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ONE SIZE DOES NOT FIT ALL: AN AUTOETHNOGRAPHIC ACCOUNT OF FAT REPRESENTATION IN YAL AS A CATALYST FOR FAT ACCEPTANCE

Laura Beal
ldavi129@vols.utk.edu

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I am submitting herewith a dissertation written by Laura Beal entitled "ONE SIZE DOES NOT FIT ALL: AN AUTOETHNOGRAPHIC ACCOUNT OF FAT REPRESENTATION IN YAL AS A CATALYST FOR FAT ACCEPTANCE." I have examined the final electronic copy of this dissertation for form and content and recommend that it be accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy, with a major in Education.

Susan Groenke, Major Professor

We have read this dissertation and recommend its acceptance:

Susan Groenke, Stergios Botzakis, Amy Billone, Steven Bickmore, Kia J. Richmond

Accepted for the Council:

Dixie L. Thompson

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**ONE SIZE DOES NOT FIT ALL: AN AUTOETHNOGRAPHIC ACCOUNT OF FAT
REPRESENTATION IN YAL AS A CATALYST FOR FAT ACCEPTANCE**

A Dissertation Presented for the
Doctor of Philosophy
Degree
The University of Tennessee, Knoxville

Laura M. Beal

May 2022

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DEDICATION

I dedicate this dissertation to my friends, far and near. Without the constant support of my friends back home, I do not believe I would have had the strength to remain on this path. In the three years I have been at the University of Tennessee, I have had the opportunity to work with some amazing people without whom I would not have had the patience or will to complete this dissertation.

I dedicate this dissertation to my family. As a first-generation student, there were so many unknowns we had to face in learning the ins and outs of education. I thank my mom for being my constant cheerleader and biggest supporter as I made my way through the sometimes-treacherous waters of education. I thank my amazing sister for reminding me every day that being a teacher is something special. Without them, I would be drifting aimlessly.

I dedicate this dissertation to my husband and love of my life. Moving across the country to pursue this dream was by far the loneliest thing I have ever had to do. Meeting him and learning love is possible is the greatest by-product I could have ever asked for on this journey. He has shown me compassion and strength in ways I never knew possible, and I am thankful for every “shouldn’t you be writing” comment or text he sent. 47 folds, Tony Beal, 47 folds.

I dedicate this dissertation to Julie Murphy. Without Julie Murphy’s books, this dissertation would not exist, for it is her books in which I saw myself – truly saw myself – as more than just a fat girl. Without characters like Willowdean, Millie, Faith, and Waylon, and the many other positive representations of fat bodies in young adult literature, I would still be fighting to be accepted for who I think people want me to be rather than who I am.

Lastly, I dedicate this dissertation to every fat person who has been on the receiving end of fat-hate. You are more than their opinions. Beautiful is not a size.

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ABSTRACT

With campaigns like We Need Diverse Books (Mabbott, 2017), readers and authors of young adult literature (YAL) are calling for more diverse representations of adolescents and adolescence, such as in race, gender, sexuality, and ability, to name a few. However, size inclusivity is often left off this list. As a young adult, I was fat, and I never had characters who were productive representations to turn to. I did not see ‘me’ in the pages of the books I read. The purpose of this study was two-fold: (1) to explore my own relationship with YAL novels that center the fat experience, and (2) to critically examine how the life experiences of fat persons are portrayed in recently published YAL.

This dissertation is guided by two research questions:

1. What was my experience reading Murphy’s (2015) *Dumplin’* as an adult reader of YAL? What did the texts do for me as a fat reader?
2. How do the protagonists/casts of characters resist the dominant negative cultural perception of fatness? How do her books act as an avenue for awareness and change?

Because this dissertation has two foci, it employs two qualitative methodologies: critical autoethnography and critical content analysis. Chapter Four presents a critical autoethnography that relies on Harro’s (2008a) Cycle of Socialization as a backdrop to discuss the construction of my fat identity, then situates *Dumplin’* (Murphy, 2015) as the critical incident that allowed me to break free of the Cycle of Socialization and move into the Cycle of Liberation (Harro, 2008b). Chapter Five utilizes critical content analysis to determine how the protagonists challenge the cultural conception of fatness and how the novels act as an avenue for change. Findings suggest Murphy’s *Dumplin’* (2015), *Puddin’* (2018), *Faith Taking Flight* (2020), and *Pumpkin* (2021a) push back against the master narrative of fatness by challenging the fat quest (Shelton, 2016). In

doing so, Murphy's novels act as artifacts for fat activism. Chapter Six concludes by offering suggestions for implementing fat pedagogy into the secondary English classroom.

Keywords: fat, young adult literature, fatphobia, representation, autoethnography, critical autoethnography, content analysis, fat awareness

PREFACE

“Fat, much like skin color, is something you cannot hide, no matter how dark the clothing you wear, or how diligently you avoid horizontal stripes” – Roxanne Gay

“Riots not diets!” – Julie Murphy

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CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

The pages of a book hold so many different experiences. Whether it is real life fiction, fantasy, science fiction, horror, psychological thriller, or any of the other myriad of genres, books have the unique ability to allow readers to experience an infinite number of lives.

Rosenblatt (1938) suggests:

Books can be a liberating experience in many ways. They may reveal [...] there can be modes of life different from the ones into which [readers] have happened to be born.

They can learn about the extraordinary diversity of subcultures to be found within the framework of our society, with its sectional, economic, and social differences. Their reading can early make them aware that there are families organized very differently from their own. They will discover in our complex society culturally accepted patterns of behavior and socially approved formulations of personal goals completely alien to their own background. (p. 185)

Reading frees readers from their social framework and encourages them to explore endless cultures; readers can see that within their own dominant social frameworks there are subcultures that represent experiences foreign to their own experiences (Rosenblatt, 1994). From this experience, readers learn about their own social, political, and religious constructs and become aware and even empathetic toward those who do not share the same constructs. “Democracy,” as Rosenblatt emphasizes, “requires a body of citizens capable of making their own personal and social choices,” (p. 184), and as democracy is connected to building empathy, reading is the key to unlocking that capability.

Childhood Reading and Readicide

As a child, I was a voracious reader. I jumped from book to book, looking to make new friends inside the pages of *Encyclopedia Brown* (Sobol, 1963), *The Bailey School Kids* (Dadey & Jones, 1991), and *Choose Your Own Adventures* (Packard, 1982), to name a few. But as I grew older and reading became an assignment, I grew to hate it. I would do whatever it took to do as little reading as possible. I was a victim of readicide, (Gallagher, 2009), the “systematic killing of the love of reading, often exacerbated by the inane, mind-numbing practices found in schools” (p. 2). The assignment of books outside student interest and reading ability levels turn avid readers against reading because it takes the fun out of the activity. Gallagher (2009) points to attitudes of reading shifting from “enthusiasm to indifference to hostility” (p. 3) and emphasizes the dwindling numbers of readers. I remember the books I was assigned to read in school. Titles such as *The Once and Future King* (White, 1958), *Their Eyes were Watching God* (Hurston, 1937), *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (Twain, 1884), *Animal Farm* (Orwell, 1945), and *Siddhartha* (Hesse, 1922) were assigned, and while I purchased the books, read the first couple of chapters, and brought them to school on discussion days, I would use the SparkNotes to fuel my discussions because I had no desire to read them. Whatever spark I had in elementary school that had me seeking out new books regularly was lost. It was not until I came to young adult literature that I found my way back to being an avid reader.

Coming to Young Adult Literature

Between high school and college, I ventured into the *Harry Potter* series (Rowling, 1998) because I had seen the movies and wanted to read the books. I was a fan; I’ll admit that. However, it was not until I encountered Stephenie Meyer’s (2005) *Twilight* series that I truly remembered what reading for pleasure felt like. I devoured the three books already in print, and I

waited impatiently for the publication of the last one. It was during this time, between reading *Eclipse* (Meyer, 2008) and awaiting *Breaking Dawn*'s (Meyer, 2008b) publication, that I came to really fall in love with young adult literature¹.

I read *Twilight* (Meyer, 2005) during my freshman year of college – 2007. Kaitlyn², my college best friend, had followed the series since its initial publication in 2005. Sitting in my dorm talking about our classes, we somehow landed on books. I mentioned I'd recently finished reading *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows* (Rowling, 2007) and was looking for something else to read. Flabbergasted that I'd just read the series for the first time, Kaitlyn, an avid *Harry Potter* (Rowling, 1998) fan, recommended I follow up with *Twilight*, this super romantic book about a 100-year-old vampire who falls in love with a seventeen-year-old girl in Washington. I agreed to read it. She ran down to her dorm room and got it from her shelves. To be honest, it sat on my desk for about a month, but when I did finally pick it up, I devoured *Twilight* (Meyer, 2005).

I can't exactly pinpoint what I loved most about the book, but for the first time since early middle school I could not put a book down. I read until the wee hours of the morning. I remember finishing the book and wanting nothing more than to call Kaitlyn and tell her exactly how I felt about it. I needed to talk about Edward and Bella's romance. It was something right out of a fairytale. He tried so hard not to want her and failed. She tried so hard to get his attention and succeeded. What a love story! Lucky for me, Kaitlyn had *New Moon* (Meyer, 2006) in her dorm room with her, so we traded; I devoured it, too. Unlike my response to *Twilight* (Meyer,

¹ Young Adult Literature refers to literature written for adolescents, ages 12-18 (Bushman & Haas, 2006; Cole, 2009; Nilsen & Donelson, 2009). YAL centers a protagonist that falls within that age range, as well. *Twilight* (Meyer, 2005) centers Bella Swan, 18 years old. Though Harry is 11 years old in *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone* (Rowling, 1997), he is 17 by the end of the series. For a more robust definition, see Chapter Two.

² Name changed for anonymity

2005), I was mad at the book. I felt betrayed by Meyer for sending Edward off and forcing Jacob onto Bella like a lost puppy. Then of course, the whole mess with the misunderstood vision and Edward attempting suicide by sunlight – these all made me angry. I needed *Eclipse* (Meyer, 2007) to reconcile my emotions. Unfortunately, Kaitlyn didn't have it with her. It was still in her room back in her hometown which made for increased anticipation. When I visited her at Thanksgiving that fall, she dutifully handed me the book and reminded me to cherish it, as *Breaking Dawn* (Meyer, 2008b) wasn't out yet, and I'd have to wait for closure. I did not heed her warning. I consumed *Eclipse* (Meyer, 2007) in two days. When it hit me that I'd have to wait nearly nine months for the conclusion to the series, I bought my own copies and reread the series. This was the first time I'd reread a book for fun. Prior to the *Twilight* (Meyer, 2005) series, I had only reread one book, *The Life of Pi* (Martel, 2003), which was simply because it was assigned in ninth grade and again the summer before twelfth grade. Between Thanksgiving 2007 and the release of *Breaking Dawn* (Meyer, 2008b) on August 2, 2008, I reread the series three times.

By the time *Breaking Dawn* (Meyer, 2008b) was published, I was living at home and commuting to a local college rather than returning to the east Texas university I'd attended the year prior. The local Borders became my bookstore of choice. For *Breaking Dawn* (Meyer, 2008b), they hosted a midnight release party. Starting at 9 pm, they had trivia, special *Twilight* (Meyer, 2005) themed drinks in the coffee shop, costume contests, and several other activities for participants. I attended the release with a friend with whom I worked. We got to the store at 7:45 to get in line. I had never attended a midnight release of anything. Because I came to *Harry Potter* (Rowling, 1998) at the end of the series' publication, the midnight releases were long since over. There were still film releases including midnight premieres, but I didn't attend those

until after I attended the *Breaking Dawn* (Meyer, 2008b) midnight release. So, *Twilight* (Meyer, 2005) introduced me to this world of waiting in line for a book, engaging in fandom-related conversations, and experiencing my first all-nighter. I consumed all 756 (Meyer, 2008) pages in 24 hours. I read throughout the night and into the morning, took a 2-hour nap, and read some more. I was reading at red lights and on my break at work.

Twilight (Meyer, 2005) reignited in me a love of reading and initiated a love of rereading. Storey (1996) suggests fans don't just read texts, they reread them. In summarizing Barthes (1975), Storey explains that rereading shifts the reader's focus from "what will happen" to "how will it happen" (Storey, 1996, p. 128). Each time I read the *Twilight* series (Meyer, 2005), I found something new in the storyline. For this purpose, I will always love *Twilight* (Meyer, 2005). It is my gateway book. Like a gateway drug, Meyer's characters and world-building made me insatiable. I wanted to read all the YAL vampire books. I read Melissa de la Cruz's *Blue Bloods* series and P.C. and Kristen Cast's *House of Night* series. When vampires got old, I moved to angels and fallen angels, reading Cassandra Clare's *Mortal Instruments* series, and then moved to the fairy realms of Melissa Meyer's *Wicked Lovely* series. This doesn't even address the YA romance obsession likely sparked by Bella and Edward's romance. Though I'll never claim *Twilight* (Meyer, 2005) will be deemed a classic in one-hundred years, I do believe it has a place on the shelves of YAL.

