media have more control over how images of their bodies are framed. While both the activists in DeLuca’s image events and Fat Instagrammers “call on society to care” by “making their bodies visible, present, exposed” (18), social media has made it easier for an activist to control how images of their body are framed, thereby making it easier to cultivate a wide following through positive messaging.

In addition to circumventing some of the gatekeepers of traditional media and allowing for more control over the messaging, social media also allows greater and more immediate interaction with the texts created, and the opportunities for uptake and remix afforded by new media may also increase users’ identification with individuals in a movement and the movement as a whole. Burke, as Racliffe notes in *Rhetorical Listening*, saw an audience’s identification with a speaker as preceding persuasion. Warnick and Heineman discuss Burkean identification as it functions online, noting that “social media are rhetorically significant not only because of the ways in which they connect people to one another discursively but also because of their greater cultural role as a form of self-expression” (102). This self-expression, or as Warnick and

Heineman put it earlier “the possibility of self-persuasion or creative participation with a text” allows users greater opportunity to interact with and participate in social movements, increasing their identification with those movements. Consuming positive messaging from a marginalized group can certainly increase a user’s identification with the movement, but the ability to comment and potentially receive a reply from the poster can increase that identification further, and actually being able to produce content and interact can increase that identification even more. While the image events described by DeLuca showed viewers something that had happened in the past and showed them the sort of thing in which they might participate in the future by contacting organizers or organizing their own, Fat Instagram is an ongoing event in which users can participate by uploading a photo and including some hashtags and an @ or two.

Ratcliffe does note, however, that Burkean identification can be a tricky endeavor. She says, “But identifications, especially cross-cultural identifications, are sometimes difficult to achieve. Such identifications may be troubled by history, uneven power dynamics, and ignorance” (2). It is not difficult to imagine how uptake and remix can be used against marginalized bodies. While a Google image search for Lizzo memes generates mostly results that use images of Lizzo or Lizzo’s lyrics in positive and inspirational ways, scrolling down will eventually reveal memes that use Lizzo’s images, lyrics, or quotes to fat shame her. Controlling how one’s body is framed or controlling the narrative can be difficult when dealing not with face-to-face interactions but with trolls and shitposters online who are predisposed to not see the humanity in decomposed bodies. As Catherine Connell learned when posting about *Fa(t)shion February* on *Sociological Images*, concern trolls can hijack the comments section. She notes that “the co-moderator of *Sociological Images* made a rare decision to close comments, noting in her final comment that ‘I have a suspicion the conversation will continue like this as long as I let it’

(220). Sometimes the best course of action to protect oneself and the community is to block the shitposters and focus on the community that already identifies.

While the challenges with identification can be daunting, those bravely putting themselves out there after harrowing encounters with trolls, or worse, are doing necessary work. The recomposition of decomposed bodies requires repetition. In their article “Fashionably Voluptuous: Normative Femininity and Resistant Performative Tactics in Fatshion Blogs.” Sociologist Anu Harju and Economist Annamari Huovinen use Judith Butlers concept of gender as a performative act when analyzing fatshion blogs. They are “viewing the acts of identity construction as discursive repetitions guided by normative beauty ideals,” going on to say that, “the capacity of fatshion blogging to constitute resistant action lies in a different kind of repeating” (1604). One body performing one act might be dismissed, ignored, or fetishized, but with the repetition of performative acts across a larger movement, decomposed bodies can be recomposed. Instagram can be a productive place to showcase repeated performative acts, since as Hariman and Lucaites argue, “Democratic culture now depends on a stream of images in the public media, just as before it depended on the reproduction of public spaces or statuary” (300). The infinite scroll on Instagram, the ability to follow tens, hundred, or thousands of accounts, and the ability control which accounts you see posts from can form a sort of personal public space, or a space made up of and by a cultivated public.

This cultivation often follows community networks. Users often decide which accounts to follow based on which posts get liked or reposted by the accounts they already follow. In the aggregate, the personal again becomes public or shared as users follow the accounts that have followed each other. The result is something that begins to take on cohesion, much as Hariman and Lucaites suggest of images in public media, “The intelligence that results is inherently

flickering, variable, modulated and ultimately composite” (300). The repetition of positive images of fat bodies, made possible on a platform like Instagram, forms a composite of fat positivity operating like a public space. Just as people might go to a public park to meet-up, relax, or feel inspired, users can opt into Fat Instagram as a space where they can meet likeminded people, possibly let their guard down and get rejuvenated, or get inspired to engage in activism or just work on changing their relationship with their own body. This is, I believe, why the work being done on Instagram is so important. Aside from the fact that social media allows users to create content free from some of the restrictions imposed by the gatekeepers of traditional media, social media allows for a connectivity which, when combined with the afforded speed of distribution and redistribution, forms composite public spaces of images, and posters are able to control the tone of that messaging. Just as public spaces use landscape, architecture, and monuments to inspire positive sentiments toward public civic institutions, the communities formed around marginalized identities on Instagram can recompose fat bodies through “a different kind of repeating” (Harju and Huovinen, 1604).

Fat Instagram

This work of recomposing fat bodies is being done across a variety of platforms, but I want to focus on the work of recomposing bodies being done on Instagram largely because, as a platform, it foregrounds still images, which enables content creators to foreground their own bodies to recompose their bodies, though not all choose to do so. While I do want to recognize the rhetorical elements added in the comments, Instagram’s interface heavily prioritizes the post over the comments. The relative size of the comments and the scrolling action mean that it is quite possible for users to interact with the often highly imagistic posts without interacting meaningfully with the comments. What I am referring to here as Fat Instagram is a collection of

activists and influencers connected by the work they do on Instagram that pushes back against anti-fat narratives. Within this interface, the bodies that fat people choose to display are central to the way that users interact with their posts and accounts, and even though every body displayed constitutes a powerful political act, these content creators employ very different visual rhetorical strategies. These different strategies are both about counteracting and stripping the power from stereotypes. Some creators counteract the stereotypes that fat people are lazy, unintelligent, and unproductive by posting images that assert middle class success and others work to strip the power from stereotypes by posting images of themselves that are more raw but still demand love and respect. Some post images of their bodies exquisitely posed and adorned with the latest fashion trends and some assert in their images that the degree to which they are “flatteringly” posed or clothed is irrelevant to whether they deserve to be treated as human beings.

Fat Instagram functions as a corner of the fatosphere, which Lauren Gurrieri and H el ene Cherrieri define as “a loosely interconnected network of online resources aimed at creating a safe space where individuals can counter fat prejudice, resist misconceptions of fat, engage in communal experiences and promote positive understandings of fat,” and many of the content creators on Fat Instagram are active in other corners of the fatosphere, including YouTube, Twitter, Tumblr, blogs, and websites. The collection of creators I am focusing on in this paper is not an exhaustive list of those who are using Instagram’s platform to push back against anti-fat narratives. I came by this collection of creators somewhat organically. @yrfatfriend was a content creator who I already followed on Twitter, I heard about @fat_baaaby through the *She’s All Fat* podcast, and my wife recommended a few fat positive creators who she follows. From

there, I allowed Instagram’s recommendation algorithm to direct me to other creators and followed those who identified as fat and posted fat positive content.

There were some limitations to this approach. In her article “Constructing Research, Constructing the Platform: Algorithms and the Rhetoricity of Social Media Research,” Leigh Gruwell argues that “algorithms not only construct social media platforms, but they also serve as a stark example of how researcher identity shapes any (digital) research project” (3). Though I have not directly contributed to any of the conversations being had on Instagram concerning fat acceptance or positivity, and though the connections between the content creators I have chosen to focus on here existed outside of anything I have done, the parameters of the Fat Instagram I will refer to in this paper are constructed from my activity. I supplied data on which Instagram’s algorithms could act, both in preparing for this project and in my personal usage of the account. Furthermore, because these algorithms are often occluded for proprietary reasons, as Dustin Edwards and Bridget Gelms note in their “Special Issue Introduction—The Rhetorics of Platforms: Definitions, Approaches, Futures” (4), it is impossible to know just how my input over time affected the formation of the list of creators who I have chosen to focus on here.

Sometimes, in fact, the output produced by an algorithm as it interacts with existing data and user input is the opposite of what one might expect. In her book *Fattily Ever After*, Stephanie Yeboah¹⁷ describes discovering fat positive content creators on Tumblr while searching for content with an anti-fat bias.

“Because of the types of food and weightloss-heavy posts I was engaging in, I guess the algorithm started showing me all blogs that had anything to do with bodies . . . while

¹⁷ I have chosen to leave in this quote by Yeboah because of what it contributes to the discussion about algorithms, but I thoroughly condemn her antisemitic comments and was not satisfied with her apology and response at the time. I have stopped following her work and am therefore unaware of anything she may have done or not done to atone in the past year.

scrolling through my feed to look for the latest fitspo “before and after” post, I’d have to scroll through huge amounts of self-love and self-appreciation posts by fat womxn” (17-18)

In this case, the algorithms sent her in a rather fortunate direction. It is likely, however, that users on Tumblr and other platforms have gone in search of fat positive materials only to wind up in the festering swamps of fat hatred that abound on social media. For researchers, a lack of knowledge about the specifics of a given algorithm and other users’ input introduces a degree of uncertainty about the results, and just as imbedding oneself into a community in order to study it necessarily alters that community, interacting with a social media platform in order to study it will necessarily alter the data set upon which algorithms operate. Because of this, I do not know where the boundaries of what could be called Fat Instagram are located nor do I know where the collection of creators I have compiled fall within those boundaries. I also do not know what roles my race, gender, or socioeconomic class might have played in Instagram’s recommendations. I do know, however, that the collection I will focus on here consists of a range of connected creators who employ a variety of rhetorical strategies to recompose fat bodies.