My relationship with YAL continued throughout college. Given the opportunity to take a YAL course in my undergraduate degree, I jumped at it. During the class, I encountered classic YAL texts such as *Forever* (Blume, 1975), *The Chocolate War* (Cormier, 1974), and *Seventeenth Summer* (Daly, 1942). We also read more contemporary texts such as *The Perks of Being a Wallflower* (Chbosky, 1999), *Feed* (Anderson, 2002), and *Looking for Alaska* (Green, 2005).

Though I do not remember all the texts assigned, I do know it was the only course I completed every single reading assignment. For the final term paper, I assessed Meyer's (2008a) *The Host* for its categorization as young adult literature. In a different semester, I registered for a fairy tales class. While I enjoyed the class, my favorite assignment was the term paper in which I read Dessen's (2000) *Dreamland* and argued it was a "Beauty and the Beast" retelling. What these two classes had in common was the joy I experienced in working with and within YAL. These papers are long lost, but I would love to see how far I have come in my understanding and analysis of YAL. To think, this enthusiasm started with a girl and her sparkling vampire boyfriend. Even after two English degrees and numerous encounters with books far more interesting and better written, I will always support *Twilight* (Meyer, 2005). I don't think that I'd have been an English teacher, a lover of YAL, or a doctoral student in YAL had I not been reintroduced to YA through *Twilight* (Meyer, 2005).

Finding Julie Murphy and the Fat Girl Narrative

I was introduced to Julie Murphy's writing in 2018. After a decade of reading YAL and reading novels never thinking about the size of the main character, I came across *Dumplin'* (Murphy, 2015). *Dumplin'* follows sixteen-year-old Willowdean Dickson, a self-proclaimed fat girl and lover of all things Dolly Parton. When romance and a rocky relationship with her mother shakes her fat positive resolve, Willowdean enters the Miss Teen Blue Bonnet beauty pageant to regain her confidence and reclaim her body. As I read it, I was amazed. Here was this girl who didn't really care about the way she looked. She was big and loud and proud. I loved how Willowdean embraced her body when others chided her for it. There were moments while I was reading when I felt jealous of the ownership Willowdean had. I wanted to feel that way. Even after a 100-pound weight loss, I struggled with loving my body. Willowdean, for most of the

book, never shamed herself or felt like she was taking up too much space. Aside from *Fat Angie* (Charlton-Trujillo, 2013) which I only knew about because of a book festival panel I'd chaired, I had not experienced a book that addressed fatness. I read *Just Listen* (Dessen, 2006) which featured a protagonist with a sister with an eating disorder. But regarding body image or the fat experience, I never sought out books to read addressing body shaming and skinny as the norm. I can only assume that I subconsciously avoided texts about fat characters because I didn't want my real-life bullying and fat-shaming experiences to taint my reading experiences. Following my reading of *Dumplin'* (Murphy, 2015), I actively sought out YAL and contemporary fiction texts with fat characters. I was curious to know if they all shared the same body positive image Willowdean possessed. It was this curiosity that led to the inception of this study.

Purpose and Focus of the Study

The purpose of this study was two-fold: (1) to explore my own relationship with YAL novels that center the fat experience, and (2) to critically examine how the life experiences of fat persons are portrayed in recently published young adult literature. The first focus of this study was to provide a critical autoethnographic account of my reading Julie Murphy's *Dumplin'* (2015). Then it will provide a critical content analysis of *Dumplin'* (Murphy, 2015), *Puddin'* (2018), *Faith Taking Flight* (2020), and *Pumpkin* (2021a). I sought to explore how Murphy centered fatness, used the word 'fat' in each text, and how Murphy's characters resisted the cultural perception of fatness.

To address these points, I depended on Fat Studies (Cooper, 2010) and Fat Standpoint Theory (Cooper Stoll & Thoun, 2020; Pausé, 2020) as the guiding theoretical framework. I also relied on Reader Response Theory (Rosenblatt, 1995; Holland, 1980; Fish, 1980) to understand how I was transacting with each text. I reviewed present literature on representations of fat

experience in YAL to better understand the status of the field and determine how my research added to the growing body of research on fat YAL.

Research Questions

This qualitative study was guided by the following research questions:

1. What was my experience reading Murphy's (2015) *Dumplin'* as an adult reader of YAL? What did the texts do for me as a fat reader?
2. How do the protagonists/casts of characters resist the dominant negative cultural perception of fatness? How do her books act as an avenue for awareness and change?

Question 1 will be explored through critical autoethnographic methods in Chapter Four, while Question 2 will be addressed in the critical content analysis in Chapter Five.

Limitations to the Study

Content analysis is based in interpretation meaning the study is subjective in nature. Krippendorff (2004) argued that content analysis aims to understand what a text or texts mean and what the information does for the person consuming the text. As Rosenblatt (1995) theorized, no reader reads the same text the same way. The transaction between the text and the reader, and the poem that emerges because of the transaction, is unique to that text and reader. With this in mind, I had to acknowledge my positionality as a fat female and understand my perspective will be subjective. I intend to conduct this study with integrity and present the findings clearly.

Additionally, this study focuses on one author writing about the fat experience. Murphy's texts center white, cisgender characters. Though there are characters of color in the ensemble casts, the protagonists lack diversity regarding race and ethnicity. Murphy's books were selected

due to their being a catalyst for my research agenda and were by no means meant to be exclusive. There is a growing number of authors writing diverse representations of the fat experience which paves the path for future research opportunities.

Review of Relevant Terms

The terms relevant to this study include Young Adult Literature, Critical Content Analysis, Critical Autoethnography, Dominant Social Framework, Feminist Standpoint Theory, fat, fat-shaming, Fat Studies, Fat Standpoint Theory, Reader Response, and thin privilege.

Young Adult Literature. Literature intended for readers between the age of 12-18 and contains an adolescent protagonist (Bushman & Haas, 2006; Cole, 2009; Nilsen & Donelson, 2009). *Abbreviation: YAL*

Critical Content Analysis. Derived from content analysis (Krippendorff, 2004), Critical Content Analysis (Short, 2017) analyzes a text or text set through a theoretical or critical lens to determine and explore underlying messages as it pertains to “issues of power” (p. 6).

Abbreviation: CCA

Critical Autoethnography. Critical autoethnographic research (Jones, 2016) engages in exploration of how the “happenings of culture” impact the researcher (p. 229). Through this work, the researcher “examines systems, institutions and discourages that privilege some people and marginalize others,” “mobilize[s] and develop[s] the explanatory frameworks that critical theory provides; and (3) seeks to ‘build new knowledge about the social world in order to stimulate new practices’ (Hill Collins, p. 135)” (Jones, 2018, citation in original, pp. 5-7).

Abbreviation: CAE

Dominant Social Framework. The dominant social framework (Rosenblatt, 1994) refers to the social environment in which a reader is situated. This impacts the way a reader will engage

with a text. For the purposes of this study, I use dominant social framework and master narrative (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012) to describe how the situations with which the characters engage.

Feminist Standpoint Theory. Feminist Standpoint Theory (Hartsock, 1983; Smith, 1987; Harding, 2004) argues locationality leads to common experiences, therein creating privilege knowledge. Originally FST sought to focus on the experiences of woman as oppressed, but it has evolved into an interdisciplinary field focused on giving power to marginalized voices.

Abbreviation: FST

Fat. In this study, fat will be used a descriptor and not as a pejorative unless quoted directly from a text or scholarly work.

Fat-Shaming. Fat-shaming is the act of oppressing a person / group of people based on their weight (Gunnars, 2019). Often used as a tactic to encourage healthier life choices, it can lead to depression and anxiety. Additionally, fat-hate/fat-hatred (LeBesco, 2004) may appear as synonyms for fat-shaming.

Fat Studies. In response to the growing oppression of fat persons, Fat Studies is a critical theory aiming to dismantle the metanarrative surrounding fat lives and fat experiences (Wann, 2009; Cooper, 2010; Brown, 2016). *Abbreviation: FS*

Fat Standpoint Theory. At the convergence of Feminist Standpoint Theory (Hartsock, 1983; Smith, 1987; Harding, 2004) and Fat Studies (Wann, 2009; Cooper, 2010; Brown, 2016) is Fat Standpoint Theory (Cooper Stoll & Thoune, 2020). Fat Standpoint Theory situates the fat persons/people at the center of the research, as their privilege knowledge can combat fat-phobia and fat-hatred. *Abbreviation: FST*

Reader Response Theory. Reader Response Theory implies that lived experiences impact the mean-making process (Rosenblatt, 1995; 1994). *Abbreviation: RRT*

Thin-Privilege. Thin privilege represents the conscious and unconscious privilege afforded to persons who are not considered fat. In YAL, thin privilege indicates a character must shed their weight to be considered worthy (Averill, 2016).

Summary and Organization of the Study

In this chapter, I have explained my relationship with reading as an elementary-aged student, as well as the result of readicide (Gallagher, 2009). I have delineated my first journey into young adult literature with Meyer's (2005) *Twilight* series. This section concluded with my introduction to Julie Murphy's (2015) young adult novel, *Dumplin'*. Also in Chapter One are the purpose and focus of the study, limitations for the study, and key words relevant to the study.

Chapter Two provides a literature review of Reader Response Theory, Feminist Standpoint Theory, Fat Studies, and Young Adult Literature. Using the tenets of Feminist Standpoint Theory and Critical Fat Studies, Chapter Two will also explain the critical and theoretical influences that may appear in the final deliverable, a critical autoethnography. Chapter Three will explain Autoethnography as Method, provide a possible theoretical framework consisting of Reader Response Theory, Feminism, and Fat Studies, and a description of possible deliverables via autoethnographic methods. Chapter Four will be a critical autoethnographic exploration of my own readings of Murphy's texts and how they align with my cultural conditioning as a fat female, Chapter Five will detail the findings from the critical content analysis assessing Murphy's representation of fat experience. This study will conclude with Chapter Six, implications for the use of books representing fat experience as tools to disrupt the cultural metanarrative surrounding fatness.

CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

Chapter two will provide an in-depth literature review of Reader Response Theory, Feminist Standpoint Theory, the Cycles of Socialization and Liberation, Fat Studies, and young adult literature. Reader Response Theory will outline how readers engage with texts and create meaning beginning with an overview of RRT and narrowing to a synthesis of key ideas in RRT. Because the theoretical frame is situated within Feminist Standpoint Theory and Fat Studies, a robust chronology of both theories will be provided culminating in a discussion of Fat Standpoint Theory within Fat Studies. Additionally, because the fat/thin binary is a socially constructed identity, a brief definition of Harro's (2008a; 2008b) Cycle of Socialization and Cycle of Liberation is provided. Finally, a review of relevant research on the genre of Young Adult Literature that will define, defend, and critique the genre in terms of the parameters of the research project.

Reader Response Theory

Reader Response Theory, or RRT, aims to determine not only how to better understand reading processes, but how lived experiences and intellectual communities impact meaning-making process (Tompkins, 1980). Unlike the common belief that RRT simply looks at how we respond to a text, RRT requires us to do a deep dive into both the response we have to a text and what that response reveals about us as the reader. Prior to reader-oriented criticism, New Criticism promoted the concept that meaning was exclusively within the text, thus insisting that the text was objective (Tompkins, 1980). RRT aimed to shift the focus from the text to the reader, the reading process, and the response "as areas for investigation" (p. ix). While there are many Reader Response theorists, at the crux of their theories they seek to examine:

authors' attitudes toward their readers, the kinds of readers various texts seem to imply, the role actual readers play in the determination of literary meaning, the relation of reading conventions to textual interpretation, and the status of the readers' self. (p. ix)

Historically, these various examinations have culminated in seven main approaches for RRT: transactional (e.g., Rosenblatt), historical context (e.g., Jauss), affective stylistics (e.g., Fish), psychological (e.g., Holland), subjective (e.g., Bleich), social (e.g., Fish), and textual (e.g., Prince). Each approach positions the reader and the text in a reciprocal relationship in which the reader's meaning-making process is impacted by the text and the text's meaning is impacted by the reader's own lived experiences (Sadjadi, 2017). This literature review will detail Rosenblatt's (1938/1995, 1978/1994) seminal theory and synthesize it with Iser's (1974/1980, 1978/1980) transactional theory, Holland's (1975/1980, 1975/2017) psychological reader response theory, Fish's (1980) social reader response theory, and Culler's (1981/2002) semiotics.

Rosenblatt Introduces Transactional Reader-Response Theory

No one should engage in discourse about RRT without mentioning and celebrating Louise Rosenblatt. A pioneer in the relationships between readers and texts, Rosenblatt dedicated her life's work to defining the efferent-aesthetic continuum and asserting readers can read critically across texts when taught how to transact with the texts, not simply interact with them (Roen & Karolides, 2005). Her works, *Literature as Exploration* (1938/1995) and *The Reader, the Text, the Poem: The Transactional Theory of Literary Work* (1978/1994), continue to influence educators, teacher educators, and scholars as they engage with various texts and readers.