While the main focus of this chapter will be on content creators who use images of their bodies to recompose their bodies, I do want to begin by recognizing the other important work done on Fat Instagram. In the chat rooms that LeBesco wrote about in *Revolting Bodies?*, the fact that bodies were not visually represented led to their perceived absence, which made passing as thin possible for people who were fat. In those text based spaces, drawing attention to the non-defaultness of one’s own body could be a powerful political act. While Instagram’s interface privileges the visual, utilizing what Joddy Murray refers to as non-discursive rhetoric, there are activists who choose to practice a more discursive rhetoric. @yrfatfriend started her work toward

fat acceptance by posting to a blog and moved to Twitter before expanding to Instagram, and her preference for the discursive could be read as a carryover from her early involvement on more text-based platforms. Many of her most recent posts replicate twitter threads as they span multiple slides, with one slide after another continuing a story or argument. Other posts are simply white text over an ombré background directing followers to her bio where there is a link to her website where she's posted a new essay. Her preference for the discursive has not prevented her from cultivating a substantial following on Instagram, and she is connected to many of the other creators on Fat Instagram, but the platform does throw her preference for the discursive into sharper relief.

If drawing attention to one's non-defaultness in a text-based space constituted a political act, on a platform like Instagram where images are the dominant form of communication and images that include bodies are ubiquitous, denying access to images of one's body can also take on a political connotation. Until the announcement of her forthcoming book in a post on September 9, 2020, @yrfatfriend had made the decision to remain both anonymous and visually absent. @yrfatfriend discussed her decision to remain anonymous on the podcast *She's All Fat*, and part of her reasoning was professional, based on the fear that being public about her fat politics might hinder her ability to do her job: "in my field I was well known enough and this was enough of a credibility killer like having fat politics will make people stop paying attention to you." Another reason was her own personal safety:

"as I started writing the number of you know threats to my physical safety were really sort of through the roof and some of that is baseline like so you're a woman on the internet stuff and some of it and some of it is really uh feels enhanced by not just being a woman on the internet but being a woman on the internet writing very honestly and with

some degree of vulnerability about like what it's like to be fat and to not try not to be fat.”

@yrfatfriend's decision making was largely about her personal, professional, and physical safety. She is writing honestly and vulnerably about being fat, but denying access to her body and identity, denying access to those who police fat bodies online. Though it may not have been her motivation, denying access to her body is an act of defiance.

By limiting or denying access to their bodies, content creators like @thefatsextherapist, @fat_baaaby, and @yrfatfriend free up space to be more discursive and, in some ways, more directly political. In a post on May 3, 2019, @thefatsextherapist speaks directly to those who may agree with her race and gender politics but not her fat politics, “you're not progressive or radical or lefty if you're also fatphobic,” pointing out a blind spot common among progressives. On July 24, 2019, @fat_baaaby posted a GIF of a man laughing with text displayed above: “Me losing followers upon posting a more explicitly fat-positive meme after one that was easier for ppl to depoliticize.” Just as body positivity has been largely depoliticized, that is, divorced from the fight against the structural oppression that fat people face, images without text on a platform like Instagram can run the risk of being depoliticized to a degree. Part of what makes a lot of the posts from Fat Instagram powerful is their insistence on treating as positive the types of bodies that have for too long been forced into negative representation. This positivity, though, can conceal the more negative aspects of the structural oppression that fat people face, especially when viewed by audiences that have not experienced that oppression. As @yrfatfriend puts it in a post from February 9, 2020, “Often, thin women think my challenges are internal—'body image' & 'self esteem.' Those are their challenges. But they aren't mine. Mine are access to health care, transportation. Mine are basic respect, street harassment.” This is what makes these

more discursive accounts powerful and necessary. Their arresting nature forces users to confront the reality that there are people who are fat who feel strongly that they are the targets of shaming, stigma, and structural oppression. They may feel seen, emboldened, empowered, skeptical, angry, or disgusted, but if they read the text, it will have some kind of effect, and it would be impossible to come away with a vague sense of body positivity.

Fatshionistas

Content creators on Fat Instagram have used more discursive forms of rhetoric to great effect, and the less ambiguous nature of that rhetoric makes it much more difficult to depoliticize, or to consume without facing its fat positive stance. As Joddy Murray argues “discursive language works best when it reifies and reduces complexity and ambiguity as it goes along” (5), and it is when they accomplish that lack of ambiguity that the political in posts from @yrfatfirend, @fat_baaaby, and @thefatsextherapist is made impossible to ignore. Murray, however, also sees power in the ambiguity of the non-discursive when he argues “it is a form not limited to the chain-of-reasoning we require in discursive text. Its strength, in part, is that it can accommodate meaning unsuited to sequencing—unutterable, affective, ephemeral—and that there are connections through images that may lead to further articulation” (5). A July 16, 2020, post by @ushshi, for example, features her awash in waves of warm neon colors wearing a white dress with red polka dots, one dramatic sleeve unfurled and disappearing into the pink light in the upper right corner. The composition is bold, a photoshopped background bleeding into and blending with @ushshi’s bust with her eyes closed and face turned upward, awash in spiritualness. The subject of the photograph, @ushshi herself, a fat woman of color, is one we do not generally see in this type of image. As @fat_baaaby articulates fat women are expected to be “as plain and muted as possible,” yet there is @ushshi again, in a July 10, 2020, image, covered

in lens flares from the reflection of her color sequined dress. These images reach out and grab the gaze that fat women are supposed to avoid. They communicate pride and power, a refusal to be silenced. They reclaim that which has been denied, color, sparkle, attention, subjectivity, the right to exist.

Just as @yrfatfriend and @fat_baaaby denying access to their bodies allows more space for the type of unambiguous discursive rhetoric that can be undeniably political, the decision by @ushshi and many others to use their bodies to recompose their bodies allows them to communicate difficult to articulate meanings in a way that is both deeply personal and broadly human. Looking at the insights of neuroscience on the role of image in non-discursive rhetoric, Murray argues that “image is not only a basic unit of thought in the brain—the progenitor of language and a component of reason—but image also *shapes* the brain, constructs pathways and nodes which make up such potentialities as personality, health, and acumen” (6). Images have the power to shape who we are, and just as images of normalized beauty standards reproduce in us Hesse-Biber’s “cult of thinness,” images like those posted on Fat Instagram may have the power to rewrite that conditioning. Harju and Huovinen argue that “One’s body is indeed such a visible, temporally and spatially continuous sign that to make any statement with and by it would resonate with much larger audience than a verbal expression ever could” (1621). This resonance can stir a variety of emotions as images of fat bodies carry with them the decomposition to which they have been subjected, but the repetition of images of fat bodies presented in ways and settings that run counter to that decomposition have the power to recompose those bodies, to shift the tone of that resonance.

One significant way that fat women shift the tone of that resonance by using their bodies to recompose their bodies on Fat Instagram is through fatshion. Harju and Huovinen write that

“As the fat body has become the object of public negotiation and scrutiny, fatshion blogging is an ostensive effort to claim ownership of one's body” (1613). The claiming of ownership through fatshion is an act of recomposition. The fat women doing this work are commonly referred to as fatshionistas, which marketing researchers Lauren Gurrieri and H el ene Cherrier define as “a fat female who disrupts normalised understandings of beauty and its social categories via active participation in cultural fields of beauty” (278). It is worth emphasizing that this disruption comes as a result of merely participating. In a post on October 4, 2020, @kirstyleanneuk talks about the reactions to an earlier video on her account, a video of her wearing a bikini to the beach for the first time, saying that “Honestly, I didn’t realise a video of a happy fat girl in a bikini was going to make people so mad 🤪💩”. The rather innocuous video was originally posted on another social media platform, Tik Tok, and can be accessed through the Reels sections of her profile. At around five seconds the video features her kneeling in the sand with the words “I’ve only ever worn a bikini at home and at a private villa before, which means this was my first time wearing a bikini on the beach!” superimposed toward the top. While many of the video’s comments were positive, she also encountered concern trolls like those mentioned by Catherine Connell. In an act of defiance to those claiming she was “promoting obesity,” @kirstyleanneuk created a mock cover for a magazine, which she titled Promoting Obesity, and posted it to her account.

One of the performative acts that Gurrier and Cherrier identify through which “fatshionistas (re)negotiate cultural notions of beauty” is mobilizing fat citizenship. Fat Instagram is, itself, a sort of fat citizenship that can serve a couple of purposes. First, it enables the creation of fat accepting spaces. Apryl Williams notes that “Fat accepting spaces (both on- and offline) are intended to be safe arenas of support in which members of various communities

can feel free to be themselves without worrying about being policed according to normative beauty standards, (3) and while Fat Instagram might not offer as much safety as a closed Facebook group or Tumblr page, it does create a space where fat people are much more likely to see positive representations of people who look like them and positive feedback on the images they share. After all, once one has discovered the loosely connected group of content creators that make up Fat Instagram, following enough of them to flood one's feed with fat positive images is relatively easy. While negative comments and commentors do need to be culled periodically, the recomposition of fat bodies in spaces like Fat Instagram also makes possible a great deal of positive support. Second, the collective power of Fat Instagram allows for further, more direct recomposition. As Connell argues, "it also empowers users to critique hegemonic fashion discourses and to publicly imagine more egalitarian and radical alternatives" (221). Fat citizenship provides the safety in numbers necessary for resistance, produces a feedback loop of recomposition in which content creators are inspired by others' posts to engage in their own acts of recomposition, and also provides an accepting space to which one can retreat when self-care is needed.

Not only do many of the content creators on Fat Instagram connect by following and interacting with each other's accounts but they also collaborate on content. In a March 7, 2020, post by @gabifresh, she is joined poolside by @jazzmynejay, @kellyaugustine, @calliethorpe, @nicolettemason, @missalexlarosa, @nataliemeansnice, and @alexmichaelmay, all fatshion bloggers. The post is, on one level, an endorsement for @swimsuitsforall, a brand specializing in plus size swimwear, which can help other fat women find swimwear that looks good and fits properly. This is also a photograph of a group of fat women poolside in a tropical locale defiantly resisting the mandate to hide their flesh in a way that seems to increase exponentially with their

numbers. They are staring forward, most of them in sunglasses and several with hands on hips, their unsmiling faces projecting a sternness that almost dares potential viewers to make a disparaging comment and suffer the consequences. They are at once seeking to help those in their position and challenging the cultural norms that put people like them in a position where they would need that help. This fat citizenry helps each other, keeps each other safe, and takes the fight to those who would decompose them.

Another one of the performative acts that Gurrier and Cherrier identify is “flaunting fat,” which they argue “involves socially transgressive acts of “breaking the rules” established by the beauty and fashion industries” (286). The rules being broken are not the mundane fashion rules that apply to everyone, like not wearing black shoes with a brown belt; they are rules that apply specifically to fat people, like not wearing horizontal stripes. Adhering to the rules has consequences. Referencing the work of Australian fatshion blogger Definatalie, Gurrier and Cherrier write “For Definatalie, flattering ‘erases human beings and our natural diversity’ and perpetuates the dangerous idea that women should undergo hours of beauty work in order to ‘blend in perfectly’. By trying to dress in a way that ‘tricks’ people into thinking her appearance is different, Definatalie fears she is ‘nullifying parts of my body. My self’” (289). Flaunting fat involves rejecting the idea that fat women ought to dress in a way that makes them look thinner, or that does not draw attention, or that covers as much flesh as possible. Fatshionistas, therefore, tend to actively draw attention to themselves and their fat.

One way this is done is by wearing bright colors. An October 5, 2020, post from @iambeauticurve features her in a teal dress and teal leather jacket, and begins her caption with “Why do we sometimes feel like it’s ok to wear all black but not all any other color?” In contrast, the self-described “cottage goth in the city,” @margotmeanie, tends to draw attention with her

black clothing and goth style. In a June 26, 2020 post, she's wearing a black top, flowing black wraparound skirt with white patterning, black heels, and a white mask with black spider web patterning. @margotmeanie, @iambeauticurve, and other fatshionistas make style choices that draw attention. They recompose their bodies by using clothes to assert their presence, to be visible. Another way fatshionistas flaunt fat is with exposed flesh. Many fatshionistas will post photographs of themselves in swimwear to endorse products, make recommendations, or like @kirstyleanneuk, just do something that they may have been afraid to do in the past. Some fatshionistas post photographs of themselves in lingerie. @gabifresh uses such posts to endorse a line of lingerie whereas @fatgirlflow uses a photograph of herself in lingerie in May 20, 2020 post to communicate both the vulnerability of her post and that she "learned that I am worthy ALWAYS. Not just with a goal in mind." Others still, like @ushshi and @mustangsallytwo have posted nude photographs to their Instagram accounts. This refusal to hide flesh echoes Fat Heffalump's call to "get out there and just fat all over the place" in response to the marginalization of decomposition (Gurrieri and Cherrier 287). These performative acts recompose fat as something that does not need to be hidden and fat bodies as ones that should be celebrated in the same ways as those that adhere more closely to normative beauty ideals.

It is worth noting that, while fatshion can be a defiant act of resistance against fatphobia, it also serves a very practical purpose, i.e., helping women find clothes when the fashion industry seems dedicated to decomposing their bodies through erasure. Clothing selection for fat people is slowly improving in many areas, but with many stores refusing to carry larger sizes and specialty stores still carrying a limited selection, finding clothes while fat is difficult. In an interview with Katie Manthey, fatshion blogger Lolly comments on that difficulty:

“I think this is the main problem for fat people, that they often can’t find things that fit them, so basically if you found something that fit you, you would buy three of it, because you might not find anything again for a year. I did things that, where I had a top that I had in three different colors, which I wore every day, for about two years, because that’s all I could find that fit me.” (Manthey and Lolly 197)

I can personally attest to having had similar experiences. If I find an article of clothing that looks presentable and in which I am comfortable, I am going to buy it in every available color, maybe even twice over. With my particular body shape, belts are extremely uncomfortable for me, even after following @chubstr’s advice from a post on 6 January 2019 to buckle the belt to the side instead of in front. When I found golf pants at Walmart that had enough stretch in the waist to stay up on their own and could pass as the type of slacks one might wear to work, I bought eight pairs despite their only coming in four colors.

Despite these experiences, I recognize that, when I dressed masculine, my gender made it relatively easy for me to find clothing. I purchased those golf pants at Walmart, a name that is synonymous with ubiquitous retailers, and each pair was less than twenty dollars. Because men’s clothing is not expected to be fitted, I have a little more wiggle room in selecting clothing, and as an adult, I have not felt social pressure to follow trends or vary my look. I think this is why, while there are some creators focused on fatshion for cis-men, like @chubstr, cis-men have not had a strong presence on Fat Instagram; fat cis-men simply do not have as much to resist.

Published in 2009 when fatshion was not nearly as prevalent as it is now, S. Bear Bergman’s account in “Part-time Fatso” as a fat transgender man illustrates this point well:

As a man, I’m a big dude, but not outside the norm for such things. I am just barely fat enough to shop at what I call The Big Fat Tall Guy Store, and can sometimes find my

size in your usual boy-upholstery emporia. Major clothing labels, like Levi Strauss, make nice things in my size . . . As a woman I am revolting. I am not only unattractively mannish but also grossly fat. The clothes I can fit into at the local big-girl stores tend to fit around the neck and then get bigger as they go downward, which results in a festive butch-in-a-bag look—all the rage nowhere, ever. (141)

This is why fatshion for women was and is so needed and why fat cis-men may not feel the same level of motivation to promote fat positivity even though they are certainly benefitting from that work. While the clothing selections are still not great for fat men, it is my experience that they are getting better, and I believe that is due largely to the work being done by fat women, such as @kirstyleanneuk posting what should have been an innocuous video of herself in a bikini at the beach and responding with a defiant sense of humor to the inevitable backlash.

While a fat woman merely being fat on social media can be disruptive, fatshionistas often increase disruption through proximity. Fashion itself is a common parlance among Instagram influencers, and while fatshionistas reject the thin ideal of main stream fashion, they do so while still operating within the language of fashion. As Harju and Huovinen argue, “To break away from a marginal position, fatshionistas are actively seeking to include the fat body in the landscape of normative female representations by mimicking the gendered and culturally acceptable discursive practices” (1618). @iambeauticurve is a good example of this approach. Her September 17, 2020, post makes many of the moves that one might expect from an Instagram influencer. She’s walking down a city sidewalk, giving the image a candid feel. She’s in strappy heels, torn jeans, and a white blazer with dramatic, puff sleeves. Her caption begins, “Another day another puff sleeve!” Puff sleeves, harkening back to the 1980s, remain on trend for Fall 2020 (Fass), and @iambeauticurve’s ensemble combines casual urban with a bit of flash

in the statement blazer. She points followers to where they might buy the jacket: “Linked this jacket in my bio. All the sizes are available and it’s now under \$100!” Her account links to her website, which includes a “Shop” tab with information about where to buy some of the clothing items featured on her site and her favorite places to shop. This post and her account in general is tied heavily to fashion discourse, and there is nothing subversive about any of it, aside from the fact that she is a fat woman of color. @iambeautycurve, and other Fat Instagrammers who take a similar approach, like @mskristine recompose their bodies by placing their bodies within a landscape that has historically sought to decompose it.

Limitations

This is not to say that the progress made by fatshion comes without drawbacks. One important concept when looking at the role of fat representation on a social media platform like Instagram is the “good fatty,” which correlates strongly with Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham’s “respectability politics” in that it is an attempt to actively undermine stereotypes and presuppositions while also policing other members of the marginalized group. The good fatty can be evoked either as an attempt to gain individual acceptance or as an argument against fatphobic ideas. “The Fat Unicorn” described by Bias might appear on a platform like Instagram in “food porn,” or photographs of healthy meals, and fitspo posts, like the #curvyfit and #curvyvyyoga studied by Webb et al. in their article for *Fat Studies*. There is, of course, nothing wrong with eating healthy or exercising, and there is nothing wrong with posting about those things. Such posts can, as mentioned above, help destabilize fatphobic narratives, but evoking a good fatty like “The Fat Unicorn” in an attempt either to mitigate one’s own experience with fatphobia through a carefully cultivated image of fitness and health or to argue against fatphobia as a whole runs the risk of being counterproductive. First, good fatty archetypes tend to be exclusionary.

“The Fat Unicorn,” for example, excludes people who are not able to eat Instagrammable health foods either due to medical dietary restrictions or lack of access to things like quality fresh produce. It also excludes those who cannot participate in the types of physical activity privileged by fitspo due to disability, injury, lack of leisure time, or not being able to afford gym memberships, classes, or even clothes to work out in. The good fatty, therefore, can tend to create exceptions to fatphobic narratives while intensifying scrutiny on people who do not fit into the good fatty archetypes.

The good fatty also tends to be middle to upper class and white. While historically fat has been associated with wealth, sociologist Sabrina Stringer posits that, “the fear of fatness commonly targets low-income women of color, and especially black women” (5). She traces this shift to “the rise of the transatlantic slave trade and the spread of Protestantism” (6), and is generally related to the idea that slaves possessed excessive appetites, and fatness came to symbolize those excessive appetites and thinness the mastery of one’s appetites. Anna Mollow sees these attitudes becoming even more prevalent in “the ‘new racism,’ which blames the social disadvantages that black people experience not on biological impairments but instead on alleged moral failings, such as ‘laziness’ and lack of ‘personal responsibility’” (105-106), the same moral failings that are so closely linked to fatness. One shortcoming of fat activism on Instagram and other places is that the people most targeted by fatphobia are the ones most often excluded. While many of the Instragrammers I looked at are women of color, the fat acceptance movement as a whole is often criticized for being overwhelmingly white.

Also, among the fat Instagrammers I have looked at, there are a lot of posts that tend to perform a middle to upper classness. The subjects are well dressed with large and varied wardrobes. The settings are carefully curated with subjects often appearing poolside, in tropical

locales, and in posh urban settings. The photographs look professional, well-lit and well posed with vibrant colors. These images challenge the notion that fat people are slothful and unintelligent and, therefore, unsuccessful while simultaneously excluding poor and working class fat people. This is not to say that images featuring alternative narratives do not exist. In Apryl Williams discussion of the Fat People of Color page on Tumblr, she highlights an image of a woman standing defiantly in a trailer park with text reading “I will never apologize for being fat, brown, & poor” (12). A more exhaustive search of Fat Instagram may very well produce posts similar to this one, but such posts do not seem to be privileged by Instagram’s algorithm.