Defining “Reader”

Reader-response criticism is often directly credited to the first edition of Rosenblatt’s 1938 *Literature as Exploration* in which Rosenblatt foregrounds the bidirectional relationship of the reader and the text. She deems this bidirectional relationship as the “transactional continuum” (Foreword, 5th Ed.). The purpose for *Literature as Exploration* (1938/1995) intended to investigate how readers were taught to read and the impact that teaching had on their relationship with the text. Very few readers read for the experience of good writing; but instead, they seek to connect to the human experience and gain knowledge. In the end, Rosenblatt offers educators a way to approach literature that not only acknowledges the complexity of the literary experience, but also “fosters the development of a more fruitful understanding and appreciation of literature” (p. 23) and centers the experience around the reader and the text.

Historically, across literary theory, the reader is often an implied participant in the reading event. The emphasis is placed, instead, on the author, the context, or the content of the text leaving the reader as a “passive recipient” (1978/1994, p. 4). Rosenblatt contends that the reader is not a passive recipient of the message, but rather, the reader is actively engaging with the text creating meaning. Reading is a “highly complex operation,” and because of the complexity, Rosenblatt argues generic readers and generic texts do not exist (p. 24). Instead, she references the reader and the text as a “live circuit” where the “reader infuses intellectual and emotional meaning into the pattern of verbal symbols, and those symbols channel [their] thoughts and feelings” (1938/1995, p. 24). The complexity of reading and therein, the diversity of readers, allows Rosenblatt to reiterate that there is no ideal reader or correct audience. Because the transaction with the text is rooted in personal lived experiences, readers can be

anyone – the readers of popular fiction and readers of literary classics – which means the diversity of readers leads to a diversity of interpretations (1978/1994).

To achieve the varied interpretations, Rosenblatt proposes the transactional continuum (1938/1995, 1978/1994), a complex series of transactions spanning from extremely efferent reading to extremely aesthetic reading. The efferent stance, derived from the Latin, *effere*, to carry away, is a very stoic transaction with the text. This transaction requires the reader to disengage from the text and only pay attention to what the symbols on the page mean to determine what is important *after* reading is complete. This end of the spectrum is about absorption of material content, focuses “on selecting out and analytically abstracting [...] information or ideas or directions for action” (1978/1994, p. 32), and disregards personal and qualitative elements rather than evoking emotional response from the reader. Efferent stances are what separate scholars from scholar-readers; Rosenblatt suggests that scholars look to literature for the structure and content which distracts them from fully engaging with the text in an aesthetic way.

Conversely, the aesthetic stance requires the reader to remain fully invested in the reading, fixing their attention on the experience they are living through *during* the reading process. The text is brought to life when the “text stirs up both referential and affective aspects of consciousness (1938/1995, p. 33). An aesthetic reading requires the reader to draw on their own “fund of experience” to better understand how the text is impacting them (1978/1994, p. 43). With the understanding that each text brings to the transaction a myriad of potentialities, the reader must participate in selective attention. When transacting with a text aesthetically, Rosenblatt indicates some textual elements will engage with the reader fully, eliciting a deeper experience, while some will only engage slightly, and others will not engage at all. This implies

a reader cannot “pay equal attention” to all the stimuli in the text; therefore, they engage in selective attention and averts their attention to the element with which they engage most (p. 167).

The transaction that occurs leaves reverberations between the reader and the text.

Defining “Text”

The common understanding of the text is a set of “printed signs in their capacity to serve as symbols” on a page (1978/1994, p. 12). However, for Transactional Reader Response Theory, the text acts as an organism with which the reader transacts and creates meaning. Until the transaction begins, the text is dormant. According to Rosenblatt, the text acts as either a stimulus or a blueprint. When a text is acting as a stimulus, it is calling the reader’s attention to their fund of experience – experiences or elements of experiences from the past. The text activates links between the verbal symbols and lived experiences (1978/1994). These lived experiences can be prior knowledge, current social frameworks, past reading, and current mood. Because the text can stimulate such links, it also can act as a blueprint. This occurs when the text leads the reader to take up a critical stance and forces them to evaluate their own understanding of external and internal responses. Transitioning from stimuli to blueprint requires active participation in that the reader must acknowledge their own understanding and “self-order” or “self-correct” (Rosenblatt, 1978/1994, p. 11). Rosenblatt explains when a reader discovers he has “projected on the text elements” and this projection is irrelevant, he must self-correct by either rereading portions of or the entirety of the text to correct a well-thought-out interpretation (1978/1994, p.11). Self-correction is not limited to just the reading of the text, as it can continue to impact interpretations long after the reading process is complete. By participating in everything the text has to offer, the reader is encouraged and sometimes forced to “reevaluate [their] own assumptions and preoccupations” set forth by the social framework in which [their] life is embedded (1938/1995,

p. 74). In essence, the reader will be able to free themselves from the rigid structure set forth for them by the social framework – often vague and generalized – and “develop flexibility of mind, a freedom from rigid emotional habits [and] enter into the aesthetic experiences the artist made possible” (p. 98). Introducing this kind of active reading acts as an entry point for social sensitivity, critical objectivity, human sympathy, and personal growth.

Defining “Poem”

Fundamentally, Rosenblatt’s (1938/1995, 1978/1994) Transactional Reader Response Theory posits a bidirectional relationship between the reader and the physical text which creates a unique response – the “poem.” Not until the reader begins transacting with the physical text does the poem emerge, for the poem is the result of the transaction between the physical text and the reader. Rosenblatt does, however, contend that a reader cannot engage solely in an aesthetic reading or an efferent reading. While reading aesthetically, readers do look for information that can be retained *after* reading, but mostly, the reading experience is about the reader acknowledging the semantic components present on the page, but to the page, they bring their own lived experiences and present context which connects them emotionally to the text. This heightened awareness becomes the transaction and “evokes” the “poem.”

The caveat of evoking a poem lies in the openness and constraint of the text. Rosenblatt stresses the role of the reader throughout both *Literature as Exploration* (1938/1995) and *The Reader, the Text, and the Poem* (1978/1994). However, she also emphasizes the “poem” is only evoked from within the constraints of the text. To effectively evoke a “poem,” the reader must be aware of the conditions in which the reader and the text are transacting because there is a limit to the “poem” that can be created. Rosenblatt references literary devices such as juxtaposition, metaphor, and symbolism as being constraints with which the reader must contend. These

devices consciously or unconsciously call upon the reader to call upon their funds of knowledge – background, knowledge, experience, and feelings – to understand the author’s use of said devices; thus, the reader becomes part of the creative process. While the openness of the text can impact many different facets of the reader’s funds of knowledge, the constraints ensure the meaning is connected to the text and not isolated to random understanding.

Building On and Expanding Reader Response Theory

Rosenblatt’s (1938/1995, 1978/1994) seminal theory – Transactional Reader Response Theory – played a pivotal role in the development and substantiation of RRT as theory. She is not alone in building RRT, however. Wolfgang Iser (1974/1980, 1978/1980), Norman H. Holland (1975/1980, 1975/2011), Stanley Fish (1980), and Jonathan D. Culler (1981/2002) also add to the understanding of how readers and texts interact and engage. Each theorist provided their own views of how a reader responds to a text, but in the end, while they may have labeled them differently, they relied on three main terms: reader, text, and interpretation.

The Reader

Rosenblatt (1938/1995, 1994/1978), Iser (1974/1980, 1978/1980), and Holland’s (1975/1980, 1975/2011) roles of the reader all align with the idea that the reader’s lived experiences ultimately impact the engagement with the text. They bring with them a bank of experiences from which they can pull to better understand how the text is impacting them. Culler (1981/2002), on the other hand, relies on the reader’s cognitive understanding of the signs and signals of the text that are impacting their making sense of the text while Fish (1980) relies on the reader’s placement in a community and the community’s agreed strategies for interpretation. Therefore, while Rosenblatt’s (1938/1995, 1994/1978), Iser’s (1974/1980, 1978/1980), Holland’s (1975/1980, 1975/2011) and Fish’s (1980) roles of the reader ultimately emphasize the

aesthetic relationship of the reader, Culler's (1981/2002) reader does not engage with emotion. Nonetheless, all five theorists agree the reader is an essential player in reading. Prior models of literary interpretation had focused on the text and/or the author, but Rosenblatt (1938/1995, 1994/1978), Iser (1974/1980, 1978/1980), Holland (1975/1980, 1975/2011), Fish (1980) and Culler (1981/2002) all address the necessity of identifying and crediting the reader in the meaning-making process.

The Text

Like their work with defining the reader, Rosenblatt (1938/1995, 1994/1978), Iser (1974/1980, 1978/1980), Holland (1975/1980, 1975/2011), Fish (1980), and Culler (1981/2002) work to move away from New Critics' view of the text. While New Criticism focused on close reading of the text as the central focus, Reader Response Criticism looked at the text and its impact on the reader and the reader's impact on the text. For Rosenblatt (1938/1995, 1994/1978), the text acts as a stimulus or blueprint with which the reader transacts. From this transaction, the text links the reader's lived experiences to the text which creates meaning. The text, for Iser, (1974/1980, 1978/1980) is the physical language with which the reader engages. It is full of determinates, the physical and structural elements of the text, and indeterminates, the gaps the reader must fill during the reading process to create meaning. Once the indeterminates are filled, the reader can concretize the text. Similarly, Fish (1980) suggests the text does not exist until the reader engages with it because the reader produces the text through the interpretive strategies. These interpretive communities dictate how the text can be read based on behaviors and beliefs about the world in which the text is situated. In Holland's (1975/1980, 1975/2011) theory, the text is simply the written and physical words on the page. The text provides the reader the details necessary for unity through the reading process. Culler (1981/2002) believes the text is a series

of signs the reader must identify to make sense of the text. He argues the text communicates with the reader through signs and signals that the reader must consume. While they may not have wholly agreed on the role of the reader, Rosenblatt (1938/1995, 1994/1978), Iser (1974/1980, 1978/1980), Holland (1975/1980, 1975/2011), Fish (1980), and Culler (1981/2002) do all seem to align in terms of the role of the text. For each theorist, the text is the physical item or location with which the reader engaged – either through emotion, imagination, projection, or communication – to create meaning.

Interpretation and Meaning

The last element in Reader Response Criticism is the response created between the reader and the text. The poem is the nuanced product of the transaction between reader and text (Rosenblatt, 1938/1995, 1994/1978). The reader brings to the text their lived experiences, the text provides the semantic components, and together, they create meaning. Iser's (1974/1980, 1978/1980) gestalt, or meaning and significance, occurs when the text and the reader converge. Once the reader has filled in the indeterminates, the product is concretization – the result of the reader filling in “gaps” and completing the text – and realization – the point at which the text and reader converge. Holland (1975/1980, 1975/2011) refers to the meaning as the synthesis of reality and the content of the text. Like Iser (1974/1980, 1978/1980), Holland's (1975/1980, 1975/2011) meaning making relies on the convergence of the text and the reader; however, convergence for Holland means the inability to extract the reader's personality from the act of reading. The text is embedded in the personality and has struck a delicate balance between the id, ego, and superego. According to Fish (1980), for meaning to occur, the interpretive communities must agree on a certain set of strategies by which the text is interpreted to achieve meaning. The communities establish sets of directions and instructions of which readers can partake to produce

acceptable interpretations. Though he argues implying a text has meaning is problematic, Culler (1981/2002) does address sense and making sense of the text. Culler criticizes the term meaning for implying the meaning is ungraspable; therefore, sense and making sense of the text more accurately denotes the process of interpreting. One important idea all four theorists agree upon is the fact the text provides openness and constraint, to borrow from Rosenblatt (1938/1995, 1994/1978), in that the meaning created from the interactions can only be within the realm of that offered by the text. There are a variety of interpretations because of the wide expanse of readers; however, the reader can only interpret what is provided by the text.

Reader Response Theory Summary

Across the five scholars reviewed above, it is evident Reader Response Theory has a variety of foci, but they all agree the reader and the text are at the center of the reading process. Without those two elements, meaning making cannot occur. Reader Response Theory acts as the frame to discuss the novels in the text set and how they have impacted me as the reader. In the following sections, I will review literature regarding the theories in which I will situate myself while transacting with the text set for this study: Feminist Standpoint Theory Hartsock, 1983; Smith, 1987; Harding, 1997), Fat Studies (Wann, 2009; Cooper, 2010; Brown, 2016), and Fat Standpoint Theory (Cooper Stoll & Thoune, 2020).