Fatshion as recomposition projects positive images of bodies that are often stigmatized, and in so doing, write a powerful counter-narrative, but it can feel like fat acceptance has been allowed only insofar as it can be commercialized. Retailers haven’t decided to carry larger sizes and work with fatshion designers out of the kindness of their hearts or a sense of social justice; they do it because they’ve recognized a market. Lesley Kinzel expresses her concerns that “we may only be adopting a new set of limitations” when fatshion goes mainstream. She argues that “In our eagerness to be included, perhaps we failed to consider that winning the fight to be sold things on the same level as thinner consumers would mean losing the war to control how we are seen.” Kinzel is concerned that handing fatshion over to commercial interests may have robbed it of some of its revolutionary power. Rather than dismantling the notion that some bodies are worthy of love and respect others are not, the good fatty archetypes that appear on Fat Instagram run the risk of merely extending the range of bodies that are worthy of love and respect, of recomposing certain bodies while others continue to be decomposed.

Part of the shame internalized by people in a fatphobic culture is that things like love, happiness, respect, success, etc. can only be accessed by those with bodies that are close enough

to the ideal. For fat people, that means that these things are inaccessible and will continue to be until they shrink their bodies. @themilitantbaker, Jes Baker, uses the term “body currency” to describe this phenomenon. Baker defines body currency in a blog post about the hate she would often see in the comments under @tessholiday’s posts: “It goes something like this: we are taught as a society that IF we achieve the ideal body that we see in traditional media (and not before) we will then obtain love, worthiness, success and ultimately happiness. Which is what we all want, right?” The message proliferated by diet culture is that thin bodies are the only currency by which these things can be accessed, and Baker reads the hate in @tessholiday’s comments sections as arising from an investment in that message. @tessholiday is accessing all of the things that she is not supposed to be able to access yet. She is supposed to shrink her body first. She has skipped all of the tedious exercise, restricted eating, and self-loathing on which others have expended and are expending so much time and energy. Through their Instagram accounts, @tessholiday and many of the other women on fat Instagram disrupt the notion of body currency, which can be difficult for those who have invested heavily in it, and they also send the message to other fat women that they don’t have to shrink themselves to access love, respect, success, worth, and happiness.

In a capitalist society that demands ever increasing production, though, ideas of respect, success, worth, and happiness are enmeshed with class, and while Fat Instagram disrupts the idea of body currency, it can at times reify the centrality of U.S. currency. The visual markers that Instagrammers, not just the people on Fat Instagram, use to communicate success, worth, and happiness are financially inaccessible to many. Two of the Instagrammers I looked at had photos of their new nails in front of steering wheels featuring the emblems of high-end German automakers, and while there is no way of knowing how new those cars were, the prominent

placement of these steering wheels and their emblems positions them as a status symbol. There are so many people in this country, however, who find manicures prohibitively expensive, let alone German automobiles, and given that fat women earn less than their thin counterparts, a disproportionate number of those excluded are fat women. Travel is also used by Instagrammers to create exciting backdrops for their photos. Beautiful beaches, varying city scapes, Disney World and Universal Studios, and even Machu Picchu for @nicolettemason all make for great photo opportunities. There are many, however, without the financial means to stray too far from their home, and travelling while fat can be further complicated by ever smaller airplane seats and the shame of knowing that others may dread sitting next to a fat person on the plane. Fat Instagram's use of these visual markers of financial success are in line with trends on the rest of Instagram, so I don't mean to be too critical of the posters who make use of them, but it tends to exclude many who can't afford such luxuries.

When we talk about body positivity being co-opted, I think it's important to recognize that it is often capital doing the co-opting. The economic system that spread fatphobia to justify slavery is the same economic system that produced the diet industry that, as Dawn Woolley puts it in her article for *Fat Studies*, "incite[s] increased consumption by frustrating desire rather than fulfilling it." (209). Fat Instagram's celebration of fat bodies is a rejection of the diet industry, and Instagrammers like @yrfatfriend make that implicit rejection of the diet industry explicit. But the culture industry described by Horkheimer and Adorno is nothing if not adaptive. As more and more people reject diet culture, capital has found a way to profit from these women by selling them products tailored to and designed to make them feel good about their bodies. Fat Instagram is tied heavily to fatshion, and this is not necessarily bad. Fatshion can help women recompose their bodies, disrupting the concept of body currency that tells them they are not

supposed to look cute or sexy until they have shrunk to a certain size. Because fatphobia is a product of capitalism, though, capitalism as a system may be ill-equipped to dismantle it.

Fat Instagram certainly is not perfect. Some of the rhetorical strategies can tend to evoke Good Fatty archetypes in a way that excludes certain populations, and as fatshion grows in popularity, so does the push to commodify fat and body positivity. There is also an extent to which the male gaze is simply being extended to more women's bodies. Fatshion can reinforce patriarchal imperatives demanding certain aesthetics from women, asserting that their value lies primarily in how they look. However, I think this is evidence not that fatshion, Fat Instagram, the fatosphere, or the larger fat acceptance movement are broken and should be abandoned, but rather evidence that there is still work to be done. In an interview with Claudia Rankine for *Vogue*, Lizzo recognizes the need for more work:

“I think it’s lazy for me to just say I’m body positive at this point,” Lizzo says. “It’s easy. I would like to be body-normative. I want to normalize my body. And not just be like, ‘Ooh, look at this cool movement. Being fat is body positive.’ No, being fat is normal. I think now, I owe it to the people who started this to not just stop here. We have to make people uncomfortable again, so that we can continue to change. Change is always uncomfortable, right?”

The challenge for Fat Instagram, then, as it grows in popularity, as more of the fatshionistas on the platform work out endorsement deals with larger brands offering plus size clothing, is to figure out how to maintain the safe space it has created for fat women while also finding ways to continue to agitate, to continue to make people uncomfortable.

As users and brands become comfortable partnering with certain bodies, content creators can push to highlight other creators whose bodies are still outside the newly drawn boundaries. If

users and brands become comfortable with a middle class fat aesthetic, creators can push to highlight creators from other socio-economic backgrounds, or if they have cultivated a middle class aesthetic that is contrary to their own financial circumstances, simply lower the facade and allow followers to see that their material conditions do not need to be hidden. It would also help to see more fat men abandon the patriarchal values that protect them from the worst of the anti-fat narratives and get involved in this movement. Fatshion, at its core, is about finding clothing options for those with limited access, clothes they can feel confident in. As someone who only recently began living openly as non-binary, I can attest to the fact that access to clothing is very much limited for men as well and accounts like @chubstr are still too rare. More enthusiastic involvement from men may help subvert the patriarchal ideal that a woman's value lies primarily in how she looks. Lastly, content creators can challenge their own comfort by continuing to challenge their own prejudices and continuing to push for a more intersectional version of fat acceptance.

CHAPTER V

FAT PEDAGOGY

In this dissertation, I have examined three spaces in which fat bodies have not had space to write their own bodies. In chapter 2, I examined how physical desks operating within the learning machine attempt to separate always already profoundly interconnected classroom ecologies into discrete, interchangeable units, decomposing fat bodies through the narrative that they do not and cannot belong unless they first drastically alter themselves. This not only hurts fat students but also creates resistance across connections in the classroom that negatively affects the class as a whole. I argue that these spaces can be attuned to accommodate fat bodies through the presence of fat bodies and teaching about the narratives written by the physical apparatuses we often overlook. In chapter 3, I examined avatar creation programs in virtual worlds. These programs often deny fat bodies the space to write themselves by communicating that fat is deviant, making it difficult to design a fat avatar, or making fat avatars impossible. I propose a path forward, however, in a design ethic that forwards identity and inclusivity. In chapter 4, I examined how a group of women on what I call Fat Instagram have been using their bodies to recompose their bodies. While social media platforms have historically been a place where fat bodies could hide or be subjected to harassment, these women have used proximity to an already popular type of content, fashion posts, to claim space for themselves and make themselves

visible. And by refusing to allow anti-fat narratives to shape their interactions on the platform, they are consciously flaunting fat and building fat citizenship.

I hope that, by this point, I have made a strong enough case that fat bodies are often denied space to write themselves, but that doesn't mean that space can't be made, as I've offered an example of fat bodies making space to write themselves in chapter 4 and recommended possible ways of making space for fat bodies in response to that space being limited or denied. While I have discussed negative effects of fat bodies being denied space, I haven't devoted much space in this dissertation to explicitly arguing that fat bodies should have space to write themselves. That conversation has already been had and is being had in so many other places, and while there may still be some value in it for people who have managed to remain unaware of the conversation surrounding fat acceptance, I think it can be easy to get stuck in a sort of loop, perpetually trying to make a case for the humanity of fat people to those who are determined not to recognize that humanity. Instead, I will focus in this chapter on what might be done to help make space for fat bodies in composition classrooms. Since the audience for this dissertation will be those who teach rhetoric and writing on college campuses, I want to propose a course that I believe could utilize the concepts in the previous three chapters to create a more meaningful experience for students. In chapter 2, I argue that the classroom is an always already profoundly interconnected space but that the apparatuses of the learning machine seek to separate students into discrete, interchangeable units. I will argue for a pedagogy that resists separating students while working to dismantle the learning machine. Chapter 3 argues for a design ethic that forwards identity and inclusivity, and I will explore ways to design a course that allows students to explore identities while also including them in the design of the course. Looking at chapter 4, Fat Instagram could be a great example for teaching rhetoric in a way that illustrates rhetoric not

as grand gesture but through small, meaningful, intentional acts, and not from the standpoint of a singular rhetor exerting force, but from a collection of loosely connected rhetors with a similar goal.