Feminist Standpoint Theory

Along the same lines as Reader Response Criticism, Feminist Standpoint Theory, or FST, emphasizes lived experiences. FST critically analyzes how authority is rooted in an individual's experiential knowledge. It suggests that people create knowledge, and they create knowledge in specific locations or positions (Sprague, 2016); therefore, knowledge creation is "influenced by the beliefs, bias, power, privilege, etc. of the creator" (Pausé, 2020, pp. 176-177). Hartsock

(1983) defines standpoint as an understanding that is “achieved rather than obvious [...] mediated rather than immediate” (p. 132). Smith (1997) maintains that with the help of other scholars, she defines FST as a “systematic study in which concepts and theories are examined for how they are activated in organizing social relations” (p. 393). Harding (2004) argues Standpoint “provides a logic of research that focuses attention on problems that are deeply disturbing to anyone reflecting on contemporary challenges to Western thought and practice, and yet insoluble within the philosophical, political, and theoretical legacies that they provide” (p. 198). At its inception, FST aimed to call attention to the clear differences between women’s and men’s lives.

Borrowing from Marxian theory of the structuring of power within the proletariat, Hartsock (1983) theorized that women’s lived experiences positioned them in a unique position to identify and critique the “phallographic institutions and ideology which constitute the capitalist for of patriarchy” (p. 284). In developing her argument, Hartsock calls upon the division of labor in which sex positions masculinity as the normative and femininity as the non-normative. As identities are constructed, they are rooted in a “masculinist world view” which “results in a deepgoing and hierarchical dualism” (p. 296-297) and ultimately, oppression. It is from this oppression, Hartsock suggests women can expose the masculine structures in place that perpetuate the inherent sexism of social models. Understanding the positions of women and the role women play in forward momentum leads into Sandra Harding’s (1997) coining of the term Feminist Standpoint Theory.

Harding (1983) roots Feminist Standpoint Theory in the sex/gender system. No matter the economic, political, or cultural/social climate, evident male privilege exists. Harding (1983) called for Standpoint to be “sensitive to the differences as well as to the commonalities of women’s labor across class, culture, and race division” (p. 321) because such attention to both

differences and commonalities would allow for a more complete understanding of the division of labor. Furthering her definition, Harding (1997) offers that standpoint theories, although often attributed to feminist ways of thought, can be applied to any social movement, as they aim to provide “public voice” to those who have been historically marginalized (p. 442). A person or group of people’s “social situations,” especially those under/unexamined, “enables and sets limits on what” they can know (p. 442).

Smith (1990) focuses on the sociological elements of Standpoint Theory, situating her understanding in the works of Marx as Harding did in the 1980s. Smith’s goal for FST was to encourage women to “speak from a site of consciousness that had not already been made over” (p. 200). For Smith, speaking is not relegated to discourses maintained and ruled by those in power; but instead, she details a social ontology in which experiences are the point of entry for inquiry and investigation. Because experience “gives direct access to the necessarily social character of people’s world,” (Smith, 1997, p. 394), Smith (1990) argues “insider materialism” (p. 206) illuminates the differences in experiences across societies. Differentiating the experiences of women from those of men accentuates the ruling apparatus, the “familiar complex of management, government administration, professions, and intelligentsia” (Smith, 1987, p. 108), and recognizes the problematic nature of the everyday world.

Feminist Standpoint Theory has evolved into an interdisciplinary field aiming to identify how common experiences create common knowledge. It has become a “type of critical social theory aimed to empower the oppressed to improve their situation which [is] largely ignored in social-political theories and movements” (Gurung, 2020, 107). This transition encourages critical questions from those who experience marginalization. This study is not an exploration of my privileged knowledge as a woman reading books about women; however, without pioneering

scholars like Hartsock (1983), Smith (1987), and Harding (1997) centering marginalized voices, such as fat voices, may not be possible. As Fat Studies and Fat Standpoint theory will detail, FST has created an entry point for marginalized persons to speak their truths and push against dominant narratives.

Fat Studies

Fat Studies is a developing, interdisciplinary field that follows in the footsteps of critical race theory, queer studies, and women's studies (Solovay & Rothblum, 2009; Watkins, Farrell, & Hugmeyer, 2012). Its aim is to critically assess how fatness is socially constructed and identify key issues that impact said social construction. The following review establishes Fat Studies as a critical framework, explains the major concepts, and provides a brief literature review of Fat Studies in young adult literature.

History of Fat Studies

Fat Studies emerged due to a pervasive belief that to be fat is to be undesirable and unhealthy (Wann, 2009). Initiated by a "fat sit-in" in the late 1960s, "Fat pride community, often called the size acceptance movement, began in the United States with the National Association to Advance Fat Acceptance" (p. x) and continued to gain momentum in the 1970s with the Fat Underground. Freespirit and Aldebaran's (1973) "The Fat Liberation Manifesto" called for respect and equal rights for people who were considered fat by social and medical standards, as well as called for an end of fat discrimination. They called out the diet companies for "exploit[ing] our bodies as objects of ridicule, thereby creating an immensely profitable market selling the false promise of avoidance of, or relief from, that ridicule (p. 18). The closing message, "FAT PEOPLE OF THE WORLD, UNITE! YOU HAVE NOTHING TO LOSE," called for fat people to "reclaim power" over their bodies and work together to achieve that goal

(p. 18, emphasis in the original). Over the last sixty years, fat activists such as Marilyn Wann, Esther Rothblum, Sandra Solovay, Kathleen LeBesco, Jana Evans Braziel, Amy E. Farrell, Cat Pausé, Charlotte Cooper, and so many others have emerged calling for change and acceptance. Through these calls for change emerged Fat Studies.

Like other critical studies, Fat Studies is marked by “aggressive, consistent, rigorous critique of the negative assumptions, stereotypes, and stigma placed on fat and the fat body” (Solovay & Rothblum, 2009, p. 2). The stereotypes are driven by rhetoric perpetuating the fat body as problematic, and Fat Studies calls attention to the production of fatphobia as culturally constructed (Cooper, 2010). Braziel and LeBesco (2001) and Shaw (2006) point out that fatness and the fat experience mock cultural norms. They are transgressive and socially reviled. Fat Studies scholars’ goals with research and literature are to reframe the narrative surrounding fatness and the fat experience. And while the scholarship is often divided into two veins, biomedical research and public health research, the social sciences look beyond the physical manifestation of fatness and the fat experience and look to the roles social structures play on fatness (Manokaran, Pausé, Roßmüller, & Vilhjálmsdóttir, 2020).

Dominant Social Framework

The construction of weight as a social problem stems from cues in the social environment (Maruer & Sobal, 1999). From these social cues, fat persons suffer from external discrimination and internal self-concepts (Degher & Hughes, 1999). The external discrimination manifests in such negative stereotypes as being less likely to make friends (Troop-Gordon & Ladd, 2005), less desirable sexual partners (Regan 1996; Chen & Brown, 2012), less deserving of attractive partners (Pearce et al., 2002), generally immoral (Hoverd & Sibley, 2007), and lesser in social status than those who are not fat (Vartanian & Silverstein, 2013). These external discriminations

often lead to a higher risk of bullying (Eisenberg, Neumark-Sztainer, Haines, & Wall, 2006; van den Berg, Neumark-Sztainer, Eisenberg, & Haines, 2008; Griffiths & Page, 2008). Internally, fat persons are susceptible to negative self-concepts such as low self-confidence and poor body image (Degher & Hughes, 1999; Davison & Birch, 2002; Eisenberg, Neumark-Sztainer, Haines, & Wall, 2006; FitzGerald & Hurst, 2017). The dominant social framework forces fat persons to be recognized first as fat, then “secondarily as possessing ancillary characteristics” (Degher & Hughes, 1999, p. 13). This development of status cues communicates the negative perception of fatness and fat experience.

Obesity-Epidemic

In the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, America moved away from fatness as a sign of wealth and moved toward a more consumer-driven “slenderness” (Fraser, 2009). The newly accepted appearance encouraged thinness as desirable which led to “cultural obsession with weight” as consumerism took hold (p. 13). The catalyst for today’s view on fatness stems from the early 1990s with the diet and weight loss industry boom and the term “obesity epidemic.” In 1995, U.S. Surgeon General C. Everett Koop instituted the “Shape Up America Campaign” in efforts to combat the growing obesity rates in the United States. Funded by big names such as Weight Watchers, Jenny Craig, and Slim Fast, Koop championed weight loss through advertisements and argued they were the “safe way to lose weight” (Fraser, 1997). The obsession with thinness (Rothblum, 2011) is perpetuated by the “huge economic market that depends on people wanting to lose weight, feeling dissatisfied with their bodies, and buying diet products” (p. 175). And while initiatives such as Health at Every Size (Bacon, 2008; Burgard, 2009) have become popular outlets to push back against the “obesity epidemic,” fat activists and scholars remain advocates for weight and size acceptance as the main antidote.

Fat Studies Appears in Academic Discourse

Fat Studies found a foothold in academia thanks in part to two texts: Rothblum and Solovay's (2009) *The Fat Reader* and Tomrley and Naylor's (2009) *Fat Studies in the UK*. These two texts highlighted the work being done in Fat Studies and provided an entry point for *Fat Studies: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Body Weight and Society* and Cameron and Russell's (2016) *The Fat Pedagogy Reader: Challenging Weight-Based Oppression through Critical Education*. Both publications attribute their success to the work of Rothblum and Solovay and Tomrley and Naylor (Cameron & Russell, 2016). The goal of Fat Studies in academia is to shine a light on "weight-based oppression" and emphasize the "need for educational theory, research, and practice to address weight-based oppression in a wide variety of educational settings" (p. 5). Situated in social justice education, Cameron and Russell (2016) provide readers with scholarship from a variety of scholars, activists, and teachers striving to end fatphobia in academia and provide a pedagogical framework to achieve said goals.

Four Key Concepts of Fat Studies

After completing a content analysis of the field of Fat Studies, Brown (2016) identified four recurring concepts across the literature. Brown paraphrases Owens (2008) suggesting Owens argues that Fat Studies does not have one central definition, but there are "shared sensibilities, including the centering of fat experience at the heart of research and discourse" (Brown, 2016, p. 203). The four key core concepts she (Brown, 2016) identifies are the importance of activism and the challenging of oppression of and discrimination against fat individuals; attentiveness to issues of language; problematizing fatness as a medical issue; and placing the actual experiences of fat individuals at the center of research, both in practice and in analysis.

Importance of Activism

Fat prejudice aligns with social justice in that fat activists aim to combat fatphobia and fat-hate. Scholars have turned to queer theory (LeBesco, 2004), feminism (Cooper, 2008; Boling, 2011), and other critical theories to address the need for pushing back against fat stigma. Cooper (2010) suggests the best way to counteract the negative stigma is for fat activists and scholars to embrace Fat Studies, as it “provides a platform for identifying, building, and developing fat culture as well as extending alliances between activism and the academy” (p. 1021). Activism is the best mode of action to increase visibility and encourage fat people to resist the dominant obesity model (Cooper, 2008). Much like the medicalization of the disabled body, the dominant obesity model reinforces thinness as the social norm (Dickins, Thomas, King, Lewis, & Holland, 2011). By aligning with the tenets of the Social Model of Disability (Oliver, 1990; Swain, French, Barnes, & Thomas, 2013), fat activists can turn the attention away from physical fatness and toward the social norms and cultural factors that oppress fat people.

Attentiveness to Issues of Language

The word ‘fat’ is often perceived as being a negative term, a descriptor that holds derogatory connotation. Language perpetuates fat hatred and fat invisibility. To discuss “fat bodies,” LeBesco (2001) emphasizes that “*obesity*” is the key search term (p. 86, n26, emphasis in the original). The contemporary narrative of the civilized American figure shapes bodies as thin, thus creating the opposite image of the uncivilized fat body (Farrell, 2011). Analyzing word choice, Wann (2009) suggests, “is a good place to begin to examine assumptions” and normalized narratives (p. xxi). Terms such as ‘fat,’ ‘obese,’ and ‘overweight’ hold power because society has situated fatness as the “antithesis of the [American] beauty ideal” (LeBesco, 2004, p. 1). In response to this power, fat scholars push back against these terms and even

attempting to reclaim them to reframe the connotation (Farrell, 2011). In *Fat!So? Because You Don't Have to Apologize for Your Size!*, Wann (1998) argues we should use the word “fat” until the stigma dissolves, and it becomes just as normal as short, tall, thin, young, or old. Owning the word as a positive descriptor transfers the power from the derogatory connotation to a positive connotation.