In order to begin dismantling the learning machine, this proposed course will employ ungrading as described by Jesse Stommel with guidance from the critical practices described by Asao B. Inoue. To get students thinking about their own fit within the physical apparatuses of the learning machine, I will recommend guiding students through listening to their bodies as well as changing the physical location of the class at least once and asking students to be mindful of how it affects them, which will lead to the second project having to do with bodies in space. To utilize a design ethic that forwards identity and inclusion, the course will begin with a project centered on identity, using an “opt-in” approach as described by Inoue and Lee Hibbard. To help students claim the right to look beyond perceptual habits and foster a broader empathy, I will recommend exposing students to reading and artwork from a diverse set of people. To help students connect identity to their own identities and their bodies, the first project will be an analog multimodal assignment like those described by Jodi Shipka. To include students on the design side, the design of the fourth project will be left to the students. They will design it around what they feel they still need to learn based on the learning outcomes for first year composition. Students will also be introduced to Fat Instagram and spend some time analyzing and discussing what is happening there and why it works. They will then, for the third project, find a similar community based around a social justice issue to explore, looking at how those bodies makes space to write themselves and accomplishes their goals. Overall, this course will employ a design ethic that forwards identity and inclusion and focus on embodied writing and action to begin dismantling the learning machine.

Composition Gets Fat

To discuss classroom pedagogy, I would like to propose a potential course, a first year composition course, built from my own teaching experience and the insight of others, and grounded in the concepts outlined in the previous three chapters. The components of the course are based on my own teaching experience and the experience of others in addition to being grounded in works like *The meaningful writing project: Learning, teaching, and writing in higher education* by Michele Eodice, Anne Ellen Geller, and Neal Lerner; *Antiracist Writing Assessment Ecologies: Teaching and Assessing Writing for a Socially Just Future* by Asao B. Inoue, *Toward a Composition Made Whole* by Jodi Shipka; and *Teaching Queer: Radical Possibilities for Teaching and Knowing* by Stacey Waite. I am confident in the value of the components of this course on their own, and I believe that, when assembled, they will provide students with meaningful writing experiences, help them to see value in writing not only to communicate but also to explore ideas, and help them to become more rhetorically aware.

Because students bring perspective into the classroom that we often can't predict and should be allowed space to write their own bodies, one of the guiding philosophies of this course will be to allow students as much freedom as possible in determining the direction of their work. In chapter 2, I discussed Foucault's idea of the learning machine, where students are treated as discrete, interchangeable parts, ranked and categorized and sent out to be commodified and consumed in capitalist markets. This process interpellates students into the role of passive receivers of knowledge. Students accept this arrangement because they believe it will increase the price they will fetch for their labor after graduation. If, in their time in the learning machine, they can consistently receive high marks in a category that prepares them to sell a type of labor that is in demand, then they can be confident that a good job with high wages awaits them. The

bourgeoisie favors this arrangement for a few reasons. First, this categorization and ranking enables them to reliably profit from training that workers are, to a larger and larger degree, paying for themselves. Second, students have little control over their own education once in the classroom, their only real option being to do what is demanded of them in a manner that pleases the instructor. This arrangement maps perfectly onto their lives as workers who do not own the means of production and, therefore, have little choice but to do what is demanded of them in a manner that pleases management.

One way to disrupt the learning machine might be to forego one of the roles we are expected to play, namely, the ranking of students. If we can begin to accustom students to the idea of having more control over their education, not just in which major they might choose but also in the design of the individual courses, we could help them to feel less comfortable in the learning machine while also helping them feel that the work they do, both within and outside the academy, is more deeply meaningful. When Eodice, Geller and Lerner asked students about the writing projects that were meaningful to them, one thing they found was that “meaningful writing projects offer students opportunities for agency” (4). Just as having more agency in avatar creation can make for a more meaningful experience in a virtual world, allowing students more agency in writing projects can make those projects more meaningful.

Allowing students some agency in topic choice and assessment has been a fairly common practice in composition classrooms for some time. In my first pedagogy course as a master's student, the professor modeled involving students in developing criteria for their essays, and that model was echoed in orientations and workshops as I started my PhD. In lieu of simply giving students the criteria by which their work would be assessed, the instructor would lead something like a brainstorming session where students would offer possible criterion and the instructor

would write them on the board, usually with some minor translation or editing. If conversation slowed, the instructor would ask some leading questions to try to get students to offer more ideas. Then, once it seemed like the students were out of suggestions or they were running out of time, the instructor would add any important criterion that the students may have missed. This sort of exercise could be viewed cynically with the assumption that students are just regurgitating the criteria they have learned to expect, not actually making decisions about how their work ought to be assessed, and instructors are conveniently protected from complaints that their criteria may be unfair since they will be able to point out to any frustrated students that they had agreed to and even helped generate the criteria. The cynical view is, I think, unfair. The instructors I know who used this method in their classrooms did so in earnest, and when I used the method early in my teaching, I found it fruitful. Even if some students were simply regurgitating received criteria, they were at least thinking more about what a good paper would look like from a reader's perspective. It also gave students a little more sense of ownership over their projects.

I do feel, however, that more can be done than brainstorming assessment criteria and picking topics. These methods could be compared to an avatar creation system, one in which the system's developers had a relatively clear idea of how avatars would look, e.g., athletic and physically intimidating, and what sorts of things would be done with them, e.g., fighting hordes of NPCs. Just as a user may be given some small amount of wiggle room with appearance, students are given a little wiggle room with topics and assessment criteria. The finished product takes on a familiar form with surface level variations. Much of the criteria by which the project will be judged, just like the criteria by which users' play will be judged in the virtual world of a game, are predetermined. Players in a combat game will deal amounts of damage and take

amounts of damage based on criteria set long before they designed their avatars, and for a literacy narrative, students will write a three-to-four-page alphabetic text relaying a narrative about their own literacy with a main point that is communicated through the details of the narrative regardless of their chosen topic or the criteria they helped generate.

Combat games are an especially apt metaphor for this type of writing since there can be, in strictly designed assignments and courses, a sort of violence. In *Teaching Queer*, Stacey Waite uses Judith Butler's notion of norms doing violence to talk about teaching: "But the part of my challenge (as a teacher interested in the idea of queering teaching itself) is to identify those less apparent moments of violence—moments, without my knowing, in which my norms (my syllabus, my assignments, my set of assumptions about my students) might do their own version of violence" (36). I do not mean to suggest that there is inherent violence in any assignment norms or parameters, nor does Waite. They go on to say that "Norms themselves are not violence, but, as Butler cautions, norms can constrain in ways that do violence. I think of violence as a kind of control or limitation that is completely un-queer—without flexibility, elasticity, or the possibility of change" (37). Strict assignment parameters can constrain in a way that does violence, not only constraining a student's creativity but also their ability to communicate in ways that allow them to write their bodies rather than reproducing the writing of dominant narratives, often sucking the meaning out of an assignment for students whose bodies do not conform to the default. Moreover, putting students in a position where they feel they are expected to reproduce constraining norms, which can happen even when instructors explicitly state that reproducing norms is not expected, can add to that violence.

Again, I do not mean to denigrate instructors who have used this practice. I think, within the inherited norms, this is a valid and often effective way to teach writing just as a limited

amount of avatar customization has the capacity to make a virtual world more compelling than it may have been with a fixed avatar. These norms that can constrain in a way that does violence enact those constraints on instructors as well. Waite says that “though I confess to not always being comfortable setting these parameters, or giving grades as a response to how well students might follow these parameters, I do these quite un-queer tasks in the confines of the institution that disciplines both me and my students” (36-37). One difference between the constraints placed on instructors and their students, though, is that is that instructors have some power, though they may not realize it, to adjust or remove those constraints.

Even if students are prompted to think about assessment in the context of their own work, this approach can fail to expose the dominant narratives imposed on student writing by the learning machine. The learning machine is less concerned with teaching writing and more concerned with making sure that writing can be done by the future workers it produces. This can be done just as easily by weeding out those who cannot already reproduce white academic discourse as it can by teaching that discourse. We can see this in Asao B. Inoue’s assertion that “students of color, which includes multi-lingual students, are often hurt by conventional writing assessment that uncritically uses a dominant discourse, which is informed by an unnamed white racial *habitus*” (16). Even when students are involved in determining the criteria or teaching about assessment is used as a central component of teaching writing, these pedagogies can fail to draw attention to the hurt caused by dominant discourses. Inoue says that he “can see how a class that engages in such a pedagogy can easily turn into a class that asks students to approximate the academic dispositions of the academy (whatever that may mean for that class) without any explicit way of interrogating the system that asks for such texts, or such evaluation of texts” (19). While allowing students to help generate criteria or teaching them to look at their own writing

with a grader's eye can be good steps toward giving them a sense of ownership over the work, these methods will not help students see why they did not have ownership of that work in the first place.

Inoue gives the example of using contract grading to help move students out from under potentially violent constraints and assessment. He finds the contract method useful because “it almost always requires lots of discussion for students to understand it, and reveals the assumptions students and teachers make about grades” (185). While I do see the merit in contract grading, I think more can be done to dismantle the teacher/student hierarchy in the classroom. In my own teaching, I have begun to experiment with ungrading like that described by Jesse Stommel. In his blog post “Why I Don’t Grade,” he argues that “Agency, dialogue, self-actualization, and social justice are not possible in a hierarchical system that pits teachers against students and encourages competition by ranking students against one another.” Holding the authority to grade assignments and students’ performance over the course of the semester denies students some of the space they need to write their own bodies. This is not to say that deeply meaningful writing cannot happen within a graded course, but to some extent, they will write the body that they think instructors want to see, the body of dominant narratives. I have only experimented with ungrading a few times in one-credit-hour first year seminar courses, but this approach has allowed students to determine what getting better at being a college student will look like for them, and it should look different for all my students. I have been pleased with the results, and I believe ungrading can have a profound impact in the writing classroom. This approach frees up writing instructors from having to assess whether a project meets some criteria or having to comment on papers to justify an eventual grade and grants them the opportunity to more meaningfully engage with their students’ writing, fulfilling another aspect of meaningful

writing projects found by Eodice, Geller, and Lerner: “engagement with instructors” (4). For some instructors, this may not drastically alter the comments they leave. Comments like “this sounds really interesting, I’d love to see you explore it a little more” or “I’m really liking the direction this is going, but I got a little lost at the end of this paragraph” would still be appropriate on an ungraded project, but the sentiment behind them would change. As much as I wanted comments like those to be completely honest when I was grading, there was always a little voice in my mind: “well, I guess I’ll have to take off points for that,” and I knew those phrases, “explore it a little more,” “I got a little lost,” would serve as justification. What’s more, my students almost certainly read them that way, too. Instead of reading those comments and seeing an instructor excited enough about their project to want to help them make it the best it could be, they saw the reasons why their grade was not as high as they might have hoped.

What ungrading will look like will vary from instructor to instructor and from class to class, but I think that, for ungrading to serve students best, two components need to be present: students need control over the direction and goals of their projects, and students need to reflect on their writing, both process and product. Both of these components in concert, control and reflection, grant students space to write their own bodies and help them develop the rhetorical awareness to do so as well. These components can be difficult at first, though, not just for instructors but also for students. Many students will never have had to make the types of decisions they will be asked to make. I know that many of my students struggle just to choose a topic let alone what form the project will take and what its goals will be. The types of assignments with narrow and rigid parameters that make justifying grades easy do students a disservice by never asking them to develop those skills. Pushing students to make these

decisions, though, has the potential to make projects much more meaningful to them. Eodice, Geller, and Lerner found that

Learning, teaching, and writing can become simultaneously more connected to our goals as educators and more connected to students' goals as learners if we value where students may choose to take their writing and why they might make those choices—allowing them the agency to make those choices and encouraging them to take hold of who they have been, who they are, and who they want to be in their futures. (140)

One way to make it easier for students to take hold of these assignments may be to start with an assignment with narrower parameters and gradually widen the parameters with each subsequent assignment. Another would be to take a collaborative approach where instructor and fellow students play an active role in the development of each students' project, giving students authority over decisions, but not forcing them to come up with all of the ideas in a vacuum of sorts. This would not only help students develop their direction and goals but also introduce students to the way that writing is and should be done outside of the classroom

Reflection is also vitally important to ungrading, prompting students to engage in the assessment of their own writing, not only the finished product but also the process by which it came about. Inoue works to enable reflection by playing with language a bit, encouraging students to think of labor rather than process and artifacts of that labor rather than products, though he admits that using labor in this way agitates his inner-Marxist. For students to be able to reflect they also need something to meaningfully reflect on, and they won't usually find that in more traditional assignments. By this point, for many of them, writing has become a sort of mechanical exercise. They have an idea of what the instructor wants, though that idea is not always accurate, and they try to reproduce it. To put it another way, they recreate the dominant

narratives about their embodiment in the writing process. An honest reflection from students might produce comments like “I used that phrase because I thought it sounded smart,” or “I used that word because it’s longer and I was worried that I wouldn’t meet the page length requirement.” Even these comments would be productive because it would help them begin to more actively question the nature of writing in the academy. Those are not the comments they typically make, though, because even in the reflection, many of them try to reproduce what they think the instructor wants. I think one way to get around this mechanical writing practice is through multimodal writing projects. The “statement of goals and choices (SOGC)” (position 2051) that Jodi Shipka suggests for multimodal projects in *Toward a Composition Made Whole* encompasses goals and reflection, and she notes that “SOGCs tend to be longer and far more detailed than the reflective texts [for traditional alphabetic writing assignments] referred to earlier” (position 2109). As students work with forms of composing for which they are not aware of dominant narratives to follow and have not developed muscle memory, they become more aware of the decisions they are making as they go.

I would also suggest that instructors follow Shipka’s lead in asking students to compose in analog ways. When I had the opportunity to teach an advanced composition course, I themed the course around the concept of identity while intentionally declining to define the term. I also deliberately neglected to provide much direction on what their projects should look like. For the first assignment, I simply told them that I wanted a digital multimodal project that dealt with identity in some way. For those who have trouble working without things like page length requirements, I asked them to put roughly as much work into their project as they would a four-to-six-page paper. If I had used Inoue’s labor and contract model, this step may have included a negotiation of the amount of time students were to spend on the project. In order to help them

find direction, I also led them through in-class brainstorming sessions and had students share ideas with the class with the hope that students would find inspiration in the ideas of their peers. Interestingly, students tended to abstract the idea of identity. Rather than producing digital multimodal projects that focused on their own identities, many of them focused instead on the concept of identities in digital technologies. One project, for example, focused on the disconnect between users' irl identities and the identities they portrayed on Instagram. Another student produced a series of PSAs warning viewers about the fact that the identity they portray on social media might negatively affect their job prospects. There are several reasons why this might have occurred. With such a non-directive assignment, students may have simply gravitated toward the digital technologies that they were most familiar with: social media. Also, social media's disingenuousness and the dangers it posed to individuals were common themes in the public discourse before the conversation began to turn more toward how social media could be used to undermine democracy. It is also possible that students were simply inspired by the early ideas of their peers.

With the second assignment, though, there was a shift. This assignment was equally non-directive. The only real difference between the two assignments was that this time I asked them to produce an analog multimodal project that had something to do with identity. It is possible that these analog projects simply did not carry the baggage of public discourse surrounding digital technologies, or that the tactile nature of working in physical mediums made them feel more connected to these projects. Whatever the cause, for this second major assignment, students interpreted the concept of identity in much more personal ways, and this led students to create some wonderfully creative and sometimes quite poignant projects. One student whose mother was a baker and cake decorator baked a cake, frosted it, and piped on words and phrases

describing her relationship with her mother, and after it had been thoroughly photographed for posterity, she shared it with the class. Another student attempted a food-based project, a Jell-O mold of a brain, that grew mold before she had the chance to work with it, but she recovered by using twine to create a facsimile of a brain on what appeared to be a wig stand, augmenting it with a variety of tactile symbols representing the many things that weighed on her mind, occupying her thoughts or pulling at her focus. Perhaps the most impactful project was from a student who used an empty refrigerator box to craft an approximation of a mattress and covered it in sheets. On the top sheet she wrote many of the misconceptions people had about her narcolepsy, and on the fitted sheet she wrote the realities of living with narcolepsy. She then fashioned straps out of rope, attached them to the refrigerator box, and drug it behind her to represent the burden of living with her condition.

I have thought since then about why those two assignments produced such different results, and I believe it can be attributed to both embodiment and how students' bodies are written in relation to the technologies they were using. With the first assignment, students may have been using software programs they were unfamiliar with to compose their projects, but the physical apparatuses that mediated their engagement with those programs, the hardware, was familiar. They had, by that point, spent a significant amount of time seated at a desk or table in front of a computer, typing and clicking to compose. Just like physical apparatuses like desks can become invisible until something like a bar or desk top pressed into flesh makes us aware of their presence, we might also say that, when we are working in physical environments our bodies are familiar with, our bodies can also become invisible. With their bodies invisible, students were less likely to interpret "identity" to mean their own identity, so they gravitated toward topics that looked at identity in a more general sense. When they were put in what was, for most of them,

the much less familiar situation of having to compose away from the familiar space in front of a computer, I believe they became more aware of their own bodies, and through them, their own identities. The feel and smell of the materials and their lack of comfort in working with those materials drew their attention to their own bodies, their abilities and limitations, and that may have pushed them to more strongly consider how they and their bodies related to the project.

In terms of how students' bodies are written in relation to the technology they use, the discourse surrounding their use of digital computing devices and software programs is more substantial than any current discourse surrounding the type of physical, analog crafts I was asking for in the second assignment. The novelty of these digital devices and their most used applications has inspired countless think pieces about the affect they will have on society. This is, of course, not a new conversation; it has reoccurred with the introduction of novel technologies at least as far back as Plato's dialogues about the potential effect of writing on memory and discourse. Since discussions of the effects social media applications have been *en vogue* for some time now, these discussions will no doubt have affected how students view themselves in relation to social media. What's more, many of my students will have experienced social media at a younger age than I did, and the discourse surrounding social media may have given them the language to frame any negative experiences they had. All this to say that, when students are asked to navigate discussions of identity using technologies around which there has been so much discussion regarding their interactions with them, they may need more coaxing to get them to step outside of the ways in which their bodies have been written in relation to those technologies. When working with analog technologies with which they are less familiar, though, they are interpellated into a position where they may have to write their own bodies, their own identities, because in that space, no one else has written them for them.

For the final assignment in the course, I offered students some options. Since the end of a semester can be stressful for students and since I had already pushed some of them well outside their comfort zone, they had the option of writing a traditional alphabetic essay. By this point in their college careers, alphabetic essays could be comfortable and safe, so I neither encouraged nor discouraged this option. They could also take on a more ambitious multimodal project, and one group of students did this by collaborating to plan, shoot, and edit a very short film. The option I was most excited about, however, was producing a set of lesson plans building toward a multimodal project that they could implement in their future teaching. My experience teaching in a K-12 classroom is limited to some short stints as a substitute teacher, and I have not taken any courses focused on K-12 education, so I was unable to offer much guidance on how the plans would be formatted, but many of them had written lesson plans in their education courses and those who had not were able to get help from those who had. As part of this option, I also required students to write a letter to their principal or whoever might oversee their curriculum explaining and justifying assigning a multimodal project in lieu of an alphabetic essay. Because the students had been working multimodally all semester, only one student chose the alphabetic essay. Overall, the students had become comfortable with composing multimodally, comfortable with thinking through multimodal projects and discussing their rationale for decision-making.