Problematizing Fatness as a Medical Issue

In discussions on fat and fatness, often the conversation turns to health and health-related stigmatization. Fat-denigrating ideology is deeply rooted in the medical realm. Medicalizing fatness situates fatness as a “temporary, fixable, ‘problem’ that is wholly under the control of the individual” (Brown, 2016). Widely attributed to “gluttony and lack of exercise” (LeBesco, 2004), being fat has been deemed as problematic. Fat Studies “seeks to expand the understanding of fatness beyond the narrow confines of medicalisation [sic] or pathology” (Cooper, 2010, p. 1020). Problematizing and medicalizing fatness has been challenged by campaigns such as “Health at Every Size” which aims to highlight the negative impacts of health-related stigmas and focus on behaviors that promote mental health (Burgard, 2009). “Health at Every Size,” or HEAS, has five main goals: enhancing health, size and self-acceptance, the pleasure of eating well, the joy of movement, and an end to weight bias. Each goal serves as a tool for shifting and reframing body image. As an organization, HAES encourages people of all sizes to define “health by the process of daily life rather than the outcome of weight” (p. 44). They counter the accepted and perpetuated definition of health and support normalizing stigma-free environments.

Placing the Individual at the Center of Research

Fat Studies scholars aim to present authentic representations of fat and fatness in everyday life. Brown (2016) points out that the lived experiences of fat scholars does not mirror

those of scholars of normative paradigms. Borrowing from feminist theories, Fat Studies centers the research on the individual and uses methodologies that best suit authentic knowledge building. Cooper (2021) and Pausé (2012, 2019) insist there is a need for fat epistemology because, as Manokaran, Pausé, Roßmöller, & Vilhjálmsdóttir (2020) suggest, to deliver authentic research, the fat community cannot be disregarded. It must not only be at the heart of research, but the fat community must also ally with other scholars outside the field of Fat Studies to widen the scope of fat and fatness across disciplines. Rothblum and Solovay (2009) provide an invaluable example of interdisciplinary research as they present Fat Studies via quantitative and qualitative research. In *Fat Studies Reader*, Rothblum and Solovay (2009) provide a comprehensive anthology that investigates key issues in the field of Fat Studies such as “intersectionality (the intersection of oppressions), health, and international and legal issues, as well as history, literature, and popular culture” (p. 3). Researchers and activists are making strides in centering the fat experience across academic and non-academic mediums.

Feminist Standpoint Theory and Fat Studies

The theoretical framework used for this study lies at the convergence of FST and FS. Fat Standpoint (Cooper Stoll & Thoune, 2020) occurs when “there is a sufficient scrutiny and critical awareness (Intemann, 2010) of the systems of power that work to create and perpetuate the collective oppression of fat people” (p. 97, citation in original). As outlined in the section delineating FST, the sharer of knowledge has intimate understanding and perspective of the experience they are sharing meaning their social location or positionality situates them as having privileged knowledge (Smith, 1997; Sprague, 2016). Pausé (2020) calls attention to how fat people are “often denied the agency to know their own truths” (p. 181); therefore, there needs to be more fat scholarship written by and centering fat people. To combat the “dominant narrative

of fatness” (p. 184), fat scholars should take ownership of the experiences and with this privileged knowledge, push back against social constructions. This concept encapsulates the convergence of FST and FS.

Cycle of Socialization

Because these theories all hinge on lived experiences, it is important to understand how lived experiences are constructed through socialization. Harro’s Cycle of Socialization³ (2008a) and Cycle of Liberation⁴ (2008b) provide a framework through which we can better understand how our identities are impacted by the environments in which we are located. Harro (2008a) emphasizes we are all born with a specific “set of social identities” that “predispose us to unequal *roles* in the dynamic system of oppression” (p. 27). As we move through the socialization process, which is pervasive, consistent, circular, self-perpetuating, and often unrecognizable, we are inundated with messages criticizing and othering differences. This is the basis for Harro’s (2008a) Cycle of Socialization. In response to this cycle, Harro (2008b) suggests there is a way to break free of socialization and move toward liberation through critical transformation. After triggering the critical transformation, we can move through the “changing terrain where not everyone goes in the same direction” and work to disrupt the “systemic assumptions, structures, rules [and] roles” (p. 628) in which we have been placed.

Cycle of Socialization

The Cycle of Socialization demonstrates how society gets “systemic training in ‘how to be’ each of our social identities throughout our lives” and represents “how the socialization process happens, from what sources it comes, how it affects our lives, and how it perpetuates

³ See page 157 for full Cycle of Socialization

⁴ See page 158 for full Cycle of Liberation

itself' (Harro, 2008a, p. 27). In short, we are born into a place of oppression that is perpetuated through the people whom we are surrounded. As infants, we have no understanding of the social identities already active in our environments; therefore, we inherit social biases without recognizing or resisting them. The personal connections we have shape our values and expectations, as well as the roles we will play in the future. These values, expectations, and roles are furthered inculcated by the institutions in which we are situated, such as school, religion, social services, etc. and enforced through "systems of rewards and punishments" (p. 28). This results in oppression of those without power. And those who cannot break free of the Cycle of Socialization continue to perpetuate the misperceptions and systemic power struggle; thus, the cycle repeats. At the core of this cycle, as Harro (2008a) points out, is ignorance, insecurity, confusion, obliviousness, and fear.

Cycle of Liberation

The Cycle of Socialization does have the opportunity to be broken through a direction for change. Harro (2008b) indicates breaking free of the Cycle of Socialization and moving into the Cycle of Liberation has the potential to spark critical transformation. Liberation is action based. As we move through the Cycle of Liberation, we actively seek knowledge. Critical transformation is spurred when a person experiences a critical incident or cognitive dissonance. This "waking up" moment instigates a change within the "core of people about what they believe about themselves" (pp. 628-629). In experiencing a critical incident, the person makes strides in empowering themselves through education, introspection, inspiration, and deconstructing their own understanding of the dominant frameworks or master narratives. This part of the cycle requires patience, as questioning the conscious world can be challenging. Moving into the "reaching out" phase, the person seeks knowledge and community to spark change. During this

phase, the person is exploring and seeking experiences aligned with their new worldview. The work moves from interpersonal to intrapersonal, as the person begins building a community of likeminded supporters. as well as working to start dialogues with those who oppose change to facilitate change. These changes lead to a change in culture that emphasizes dismantling oppressive systemic “structures, assumptions, philosophy, rules and procedures, and roles” (p. 629). The coalescing phase includes the organizing and educating of others while being a role model and moving toward action. The last phases of the Cycle include creating change through transforming institutions perpetuating assumptions, and maintaining change by spreading hope, modeling authenticity, integrity, and wholeness, as well as accepting accountability. Unlike the Cycle of Socialization, the Cycle of Liberation thrives on self-love, hope, self-esteem, balance, joy, support, security, spiritual base, and authentic love of others.

Theoretical Framework Summary

The three theories presented above all provide entry points for centering lived experience in research. Feminist Standpoint Theory stems from theory on the lived experiences of women in the workforce (Feminist Standpoint Theory (Hartsock, 1983; Smith, 1987; Harding, 1997). The aim of FST scholars was to highlight the lived experiences of marginalized voices and provide a space for those voices to share their stories. Fat Studies (Wann, 2009; Cooper, 2010; Brown, 2016) seeks to empower the voices of fat persons who have previously been silenced by the social construct of thinness. Like FST, FS seeks to give a voice to fat persons so as to disrupt the misconceptions and beliefs surrounding fat experience. To do so, FS scholars are engaging in Fat Standpoint Theory (Cooper Stoll & Thoune, 2020, Pausé, 2020). Fat Standpoint Theory centers the fat experience as told by the fat person(s) and encourages researchers and activists to embrace body acceptance. These three theories, all interconnected through their concern for lived

experiences and magnifying voices, work together as I situate my critical autoethnography in my own experiences as a fat adolescent and woman and provide critical aspects for analyzing the text set selected. Additionally, Harro's (2008a; 2008b) *Cycles of Socialization and Liberation* provide the critical language to engage in exploration of my identity so to better understand why *Dumplin'* (Murphy, 2015) was so impactful for me as a fat adult reader of YAL.

Young Adult Literature

Young adult literature, or YAL, is the key genre relevant to the study. The books I read are all YAL that center fat experience and have self-identified fat young adult protagonists. As detailed in Chapter One, YAL plays a definitive role in my current relationship with reading. This dissertation would not be in existence without works such as Meyer's (2005) *Twilight* series. Additionally, I would not be transitioning from fat-shame to fat-acceptance without the works of Julie Murphy. YAL afforded me growth, not only as a person but as a researcher. The following review of relevant literature gives a brief overview of YAL as a genre and fat-scholars' work in YAL.

Young Adult Literature as a Genre

YAL as a genre continues to remain in flux as the social and cultural understanding of young adulthood changes (Cart, 2008). Cart (2008) champions YAL for its truth-telling and ability to cultivate personal sensibility. It embraces the diversity of humanity and shares the different stories with those who read the novels. YAL is considered a genre intended for readers between the ages of 12-18 years old and contains an adolescent protagonist (Bushman & Haas, 2006; Cole, 2009; Nilsen & Donelson, 2009). Koss and Teale (2009) conducted a content analysis to understand the trends found in YAL. Their findings revealed, as of 2009, of their representative sample, YAL consisted of forty-seven percent contemporary realistic fiction,

twelve percent fantasy, seven percent historical fiction, seven percent mystery, seven percent biography, five percent memoir, three percent science fiction, three percent nonfiction, and two percent horror (Table 2, p. 566). They also concluded that YAL predominantly includes narratives concerning characters of European decent, thirty-two percent, Christian or non-religious background, twenty-four percent, and sixty-three percent respectively, heteronormative, and heterosexual orientations, ninety percent, and ableist tendencies, seventy-five percent (Table 3, p. 566). More recently, representation of diverse characters has increased greatly. Lee (2018) indicated an increase in the number of non-white protagonists between the years of 2014 and 2017, a significant increase in LGBTQ representation post 2015; however, the intersection of race and LGBTQ representation showed little growth with only one text with a LGBTQ non-white character. Though there is still plenty of room for growth, YAL has come a long way in becoming more inclusive.

Fat Studies and Young Adult Literature

To survey the field of young adult literature, I conducted a scholarly search for articles concerning fat body representation in YAL. Using “fat body” and “young adult literature” and restricting the search to 2012-2021, I identified nineteen scholarly articles. After reading and analyzing the search results, eliminating articles that do not directly address YAL, and those that were books, book reviews, dissertations, and theses, the search was narrowed to seven articles. Within the seven articles, the authors focus on twenty titles centering fat protagonists: *Big Fat Manifesto* (Vaught, 2007), *The Earth, My Butt, and Other Big Round Things* (Mackler, 2003), *One Fat Summer* (Lipsyte, 1977), *Fat Boy Summer* (Forde, 2003), *The Girl of Fire and Thorns* (Carson, 2011), *Eleanor and Park* (Rowell, 2013), *Food, Girls, and Other Things I Can't Have* (Zadoff, 2011), *Holding Up the Universe* (Niven, 2016), *Gabi, Girl in Pieces* (Quintero, 2014),

Dumplin' (Murphy, 2015), *In Real Life* (Doctorow & Wang, 2015), *This One Summer* (Tamaki & Tamaki, 2015), *Vintage Veronica* (Perl, 2010), *Fat Angie* (Charlton-Trujillo, 2013), *Skinny* (Cooner, 2012), *Looks* (George, 2008), *The Summer of Jordi Perez (and the Best Burger in Los Angeles)* (Spalding, 2018), *Undead Girl Gang* (Anderson, 2018), *To Be Honest* (Martin, 2018), *Artichoke's Heart* (Supplee, 2008), and *This Book Isn't Fat, It's Fabulous* (Beck, 2008). While the analyses discussed various topics, such as the relationship between weight and desire (Amato, 2019), relationships with adults (Shelton, 2016; Byers, 2017; Amato, 2019), fat acceptance (Averill, 2016; Byers, 2017; Amato, 2019, Davis, 2021), and the peritext of fat positive YAL (Amato, 2021), they ultimately discuss the sociocultural constructs in which the novels and their characters are situated.

Dominant Social Frameworks. The sociocultural constructs of thin/fat appeared important across the analysis. Parsons (2016) and Amato (2019) both call attention to food addiction. Parsons (2016) found that the characters' "dramatic arc" included a moment where the protagonist "experiences a turning point, a 'bottom', after which she vows to change," such as losing weight, dieting, exercising, or plastic surgery (p. 11). Each protagonist participated in self-loathing, desperation, and obsession. Parsons argues this problematizes the addiction model because the novels ultimately "perpetuate[d] rather than deconstruct[ed] the ideal female body and the lengths to which fat females should go to attain it" (p. 24). Amato (2019) highlights how in her findings, the characters in *Gabi, Girl in Pieces* (Quintero, 2014), *Dumplin'* (Murphy, 2015), *In Real Life* (Doctorow & Wang, 2015), and *This One Summer* (Tamaki & Tamaki, 2015) all embraced their love of food. While they are "still negotiating their bodies within a fatphobic world" (p. 18), the language about food is enthusiastic, devoid of shame and/or guilt. For instance, *Gabi* (Quintero, 2014) and *Willowdean* (Murphy, 2015) are positioned in situations

where their food consumption does not “other” them in regard to the rest of the cast of characters, nor are they using food to “cope with trauma” (p.16). Parsons (2016) and Amato (2019) address the depiction of food in the novels they analyzed; however, Amato (2019) found more positive depictions of food intake and uses it to foster discussion about and disruption of “the assumption that to be fat is to be unhappy and unhealthy” (p. 19). Both articles make valid points about the social construction of body image and how food plays a role in the “thin” mentality.

The “thin” mentality also appears in discussion of fitting into the “cult of thinness” construction (Parsons, 2016). The social image that girls should be desirable and beautiful (Quick, 2008) often perpetuates the normative constructions. In her discussion of food addiction, Parsons (2016) calls attention to how many of the characters in her analysis would “binge eat in private, evading the judgmental gaze of family, peers, and society at large” (p. 13). They do not want to be judged based on their food intake, so they choose to hide it which leads to downward spirals into self-loathing and inferiority. Their actions move them farther away from the normative construction; therefore, they internalize their feelings and attempt to change their appearance to fit the standards of society. Averill (2016) aligns with Parsons’ (2016) findings. One of the key concepts Averill (2016) focuses on is how YAL representations exemplify thin-thinking and privileges thin “as a metaphor for civilized, successful, powerful, and divine” (p. 17). To be accepted in society, the characters must shed the weight that functions as failure, and while the novels she analyzed did situate characters with some degree of body empowerment, the texts themselves were still situated in the “thin-thinking” social construction. Shelton (2016) highlights the “fat quest” in two of the novels she includes in her analysis. This quest, also known as the “*Bildungsroman* of weight loss” (Webb, 2009), is made up of “steps a fat

protagonist must take before he/she can be considered worthy” (Shelton, 2016, p. 172). She also notes that books that abide by this notion further support ableist views, as “the able body [is] the baseline of human worth” (p. 174). Parsons (2016), Averill (2016), and Shelton (2016) all focus on how society’s pressure to be thin impacts the mentality of the characters.

Fat acceptance also appears to be a key theme across the articles. Amato (2021) and Davis (2021) focus on how YAL novels represent body and fat positivity. Amato (2021) focuses her attention to the peritexts of fat positive YAL novels. Seeking to understand the power of the peritext, Amato conducted a critical discourse analysis to determine how “iconography, tag lines, book summaries, and reviews endorsed by other authors” position the reader to engage with the text (p.40). She concluded that fat-positive peritext is moving in the right direction – such as including realistic images of fat females and descriptions that do not center weight loss – but there is still room for growth – such as fat-positive texts that center young women of color. With her critical content analysis, Davis (2021) focused on texts that also presented realistic representations of fat females. Her study seeks to understand how YAL represents positive body image by applying Wood-Barcalow, Tylka, and Augustus-Hovarth’s (2009) framework for positive body image, specifically focusing on how body image can waver. Whether platonic, romantic, or familial, support systems help the characters challenge their own insecurities and remain positive in their body image. Both Amato (2021) and Davis (2021) suggest using fat-positive and body-positive texts in the classroom, as they provide entry points for critical discourse surrounding “tensions, contradictions, and evolution of weight-based language” (Amato, 2021, p. 46). “Challenging the size construct status quo” as Davis (2021) suggests, gives students the opportunity and the language to analyze their own social constructions and push back against the dominant narratives.

Synthesis. Across the seven articles, the most important conversation posited by the authors was the need for more body positive representation in YAL. Byers (2017) suggests that the “future that emerges from reimagining the fat body, of embracing new ways of knowing the self and the world, is the direction” YAL needs to move toward. Publications need to imagine worlds “filled with complex, intersectional characters whose communities exist beyond thin-thinking and fat-hate” (p. 168). Building on the notion of intersectionality, Shelton (2016) and Averill (2016) argue for more diverse representations of fat bodies because the “fat quest” is not limited to White, Western cultures. Challenging the ableist thinking and taking on the fat quest as “positive, empowering bibliotherapy for fat - and thin - teens” (Shelton, 2016, p. 187), as well as focusing on “changing the cultural consciousness rather than changing the fat individual” (Averill, 2016, p. 30) are some directions YAL should go. Amato (2019; 2021) and Davis recognize the need for more diverse body representations in the classroom and calls for educators to include texts that challenge the social construction of body image and provide a “counternarrative of body image” to combat fatphobia (p. 19). Parsons (2016) concludes with a call to action: “It is crucial that all generations, particularly our younger generation, develop positive body image in response to their strong, healthy bodies without censoring shape and size” (p. 26). Together, they acknowledge a gap in representation of fat bodies, and while strides have been made to provide more fat positive images, there is still room for improvement (Parsons, 2016; Shelton, 2016; Averill, 2016; Byers, 2018; Amato, 2019).

Summary

This review of relevant literature began with an examination of Reader Response criticism, including Rosenblatt’s definitions of the reader, the text, and the poem, a conceptualization of transactional Reader Response Theory, and a synthesis of Rosenblatt with

Iser, Holland, and Culler. In addition, this review presented the two main theoretical models used in the study: Feminist Standpoint Theory and Fat Studies. In the theoretical models, this review also addressed the convergence of FST and FS as the critical standpoint for the study. It also provided a definition of Harro's (2008a; 2008b) Cycles of Socialization and Liberation and explained how it can provide the critical language necessary for engaging in a critical autoethnography. Lastly, a brief overview of young adult literature was provided to explain the genre to be used in the study.

CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY

This dissertation utilizes the qualitative research methods of autoethnography and critical content analysis. Both methodologies align with the frameworks' purposes as mentioned in Chapter Two: Reader Response Theory relies on lived experiences; Feminist Standpoint Theory, Fat Studies, and Fat Standpoint Theory all emphasize centering privileged knowledge in research; and Fat Studies encourages researchers to understand both the social forces related to fat phobia and fat-hate, as well as understand the researcher's own involvement in the structures. Keeping these foci in the forefront of the study, autoethnography and critical content analysis provide the most effective methodologies for exploring my lived experiences as a fat female and those novels centering fat experience. This chapter provides insight into autoethnography as method, as well as guidelines for conducting autoethnographic research, the possible deliverables for autoethnography, and exemplars in the field. Second, it will provide background information and the evolution of content analysis, examples of content analyses in Young Adult Literature, and concludes with an explanation of the theoretical framework in which the study is situated.

Autoethnography as Qualitative Research

Autoethnography (AE) is a valuable tool in qualitative research as it focuses on social and personal experiences that have traditionally made researchers feel marginalized or powerless (Lapadat, 2017). In the 1980s and 1990s, as research was transitioning away from post-positivism and toward postmodernism, scholars began to focus on researchers' positionality and its impact on research outcomes (Hughes & Pennington, 2017). Scholars began acknowledging that because lived experiences impact perception, different people make different assumptions about the world creating a consistent subjectivity. Hughes and Pennington (2017) refer to this subjectivity as recognizing how cultural constructs impact identity and willingly engaging in

conversation to understand and rewrite the self. As scholars approach their own understandings of culture through lived experience, they participate in qualitative research involving critical reflexivity, educative experiences, privilege-penalty experiences, ethical concerns, and salient experiences from which critical conversation can emerge (Hughes & Pennington, 2017).

Autoethnography is a relevant methodology for such critical conversations as it is “qualitative inquiry that reflects renewed appreciation for the centrality of narrative in human experience” (Lapadat, 2017, p. 597). The following review of literature introduces autoethnography as method and includes key scholars and representations of autoethnography in the field of qualitative research.

Guiding Principles of Autoethnography

Autoethnography aims to connect the personal experiences of the researcher to culture and identify how “a vulnerable self [...] is moved by and move through, refract, and resist cultural interpretations” (Ellis & Bochner, 2000, p. 765). To achieve this identification and self-reflexivity, Ellis and Adams (2020) offer seven guiding principles of autoethnographic work (See Table 1 on page 148-149). These principles offer the researcher an outline to consider when contemplating autoethnographic work. Ellis and Adams (2020) suggest that while the first two principles are streamline across most autoethnographic works, the remaining five are tailored more toward the goal of the research. They suggest these elements can be “specific goals, advantages, and rewards for using autoethnography” (p. 368). Poulos (2021) adds that autoethnography is more than a story told by an experienced researcher, but instead it is a “story with a purpose” (p. 13) meant to give audiences a fuller picture of the cultural phenomenon under analysis.

Autoethnography as Method

Autoethnography should not be taken lightly. It is rooted in the lived experiences of the researcher which means there is a required vulnerability on the researcher's behalf to successfully complete a quality autoethnography. Poulos (2021) offers four key features that distinguish autoethnography from other methodologies: Autoethnographers:

1. Actively engage researcher reflexivity, grounded in systematic introspection, bringing personal insight to the project
 2. Practice the craft of writing by engaging the methods and conventions of writers of fiction, creative nonfiction, autobiography, and memoir
 3. Foreground the writing process itself as the primary method of inquiry [as they] write to discover, inquire, explore, and show rather than tell a reader what is known
 4. May uncover (otherwise hidden) truths by putting thoughts into concrete words.
- (pp. 16-17)

Across these four features, Poulos calls attention to the autoethnographer's actions during the writing process because each is intimately connected to the story being shared. To tap into the "systematic introspection" necessary, the autoethnographer must be willing to tap into raw emotion.

Because autoethnography is rooted in raw, emotional lived experiences, Ellis and Adams (2020) offer four key reasons why an autoethnographic project may arise: (1) From epiphanies or personal struggles; (2) From common experiences; (3) From dilemmas or complications in doing traditional fieldwork; and (4) For the purpose of adding to existing research (p. 373). The informal and personal nature of autoethnography allows the exploration of historically untold

topics: navigating sexuality (Adams, 2011), the death of a sibling (Ellis, 1993), traversing the academic job market (Hermann, 2012), exposing racism and sexism in academia (Hernandez, Ngunjiri, & Chang, 2015), or discovering family secrets (Poulos, 2019). This type of writing begins with the researcher focusing their topic on something broad or something more specific; some topics will be more emotion driven and personal while others will be research driven. No matter the topic, it is personal to the researcher (Chang, 2008). Those research topics that derive from epiphanies and personal struggles lead researchers to be highly introspective and the outcomes often are cathartic and revelatory (Ellis & Adams, 2020).

Sometimes in thinking an experience is exclusive, the researcher will find that it is a common experience, and therein act as an entry point for the researcher to call attention to the experience and possibly incite change. Autoethnographies also emerge from traditional fieldwork and research. While conducting research, the researcher may use fieldnotes to construct behind-the-scenes accounts of their process which adds to the richness of the traditional research project. Lastly, autoethnography can substantiate the research existing in the field. In accounts such as these, the researchers highlight the problems evident in the field and foster discussion about current processes (Ellis & Adams, 2020). Altogether, autoethnography veers away from the stoic, linear, and rigid model of traditional research design and promotes a multi-layered, emotive dialogue (Chang, 2008).

Doing Autoethnography

In doing autoethnography, the researcher's goal is not to distance themselves from the project. Bochner (2013) goes as far as to suggest that autoethnography is not really a methodology; but instead, it is a way of life that "acknowledges contingency, finitude, embeddedness in storied being, encounters with Otherness, an appraisal of ethical and moral

commitments, and a desire to keep the conversation going” (p. 53). Autoethnography is about the researcher situating themselves smack dab in the middle of living an experience and asking how their experience can improve the experiences of other (Denzin, 1997). Autoethnographers dabble with various truths and must make meaning of an active, dynamic, and ever-moving culture (Bochner, 2013).

In preparing for autoethnographic research, the autoethnographer must pay close attention to data collection. Because autoethnography does engage with ethnographic means of data collection, researchers must modify their techniques to incorporate aesthetic, cognitive, emotional, and relational values often disregarded in observational data collection (Anderson & Glass-Coffin, 2013). Data collection techniques that best produce autoethnographic writing are detailed below.

Positionality

Autoethnographic projects are inherently personal. The researcher is attempting to align their own lived experiences with larger cultural moments. Chang (2008) denotes three approaches to researchers positioning themselves in the research: researcher as the main character, research as co-participants, or researcher studies others as they fit into the researcher’s world. Most autoethnographies will align with Chang’s first approach. “The life of self is the primary focus of inquiry,” Chang explains, while “others are explored in auxiliary relationships with self” (p. 65). The autoethnography is centered around the lived experiences of the researcher making them the “main narrators, interpreters, and researchers” (p. 65). Anyone else involved in the experience become supporting characters with which the researcher can engage. The second approach expands the view to include others who have experienced the same event as the researcher; therefore, the researcher becomes a co-participant with which the researcher

can engage and identify similarities and differences within the personal experience. The co-participants are “equally emphasized and valued” (pp. 65-66) as the researcher conducting the study. The final approach is not often classified as a true autoethnography as it does not engage with the self efficiently enough to center the researcher’s personal experience. Instead, the researcher will use their own personal experience to open “a door to an investigation but remains outside while others are in the spotlight as main characters or participants” (p. 67). This kind of research indirectly sheds light on the researcher’s life but does not center their lived experiences. Choosing how the researcher positions the self ultimately impacts the direction and design of autoethnographic work.