Like this advanced composition course, the course I'm proposing would have identity as a central theme. Inoue puts emphasis on examining, with students, the structures that have produced the writing assessment criteria to which they are accustomed or, in some cases, with which their writing has been attacked. I think this work is vital in an examination of identity. Looking at this move in the context of a design ethic that forwards identity and inclusion, it would be hard to say that inclusion had been achieved if students were to uncritically reproduce

the very conditions that excluded them. Just as it is possible to forward identity in design, it is also possible to forward identity in a composition classroom. Indeed, many of our composition classrooms already start down the path of forwarding identity with assignments like personal narratives and literacy narratives, assignments that ask students to draw on their personal experiences and, in the case of literacy narratives, think about those experiences in relation to the content of the course. These essays are often intended as an opportunity for students to write about something they presumably know, themselves, so we and they can gauge their level of mastery of the craft of writing without encumberment from their lack of mastery over material.

These often-introductory essays can come up short of asking students to really examine how who they are, their identity, has shaped and is shaped by those narratives, and too often any cause for introspection is set aside at the end of the unit, as students are asked to turn their focus outward, possibly reinforcing students' sense that the path toward academic writing involves the process of leaving personal concerns and identity behind. Students often enter our classrooms with the sense that academic or serious writing should always be objective and omit any reference to the self, as evidenced by their timidity about using the word "I." While we may feel inclined to roll our eyes at the prescriptiveness of outlawing a word, this idea that including one's self in their work diminishes that work's seriousness persists within faculty, as evidenced by the use of terms like "mesearch" used to deride legitimate autoethnography or the work that Aja Martinez has to do in her writing to legitimize the use of counterstory. This idea maps well onto the practice of allowing personal writing on the first assignment and, rather than exploring identity and positionality further, abandoning the personal in favor of other intellectual pursuits.

Some of the academy's discomfort with including one's identity in their work, I believe, stems from the discomfort of facing dominant narratives and unjust hierarchies on which the

academy has been built. Students are mostly safe from the academy's methodological prejudices since their work rarely leaves the classroom ecology. One of the challenges of discussing any issue related to social justice in a composition classroom, however, is that students will enter with opinions on those subjects, and while there is certainly room to explore different opinions on how best to effect change, students will also enter the classroom with differing opinions about whether certain social justice issues exist and, even if they do exist, whether those issues should be changed. I want desperately for some of my students' received ideas about fat to be challenged and changed. I want fat people to be accepted, loved, respected, and accommodated. I want fat people to be treated as humans, as equals, not bullied or condescended to. It is an emotional struggle every time, though, to voluntarily put myself in a room where my worth and humanity may be questioned, especially if the different opinions about my worth and humanity are being treated as equally valid points in a debate. And if there are students like me in the class, then talking about my own identity may open them up to the same emotional turmoil.

Even if, through exploration in the classroom, students come to accept and celebrate their identities, to speak back to internalized shame, the anticipated judgment remains, though their attitude toward that judgment may change. Shame and resignation may be replaced with anger or exhaustion, and as students become more aware of the ways in which certain of their identities are oppressed, the feelings associated with that anticipated judgement may intensify. Some students, therefore, may be reluctant to discuss their identities with the class or even to write about their identities in assignments that will only be read by the instructor. Ultimately, this comes down to whether students feel safe, whether they feel that, in this class, they don't have to anticipate that judgment. Despite an instructor's best efforts, students will bring with them lessons learned from experience, potentially even lessons learned from interactions with other

students outside of the classroom. The unjust hierarchies that produce the oppression from which springs the anticipated judgment, though, are not going to go away if ignored like a bully who gets bored. I am doing my students an injustice if I choose to protect their emotions and my own in the moment rather than inviting them to begin the difficult work of dismantling these hierarchies with me.

It is important to address issues of identity and of the power dynamics between identities. As Stommel notes, “Ungrading is a key part of my critical pedagogical approach, but it only works as a radical, decolonizing, feminist practice if it’s done carefully and alongside other critical pedagogical practices” (FAQ). So, while ungrading does help create more meaningful practices and recognizes that students come in from and are going to different places, it fails to challenge and can even reify the inequities that exist outside the classroom and that the students bring with them. Including students on the design side of a course, however, means that they have some agency in how identity is addressed and discussed. Lee Hibbard handles the issue of disclosure by providing students opportunity to “opt-in.” For him, “pronoun and identity sharing are always opt-in practices.” Inoue uses a similar strategy. He broaches the topic by discussing his own experiences with race, noting that when he did so, “they felt more authorized to bring up their own racialized experiences and *habitus*. I did not explicitly ask them to do this though” (179). He then allows students to opt-in and finds that they tend to do just that. He says, “They did not have to reveal anything about their past or their own sense of racial, class, or gendered identities, but everyone did” (179). Non-default identities and bodies are written as shameful, and the assumption is that they would prefer to hide if possible. Inoue’s findings, however, echo the participation on Fat Instagram and the desire to create fat avatars. Many people want to opt-in, to have a chance to be known, they only need to know it is safe and possible to do so. It is, of

course, important to note that one-hundred percent opting-in will not always be the case, and while calling on students who do not seem to be engaging may be an effective strategy in other classroom discussions, it is important to resist the urge to do so in the context of opt-in discussions.

I also used an opt-in strategy, though I would not have known to call it that at the time, for the assignments in the advanced composition course I taught. I intentionally neglected to define identity or to provide specific examples. This gave students the freedom to choose to talk about marginalized identities but also left them the option of talking about a more innocuous identity, though I think there would have been value in using Inoue's method of disclosure outside of the context of the assignments themselves. While he was able to get all his students to talk about their identities as they related to dominant narratives, I had mixed results. In one poignant example of exploring identity related to dominant narratives, a student used the analog assignment to explore questions around her heritage. She was Mexican and Italian, but as she was growing up, her grandmother taught her to only mention her Italian heritage. By this time, Italian had lost much of the stigma it once carried as it was annexed by whiteness, but Mexican was still heavily maligned. This required the student to disclose a part of her identity, a part she had been taught not to disclose and that she had been, in part, prevented from exploring. Other students, however, chose to explore parts of their identity that were deeply meaningful to them but that did not exist within an unjust hierarchy. One example was a student who earnestly wanted to become a film critic and filled a popcorn bucket with yellow and white folded pieces of paper, each of which contained either a film opinion or a statement about his identity.

This is not to say, however, that I avoided talking about social justice issues and the identities affected. One of the things I wanted the future educators in the advanced composition

course to come away with was a sense of how the physical elements of the classroom could affect student learning. The course normally met in a recently renovated classroom in the same building that housed the English Department's offices. The room contained four long tables, each extending from one of the four corners of the room toward the center, where there was a podium. Ironically, the podium decentered the instructor from the students' perspective since they were seated facing their classmates on the other side of the table, but the podium was in the center of the room. The instructor was decentered by being placed in the center. The chairs in this classroom were selected for their comfort and adjustability, accommodating a wide range of bodies, and could roll or swivel to face the monitors at the end of the table, the whiteboards along the walls, or the podium in the center. My students had grown accustomed to sitting in this comfortable and flexible seating for our course, which met twice a week for an hour and fifteen minutes per meeting.

For the class period for which I had assigned Hettrick and Attig's "Sitting Pretty," I spoke with the person who scheduled classrooms for the English department, and we found a room in another building that was free during our meeting time, and after allowing a few minutes in our normal classroom for any late arrivals, we moved our discussion of "Sitting Pretty" to this empty classroom. The room was full of more traditional student desks with rigid writing surfaces attached by metal rods to plastic chairs with bolts that would grab and remove strands of hair from long haired students. This was our first discussion that was explicitly about Fat Studies. There was some resistance to the idea, as I had expected, but the juxtaposition between our normal classroom furniture and the furniture in this other classroom helped some of the students connect to the material. Even those with bodies that fell well within the default range were aware

of how much less comfortable these desks were and could perhaps begin to imagine what it might be like sitting through a class in desks that were not designed with their bodies in mind.

Some of my students responded very positively to the lesson, saying that they had not thought much about desks before or that they were glad someone was drawing attention to the discomfort they often felt, and at least one student emphatically requested that we never go to that classroom again. While I hope some of my students came away from this experience with a greater understanding of and willingness to advocate for fat students, I also wanted them to have a greater appreciation for lessons taught by physical spaces, including physical apparatuses like desks. I wanted them to see how something as mundane as desks could write and even decompose bodies. In that room, all of the students were interpellated into a conversation focused on me rather than collaboration with their classmates. There was resistance across connections that had once flowed freely. My hope, in addition to building a broader empathy by asking them to empathize with bodies that they have ignored, is that they would use this experience to exercise what control they have over the physical spaces of their future classrooms to make sure the students were centered in their own learning and to make sure that no one was being taught that they do not belong.

I also took this class session as a moment to have them stop and listen to their bodies. This was the first time I had done so, and I am not sure it went as well as it could have. When I've presented at conferences on topics associated with this topic, however, I have had attendees take a moment to listen to their bodies, walking them through something like guided meditation focusing on different areas of the body. I am not, myself, very experienced with meditation, and I assume that most of those who I am guiding are not either. Since, for some of them, this entire concept may be foreign, I tend to suggest the sorts of things they might focus on as they listen to

their bodies. We start in the limbs, listening for aches, pains, fatigue, restlessness, discomfort. We then move to the torso. We listen again to the muscles, bones, and joints before focusing on our digestive systems and how they are working, our lungs and how they are working, our hearts and how they are beating. We then move to the head, listening for sinus pressure, muscle aches, and eye strain before focusing on our brains. Are we tired, foggy headed, anxious? The downside to this approach is that the examples come from my own experience, so in a sense, I'm asking attendees to listen to their bodies through the lens of my body. My hope, though, is that, as they start listening, my suggestions fade into the background as they listen to their own bodies and work to find the language to describe what they hear.