Literature and Theoretical Perspectives

Contextualizing and situating an autoethnography into its cultural moment helps identify the intersectionality between the lived experiences and the historical and cultural moments occurring at the time of the events being shared. Autoethnographers aim to make connections with the “sociocultural matrix of human knowledge and experience,” (Poulos, 2021, p. 65) as well as to the theoretical traditions in their field of study. Having a well-constructed and robust literature review can help the researcher categorize their data points and identify themes that may emerge (Saldaña, 2016). Poulos (2021) suggests that because practice informs theory and theory informs practice, framing the final product within the underpinnings of theoretical tenets elevates the story beyond simply narration. It transitions it into a striking conversation about human life.

Memory Mining or Recalling

When trying to better understand how a cultural construct has impacted their identity, researchers must conduct what Poulos (2021) calls memory mining and Chang (2008) calls recalling. It goes without saying that memories are a precarious data set as there may be gaps in

memory, memories altered by cultural construction, and/or misremembered moments (Poulos, 2021; Chang, 2008; Adams, Jones, & Ellis, 2015). Chang (2008) suggests beginning the recall process through activities such as autobiographical timelines. Creating a robust autobiographical timeline can include a whole lifetime or a more focused time span that includes major social events and major life events can help the researcher find a foundation for focusing their writing. Piecing together memories is the building blocks of meaningful autoethnographic work.

Autobiographical Fieldwork

Where memory mining and recall focus on what has already happened to the researcher, fieldwork allows the researcher to observe their own “behaviors, thoughts, emotions, and interactions as they occur” (Chang, 2008, p. 89). According to Anderson and Glass-Coffin (2013), fieldwork in autoethnography should rely heavily on self-description and introspection while also acknowledging and reflecting on “the ways in which their engagement with the ‘field’ has contributed to their understanding of themselves as contingent upon and emerging from the experiences of their lives” (p. 67). Some methods of collecting and maintaining field notes are keeping field journals (Chang, 2008) or personal diaries (Anderson & Glass-Coffin, 2013). Journaling and keeping diaries present opportunities for researchers to provide rich description regarding conversations, lived experiences, self-reflections. These self-reflective activities offer “evocative potential – [the] ability to either open the researcher to deeper reflection on relevant experiences and relationships or to evoke compelling images, emotions, or understandings in other readers” (p. 68). Fieldnotes will be key to documenting the lived experiences of the researcher, as well as providing an artifact for the researcher to analyze as they seek out answers to their research questions.

Ethics, Validation, and Autoethnography

Autoethnography is a heavily reflexive method of qualitative research. It incorporates and emphasizes the human experience and how the human “experience is storied” (Adams, Jones, & Ellis, 2013, p. 673). In academe, however, autoethnography is often challenged for several ethical issues such as lacking anonymity and researcher vulnerability. When the researcher is the subject of the research project, the validity of the findings can be called into question. Relying on memory mining (Poulos, 2021) and reflection is dangerous as there is no clear path to a person’s psyche because experience creates a filter over the event which can make the memory unstable (Derrida, 1972). Denzin (2014) emphasizes:

Autoethnographic and biographical studies should attempt to articulate how each subject deals with problems to coherence, illusion, consubstantiality, presence, deep inner selves, others, gender, class, starting and ending points, epiphanies, fictions, truths, and final causes. These recurring, obdurate, culturally constructed dimensions of Western lives provide framing devices for the stories that are told about the lives that we study. (pp. 14-15)

The purpose of autoethnography is to not only reflect upon lived experiences, but it is also to better understand how and why those experiences are important to the researcher. As Denzin (2014) points out, autoethnographers must identify how to navigate through the “culturally constructed dimensions” of the experience to fully understand its impact. Others will read and live vicariously through the experiences on the page, so they must be as accurate as possible.

To achieve this, both Richardson (2000) and Poulos (2013) offer possible parameters for evaluating autoethnographic projects for validity. Richardson (2000) defines five principles for evaluation: substantive contribution, aesthetic merit, reflexivity, impact, and expresses a reality.

Poulos (2013) provides seven touchstones for autoethnography should be evaluated: centrality of the autoethnographer; autoethnography goes beyond personal experiences and links to larger constructs; autoethnography aims to be creative, evocative, and emotional; autoethnography moves away from traditional research aims (I. e. transforming or changing the reader); autoethnography is rooted in both the “head” and the “heart” of the writer; autoethnography is grounded in theory of knowledge that is reflexive, phenomenological, praxis-driven, and built out of “phronesis”; and the autoethnography process is both interpretive and critical (p. 45-47).

When synthesized, Richardson’s (2000) principles and Poulos’s (2013) touchstones highlight the autoethnographer’s responsibility not only to accurately represent their own experiences, but they must also demonstrate understanding of how social constructions impact their lived experiences and frame their products via theoretical means. Levitt, Wertz, Motulsky, Morrow, and Ponterotto (2017) more directly call for autoethnographers to ground works in trustworthiness, fidelity, and utility so as to maintain the methodological integrity necessary in qualitative research. Aligned with Richardson (2000) and Poulos (2013), Levitt, Wertz, Motulsky, Morrow, and Ponterotto (2017) emphasize that the author is at the core of the piece; therefore, they must remain true not only to their own experiences but also to the experiences of others.

Content Analysis

Where autoethnography allows the researcher to understand their own cultural connections and constructs, content analysis turns the attention to texts to understand how texts communicate with society. Content analysis first found its popularity in the early 1950s in the study of mass communication (White & Marsh, 2006); however, content analysis can be traced back to the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries (Krippendorff, 2004). At its roots, content

analysis aims to determine and define written artifacts from a given society (White & Marsh, 2006). Through coding and identifying patterns, analyses can “make sense of [...] interpretations within contexts surrounding the texts” (Short, 2017, p. 3). Communication reveals details of both the sender and the receiver; therefore, content analysis allows researchers to identify and reveal information about the sender and the receiver, as well as the social context surrounding both participants (Krippendorff, 1989). Content analysis must acknowledge and go “outside the immediately observable physical vehicles of communication and [rely] on their symbolic qualities to trace the antecedents, correlates, or consequences of communication” (p. 403) because these traits are what illuminate the unobservable, as well as reveal patterns. Content analysis most commonly aligns with such data sources as verbal discourse, written documents, and visual representations. However, this is not the extent of data sources. Researchers have expanded content analysis as methodology to analyze media, personal letters, court witness accounts, and other meaningful verbal and written artifacts (White & Marsh, 2006).

Krippendorff (1989) posits that anything occurring in “sufficient numbers” and possesses “stable meanings for a specific group of people” or purpose can and may be “subjected” to content analysis (p. 404). If the researcher can both create their own context for analysis and be receptive to a “rich repertoire of social-scientific constructs,” the researcher will be able to ascertain the patterns and trends not obvious to ordinary readers and/or researchers (p. 404).

Guiding Principles of Content Analysis

Content analysts examine texts to understand “what they mean to people, what they enable or prevent, and what the information conveyed by them does” (Krippendorff, 2004, p. xviii). As the definition of text has changed over the centuries, the guiding principles of content analysis have shifted, as well. Krippendorff (1989) offers six procedural steps for conducting an effective

content analysis: design, unitizing, sampling, coding, drawing inferences, and validation (see Table 2 on 150 for definitions). White and Marsh (2006) expand on Krippendorff's (1989) processes adding three additional steps between sampling and coding – draw sample, establish data collection, and establish coding scheme (White & Marsh, 2006) – and combine and redefine drawing inferences and validation (Krippendorff, 1989) into check for reliability and adjust coding, analyze coded data, and write up results (White & Marsh, 2006).

Krippendorff (2004) furthers his discussion of content analysis by creating a framework for content analysis. Much like the procedural steps he dictates in “Content Analysis” (1989), he suggests an effective content analysis requires six conceptual components: text, research question, context, analytical constructs, inferences, and validating evidence (see Table 3 on 151 for definitions). Across Krippendorff's procedures (1989) and components (2004), he emphasizes the importance of staying true to the data and the purpose for the content analysis. It is a context-sensitive method that requires the researcher to situate the study and remain cognizant of their research questions so as not to stray from the initial purpose.

Types of Content Analysis in Children's and Young Adult Literature

Content analysis, like other methods, has grown and evolved as different scholars have taken it and molded it to fit their projects. White and Marsh (2006) showcase content analysis as it is utilized in library and information science. Short (2017) crafted Critical Content Analysis to analyze children's and young adult literature. Sulzer, Thein, and Schmidt (2018) suggest Critical Comparative Content Analysis to compare multiple texts for their presentation of the same concepts. Whether its content analysis (Krippendorff, 2004), critical content analysis (Short, 2017), or critical comparative content analysis (Sulzer, Thein, & Schmidt, 2018), their foundations seek to understand how symbols are interpreted and understood by audiences.

Because many of the content analyses completed in the field of young adult literature rely on either critical content analysis (Short, 2017) or critical comparative content analysis (Sulzer, Thein, & Schmidt, 2018), the following is a brief explanation of each methodology.

As a research methodology, Short (2017) defines critical content analysis as “bringing a critical lens to an analysis of a text or a group of texts in an effort to explore the possible underlying messages within those texts, particularly as related to issues of power” (p. 6). Bradford (2017) echoes Short and emphasizes that critical content analysis should analyze the themes and content of the text, as well as the “how” of the text – “the language of texts, and the narrative strategies by which they position readers” (p. 17). Critical content analysis aims to apply a critical lens to the inferences seeking and questioning the “concept of ‘truth’ and how it is presented” in the data (Short, 2017, p. 5) which inextricably links content analysis to critical theory. Seeking truth in a text requires some understanding of how the text is positioning the reader through certain lenses, such as gender, race, and class. These underpinnings influence how the reader reads the text, therefore, impacting how the reader is positioned in relation to the text.

When looking at the field of children’s and young adult literature, there appears to be an upsurge of analyses taking up the critical content analysis methodology and illuminating the diverse representations in the field. Crisp, Price Gardner, and Almeida (2017) found that children’s books that had received the Orbis Pictus Award between 1990-2017 often relied on heteronormative constructions in their depiction of LGBTQ persons, as well as erasure and compulsory heterosexuality to minimize queerness. They found no specificity in sexual preferences or sexual identity, and of the focal characters who have been identified as being part of the LGBTQ community, they were all white, cisgender males. Wiseman, Vehabovic, and

Jones (2019) offer authentic children's books and critical race theory as an entry point to discuss anti-bullying and cultural, racial, and ethnic acceptance. Apart from their text set, *Busing Brewster* (Michelson, 2010), *Chocolate Me* (Diggs, 2011), *First Day in Grapes* (Perez, 2002), *Layla's Head Scarf* (Cohen, 2009), *Mr. Lincoln's Way* (Polacco, 2001), *Sumi's First Day of School Ever* (Pak, 2003), and *I'm New Here* (O'Brien, 2015), Wiseman, Vehabovic, and Jones (2019) found that few books included varied cultural experiences. Critical content analysis affords Crisp, Price Gardner, Almeida (2017) and Wiseman, Vehabovic, and Jones (2019), and other children's and young adult literature scholars a methodology to critique the field and make suggestions for forward progression.

While Short's (2017) critical content analysis is effective across a text set, Sulzer, Their, and Schmidt (2018) offer a methodology that identifies differences across texts. Grounded in qualitative content analysis and critical discourse analysis, Comparative Critical Content Analysis, or CCCA, uses coding frames, emphasis on context, and surface level features to determine how the "presumed audience/reader" changes the text (p. 7). It "combines the critical—analysis of social and cultural constructs and power hierarchies—with the comparative—analysis of the ways in which social and cultural constructs and power hierarchies are represented differently to different audiences" (p. 22). There are four stages in the CCCA process: *preparation* – reading each text in the set and recording general impressions and questions, *creation of the coding frame* – purposefully abstracting words, phrases, and passages from each text in the set, *coding the data* – revisiting passages and identifying emerging ideas (Saldaña, 2016), and *establishing interpretations* – determining how the texts emphasize the same ideology(ies) across different texts.

In the article that established CCCA as a framework, Sulzer, Thein and Schmidt (2018) looked at two young adult adaptations of Navy SEAL memoirs. They found that the adaptations not only altered the level of language, making it more accessible to the intended audience, but it also adapted the narrative “to make strategic, qualitative changes that forward particular messages deemed necessary and appropriate for a youth audience” (p. 19). Amato (2019) conducted a critical comparative content analysis to assess how young adult fat protagonists were depicted in traditional prose novels and in graphic novels. Across four novels, *Gabi, Girl in Pieces* (Quintero, 2014), *Dumplin’* (Murphy, 2015), *In Real Life* (Doctorow & Wang, 2015), and *This One Summer* (Tamaki & Tamaki, 2015), she discusses how prose novels and graphic novels depict fatness. In graphic novels, there is no way to imagine the character any other way than fat because the character is on the page, while prose narratives offer the reader the opportunity to dismiss the character’s fatness. Adding the comparative component to critical content analysis widens the view of texts and their representations across texts rather than looking at a singular text.