In short, I think it is important to address identity by using an opt-in approach, allowing students to decide when and if they will disclose or explore certain aspects of their identity. In order to let students know it is safe to discuss parts of their identity related to unjust hierarchies, I assign readings by people writing about those identities and try to find ways to make the issues discussed a little more visceral while trying not to engage in marginalized identity tourism¹⁸ and avoiding activities that divide the class along power dynamics. I also invite them to be more aware of their physical bodies so that they may be more aware of how those bodies may be composed or decomposed. I try my best to be sensitive to how a conversation might be making certain students feel and avoid putting students in a position where they feel like they are the spokesperson for a marginalized identity. As an instructor, I feel the need to step in if someone's worth and humanity are being disputed because of an identity they hold. I will not, however,

¹⁸ by marginalized identity tourism, I mean activities that all people not of that identity to "experience what it's like," as though that experience could be conveyed in one short activity. These activities tend to center members of the dominant group, allowing them to "learn" something, while not teaching those with the marginalized identity anything, meaningful or otherwise. For the dominant group, they also engender the feeling that they now "understand," which tends to function to assuage any guilt by making them one of the good people from the dominant group, embolden them to talk over members of the marginalized identity on issues surrounding their lived experience, and relieve them from having to do any of the truly difficult work of allyship.

protect an ideology that disputes the worth and humanity of others. For example, I will absolutely step in if the class starts to drift toward a debate over trans rights. I do not want a trans student in my class to feel that their existence is up for debate, nor do I want students to get the impression that this is a debate with two equally valid sides. If, however, someone is discussing how best to advance trans rights, I will not step in to protect the egos or sensibilities of any transphobes that might happen to be in the room.

Proposed First Year Composition Course

With all of that in mind, this is what the course I'm proposing might look like:

Unit 1: Identity

- Students will be introduced to the course, given a general idea of the assignments, and introduced to ungrading. They will learn about setting goals before a project's completion and, after a project's completion, reflecting on the process, how/if goals were met, and any unanticipated directions. They may read parts of Jesse Stommel's blog that cover ungrading and discuss their experiences with being graded.
- Students will begin to explore the idea of communicating identity. They may read a poem like M. NourbeSe Philip's "Discourse on the Logic of Language," view some of the artworks of Jean Michel-Basquiat, and this could be a good time to introduce them to some of the Fatshionistas on Fat Instagram. They may discuss ways in which they may have communicated identity in the past, given space to opt-in to talking about their own identity if they so choose.
- Students will work toward Project 1, an analog multimodal project having to do with identity. They can opt-in to building the project around their own identities or explore identity in a less personal way. If the instructor is able, they may bring crafting materials

to class and/or invite students to bring crafting materials to class to help generate ideas. Students may brainstorm, share ideas, and offer feedback on each other's ideas. Once they've had time to determine a direction, they will set goals for how and what they want their project to communicate. After they've finished, they will reflect on the process, how well they met their goals, and whether any unintended directions or messages presented themselves. They will also evaluate their work.

Unit 2: Bodies and Space

- Students will begin to think about bodies through listening to their own bodies. They may go through a guided meditation of sorts and record their impression of the experience. Then if possible, they may go through the same meditation somewhere else—in another classroom, outside, some place they frequent outside of class—and again record their impression of the experience before looking at both recordings with attention to what has changed.
- Students may read Hetrick and Attig's "Sitting Pretty" and reflect on their own experiences with classroom furniture. They may then discuss parts of their reflection that they are comfortable sharing. Students may also keep a journal, analyzing the physical space of their classrooms or physical spaces at other places they frequent. They will pay close attention to how the furniture is communicating to them and what position it asks them to take, what was intended by the arrangement of the furniture, and why decisions about which furniture to include may have been made.
- Student's may be introduced to the AllGo app and its intended aims. They then might replicate the function of the app by rating places they visit on campus or around town based on how well they would accommodate friends, loved ones, or themselves if extra

accommodations were needed. Students may then compare their ratings, looking for common spaces rated to see the average rating of those spaces.

- Students will work toward Project 2, a multimodal project having to do with bodies in space. They will not be limited to analog projects, but may still work in analog if it fits their goals. The instructor may introduce digital forms that projects may take, like podcasts, videos, photo essays, or blogs, inviting students to discuss any different forms that occur to them. Instructors may also make crafting materials available. Students may brainstorm, share ideas, and offer feedback on each other's ideas. Once they have had time to determine a direction, they will set goals for how and what they want their project to communicate. After they have finished, they will reflect on the process, how well they met their goals, and whether any unintended directions or messages presented themselves. They will also evaluate their work.

Unit 3: Embodied Rhetoric Online

- Students will begin to think about embodied rhetoric in collective action online. Students may return to Fat Instagram, analyzing the ways in which individual posts, often small in scope, can in aggregate, form a powerful message. They may read “Queering Beauty: Fatshionistas in the Fatosphere” by Lauren Guerrieri and H el ene Cherrier, analyzing Fat Instagram through this lens and/or analyzing how Guerrieri and Cherrier's analysis might map onto online communities they are a part of.
- Students will begin to think about disclosure online and what that might mean for those researching online. Students may view and discuss the heuristic in Heidi A. McKee and James E. Porter's *Ethics of Internet Research: A Rhetorical, Case-based Process*. They

may think about how that heuristic might apply to someone researching their activity online and share in discussion if they feel comfortable.

- Students will work toward project 3, a multimodal or alphabetic project having to do with the rhetoric of a public online community that works toward social justice in some way. This project can analyze the methods used by that online community, represent the methods used in a form that is more spatiotemporally limited than internet discourse, or document their own participation with the community. Students may brainstorm, share ideas, and offer feedback on each other's ideas, including sharing the different communities they have found. Once they have had time to determine a direction, they will set goals for how and what they want their project to communicate. After they have finished, they will reflect on the process, how well they met their goals, and whether any unintended directions or messages presented themselves. Students will still set goals and reflect afterward if they choose to compose alphabetically. They will also evaluate their work.

Unit 4: Wild Card

- Students will choose a topic for further exploration. Students will be encouraged to choose a topic that is related to the previous three units in some way but will also be allowed to depart from the previous themes if they can justify that departure. Students can collaborate with other students, collaborate as a class or work individually.
- Students may read the WPA Outcomes Statement for First-Year Composition (3.0) and discuss how what they've done so far fits into those outcomes. If they feel their previous work has not sufficiently met some of the outcomes, they may tailor project 4 to give them an opportunity to work on those outcomes.

- In much the same way that different texts have been used to discuss the themes of each unit, students will be responsible for choosing texts that further their understanding of their chosen topic. These texts can be synthesized into project 4 or they can be mentioned in the goals statement or reflection, but they must be properly cited in one of those places.
- Students will work toward project 4, which will take whatever form they decide on. Students may brainstorm, share ideas, and offer feedback on each other's ideas. Once they have had time to determine a direction, they will set goals for how and what they want their project to communicate. After they have finished, they will reflect on the process, how well they met their goals, and whether any unintended directions or messages presented themselves. Students will still set goals and reflect afterward if they choose to compose alphabetically. They will also evaluate their work.

I believe this course would meet the expectations of a first year composition course while also speaking to many of the concepts discussed in this dissertation. The course would utilize the findings in chapter 4 by asking students to analyze an online community in a similar manner and think about the decomposition and recomposition of bodies in units 2 and 3. The course would utilize the design ethic in chapter 3, forwarding identity and inclusion. Students would be asked to look beyond their perceptual habits when discussing readings, develop a broader empathy by thinking about bodies in unit 2 and analyzing online communities that work toward social justice in unit 3, enable robust identity exploration and identity play by analyzing identity in unit 1, and promote intentional inclusivity on the design end by including students in the design of the course as a whole and asking them to take the lead in designing unit 4. The course would utilize chapter 2 by asking students to think about the way physical spaces communicate and how they are a part of what happens in those spaces in unit 2. The course as a whole also utilizes chapter 2

by treating the class as always already profoundly interconnected, encouraging collaboration and crowd sourcing. It may also help loosen the bolts on the learning machine, increasing the potential for future dismantling.

The learning machine is just one institution that seeks to write bodies, denying those bodies space to write themselves. Other institutions include fashion, travel, the food industry, the prison industrial complex, the immigration system, the military industrial complex, and capitalism itself. In this dissertation, I have looked at one oppressed group of which I am a member, but there are many others. The functions of the learning machine and the way it uses physical apparatuses to discipline, denying fat bodies space to write themselves, can be seen across other institutions. The methods used to make space, then, by being visibly and unapologetically present and using existing connections to build citizenship, could help make space for other types of bodies in other institutions. Non-default bodies and identities are denied space to write their own bodies not only by design choices in virtual worlds but also by design choices in other industries and institutions. A design ethic that forwards identity and inclusion, then, could be employed across industries and institutions, informing designs both simple and complex. The methods used by Fat Instagram to use their bodies to recompose their bodies can and have been used by other decomposed bodies both in other virtual worlds and irl.

The thread that links these institutions and industries is that they have, to some degree, denied bodies space to write themselves, and the key contribution of this dissertation has been the examination of making space. Yes, fat bodies are denied space to write themselves in classrooms, but they can make space and space can be made for them. Yes, fat bodies have been denied space to write themselves in virtual worlds, but a design ethic that forwards identity and inclusion can create that space. Fat bodies have been decomposed through medicalization, but

they are making space to write themselves, using their bodies to recompose their bodies. In writing this dissertation, I have even made space to write my own body. Whenever reading a body, then, ask not just how that body has been written but also who did the writing. The writing of others' bodies tends to be done to maintain one or more unjust hierarchies, and the best way to begin dismantling those hierarchies would be to help make space for those bodies to write themselves.

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Doctor of Philosophy

Dissertation: (DIS)EMBODYING FAT BODIES: ERASURE AND RESISTANCE IN
CYBERSPACE AND THE CLASSROOM

Major Field: English – Rhetoric and Writing Studies

Biographical:

Education:

Completed the requirements for the Doctor of Philosophy in English at
Oklahoma State University, Stillwater, Oklahoma in December 2021.

Completed the requirements for the Master of Arts in English at
Sam Houston State University, Huntsville, Texas in 2012.

Complete the requirements for the Bachelor of Arts in English at
William Tyndale College, Farmington Hills, Michigan in 2003.

Experience: Presented at regional and national conferences, including RSA, CCCC,
Computers and Writing, and Watson.