Research Questions

Because this dissertation’s findings will be split into two sections, a critical autoethnography and a critical content analysis, there are two separate but complementary sets of research questions. The following details how both sets of questions will be answered using their respective methodologies.

Critical Autoethnography

Chapter Four will present a critical autoethnography. Using Harro’s Cycle of Socialization (2008a) and Cycle of Liberation (2008b), I will autoethnographically explore how my fat identity was socially constructed by the institutions with which I most interacted. I will

then describe how reading Murphy's (2015) *Dumplin'* acted as the critical incident allowing me to break the Cycle of Socialization (Harro, 2008a) and move into the Cycle of Liberation (Harro, 2008b). Lastly, it will conclude with next steps in my journey through liberation. This CAE was guided by the following question:

What was my experience reading Murphy's (2015) *Dumplin'* as an adult reader of YAL? What did the texts do for me as a fat reader?

Answering the Research Questions

This study will follow an adapted version of Hughes and Pennington's (2017) "Doing Autoethnography" cycle (original shown in Figure 1 on 154). In adapting their cycle, I aimed to identify and fill-in each element. In the diagram below, I have:

1. The topic of interest: representations of fat bodies in young adult literature
2. Located myself in the context of the study: former fat young adult female, current adult struggling with undiagnosed Body Dysmorphic Disorder
3. Constructed research questions: detailed earlier in Chapter Three
4. Situated the study in research and theory: Feminist Standpoint Theory (Hartsock, 1983; Smith, 1987; Harding, 1997), Fat Studies (Wann, 2009; Cooper, 2010; Brown, 2016), and Fat Standpoint Theory (Cooper Stoll & Thoune, 2020)
5. Created a plan for assemblage and analysis
6. Identified points of reference for validity: Poulos (2021) and tenets of CAE (Boylorn & Orbe, 2020; Jones, 2016) (See Figure 2 on 155)

Additionally, I have created a set of tasks for assemblage (Hughes & Pennington, 2017). To read, create, and critique, I will first (1) Select relevant texts; (2) Read and Re-Read; and (3) Write across Experiences. An important task during steps 2-3 will be keeping marginal comments, as

these will become field notes and evidence necessary for steps 4-8. I will need to (4) Research and Review; (5) Craft Narratives; (6) Identify Significant Passages; and (7) Conduct Critical Analysis. Lastly, I will (8) Make Connections to Other Texts (See Figure 3 on 157)

Interest, Self, and the Central Questions rely on Reader Response Theory – establishing why the texts are important to me as the reader and what I seek to answer in this study. The Theoretical Framework provides the critical concepts with which I will engage in conversation with the texts. Assemblage/Analysis acts as the critical content analysis and the critical aspect of the critical autoethnography, as I am seeking to understand how *Dumplin'* (Murphy, 2015) impacted my own transition from fat victim to fat researcher and how *Dumplin'* (2015), *Puddin'* (2018), *Faith Taking Flight* (2020), and *Pumpkin* (2021a) depict the fat experience and push back against the dominant narrative. Lastly, Validity provides the process through which I will remain ethical and valid in my study. When put together, this process allows me to conduct a critical content analysis embedded in a critical autoethnography.

Survey of the Field Regarding Body Representation

Chapter Five will be guided by questions regarding the overall representation of fat protagonists in the field of young adult literature focusing on four Murphy texts: *Dumplin'* (2015), *Puddin'* (2018), *Faith Taking Flight* (2020), and *Pumpkin* (2021a). Guiding this section of findings were the following questions:

How do the protagonists/casts of characters resist the cultural perception of fatness? How do her books act as an avenue for awareness and change?

Answering Research Questions

To conduct an effective and successful content analysis, I must keep in mind Krippendorff's conceptual components as depicted in Table 6 (see page 151 for definitions) The

content analysis framework consists of six components: (1) A body of text; (2) a research question; (3) a context of the analyst's choice; (4) an analytical construct; (5) inferences; and (6) validating evidence. As I conduct the content analysis, I will maintain a clearly directed analysis of the text set.

To Krippendorff's first component, I have chosen a set of texts that depict fat protagonists and center fat experience. To follow the guidelines indicated in conducting an effective content analysis, I have chosen four titles: *Dumplin'* (Murphy, 2015), *Puddin'* (Murphy, 2018), *Faith: Taking Flight* (Murphy, 2020), and *Pumpkin* (Murphy, 2021a). Two of the titles were texts read previously (*Dumplin'* and *Puddin'*), and two titles were texts purchased previously for pleasure reading (*Pumpkin'* and *Faith: Taking Flight*). All titles are Julie Murphy titles, as she is the catalyst for my research agenda. The following table indicates the titles, fat protagonist, and a summary of each text. As this dissertation is driven by my own positionality as a fat female and research questions regarding the representation of fat bodies in young adult literature, reading texts that address fat bodies allows for a clear and purposeful reading of each text. As Krippendorff (2004) suggests, grounding content analysis in research questions creates empirical data. And while content analysis cannot be validated due to the inherent subjectivity, formulating guiding research questions will prevent me from "getting lost in mere abstraction" (p. 32). I have written the content analysis questions in a manner that allows for observations to be made concerning the text itself regarding fatness and the fat experience.

Regarding context, I have situated this study in the convergence Feminist Standpoint Theory (Hartsock, 1983; Smith, 1987; Harding, 1997) and Fat Studies (Wann, 2009; Cooper, 2010; Brown, 2016): Fat Standpoint Theory (Cooper Stoll & Thoune, 2020; Pausé, 2020). Fat standpoint is an entry point for academic analysis from the point of view of a fat person. With

this understanding in mind, the text selection and research questions afford readers of this dissertation an understanding of where I, as the researcher am positioning myself, and how the findings add to a larger discussion of fat positivity and body acceptance in scholarship. In addition, the analytical constructs will be situated in language used in fat positive discourse and body acceptance. This will allow further research and validity across content analysis in Fat Studies in and beyond young adult literature.

The study relies on inductive coding, as I explored the texts without a set code in place (Potter & Levine-Donnerstein, 1999). The coding was only established following the completion of the reading and data collection. In the reading process, as I read, I marked passages in the text and wrote comments in the margin. Each book was read twice, next copies for each read so not to influence marginalia. At the end of the reading process, I created a chart that collected, the year the text was read, the page number, the quote, and included a column for analysis and one for additional comments. For *Puddin'* (Murphy, 2019), there was an additional column for character, as the text has dual perspectives. Once all data was collected for each text, I then analyzed the marginalia. From these analyses, I identified four key themes (Saldaña, 2016): (1) In alignment with Fat Studies; (2) Exemplification of my own experiences; (3) Overlap between lived experiences and Fat Studies; (4) General Observations. After highlighting the quotes based on the themes, I then categorized the quotes based on with which research question they aligned, indicated by a green box for RQ1, a red box for RQ2, a blue box for RQ3, and a purple box for RQ4. Once I completed coding, I separated the quotes based on their box. In the case that a quote aligned with more than one research question, it was noted in the “additional comments” column.

The last step in conducting a content analysis is validating evidence. Because this content analysis is housed in an autoethnographic methodology, I validated the evidence by constantly

returning to Richardson's (2000) principles and Poulos's (2013) touchstones for evaluating autoethnographic works. By returning to these principles and touchstones, I stayed true to the task and created a content analysis that can be reproduced.

Methodology Summary

While critical autoethnography and content analysis are two very different qualitative methods, they both aim to understand cultural constructions. Critical autoethnography allows me to situate myself as at the center of my research and critically explore my identity as a fat female and my transition to fat researcher-activist. Content analysis provides a methodology to better understand the current themes and messages in YAL that centers the fat experience and fat protagonists. As it was a book that centered the fat experience that was the catalyst for my transition, critical autoethnography and content analysis are the best methodologies for the purpose and focus of the study.

Theoretical Framework

Autoethnography has a variety of forms (Chang, 2008; Adams, Jones, & Ellis, 2015; Poulos, 2021). Many autoethnography scholars regard autoethnography as a writer would regard a work of fiction: a craft. An autoethnography can manifest through poetry (Pelias 2004, 2011; Boylorn, 2012; Tillmann, 2009, Weems, 2008; Dutta & Basu, 2013), critical autoethnography (Boylorn & Orbe, 2020), performance autoethnography (Schneider, 2005; Spry 2011; Shoemaker, 2013; Denzin, 2007, 2018), social fiction (Leavy, 2013), collaborative autoethnography (Gale, Pelias, Russell, Spry, & Wyatt, 2012; "duoethnography" Diversi & Moreira, 2009, 2018). Because of the reasons I detail below, the two best deliverables for this dissertation are critical autoethnography and social fiction.

Critical autoethnography is “cultural analysis through personal narrative” and encourages a “critical lens, alongside an introspective and outward one, to make sense of who we are in context to our cultural community” (Boylorn & Orbe, 2020, p. 4). Because the text set centers representations of fatness, which is constructed by social standards and perpetuated through dominant social metanarratives, a critical autoethnography allows me to not only understand the books reflects my own experiences as a fat female, but it also allows me to investigate the cultural constructions imposed upon me regarding my weight and fatness. The three aims of a critical autoethnography are to (1) to examine systems, institutions, and discourses that privilege some people and marginalize others; (2) to mobilize and develop the explanatory frameworks that critical theory provides us—by putting theory into action through storytelling; and (3) to build new knowledge about the social world in order to stimulate new practices (Jones, 2018, as paraphrased in Boylorn & Orbe, 2020, p. 6); therefore, this study helps me to better understand my own experiences with body shaming and body hate as they relate to the journeys of the characters, examine the cultural constructs that perpetuated those experiences, and explore my transition from oppressed to researcher-activist. The following theories act as foundations for executing a critical autoethnography.

Reader Response Theory

To understand how I am responded to each text in the text set and the text set as a whole, I drew on Holland’s psychological Reader Response Theory. Holland (1975/1980, 1975/2011) approached RRT through a psychoanalytic lens. He argued that to truly understand a reader’s interpretation, they must understand how their individual personality responds to the text. Holland identified four key terms regarding literary interpretation: unity, text, identity, and self. Unity refers to the details of the work to which the reader attaches. These details imply a “central

theme” (1985/1980, p.119). Through “successive abstraction,” the reader groups details into different themes and condenses the different themes into one central theme which ultimately reveals intimate details about the reader (p. 119). The text offers the reader the information from which to abstract their central theme. Borrowing from Lichtenstein (1965), Holland (1975/1980) defines identity as the character or personality of the reader. Each individual personality lives out variations of their identity theme and seeks it out as they read. The last term Holland defined was self: one’s own person – the culmination of the body and the psyche. Together, these four terms come together to reveal how a reader interacts with a text: “*identity* is the *unity* I find in a *self* if I look at it as though it were a *text*” (p. 121). In other words, the text and the self-represent variability while unity and identity are fixed. As the reader engages with the text, they seek out elements of themselves in the text and aim for unity. This process leads to the creation of meaning.

Reader response theory and critical autoethnography pair nicely together because they both rely on lived experiences as evidence for research. The two will complement each other because in doing a critical autoethnography about reading, I needed to connect my own lived experiences to my engagements with the texts. Holland (1975/1980, 1975/2011) purposed that a reader is only changed characteristically if they are completely satisfied via defense mechanisms and fantasy; therefore, part of the self-study aspect involved dissecting what mechanisms and fantasies were being satisfied and striving to understand how my lived experiences had an impact on those mechanisms. Additionally, because the rereading of all four texts occurs after my research into Fat Studies, Fish’s (1980) interpretive strategies had an impact on the reading of each text. Instead of purely reading for pleasure, as was the case for *Dumplin’* (Murphy, 2015) in 2019, the four texts in the text set have been reread with the concepts of Fat Studies in mind. I

had to acknowledge the influence this knowledge had on the transactions with the texts and the meaning making process.

Fat Studies and Fat Standpoint Theory

Chapters Four and Five both rely on my own positionality as a fat woman who has experienced fatphobia and oppression. Autoethnography “lends itself to activist scholarship” (Pausé, 2020, p. 176) because it encourages the researcher to center their own lived experiences in the research to better understand and acknowledge the “privileges, environments, and structural forces that shape” experience (p. 176). As I was aiming to understand my own cultural construction and self-concept, I had to first acknowledge the ridicule and oppression I have experienced as a fat woman, then move to critically deconstruct those experiences to learn how to combat them. The critical frame in which this dissertation is situated is Fat Standpoint Theory (Cooper Stoll & Thoune, 2020; Pausé, 2020). Fat Standpoint encourages fat scholars to use their own lived experiences to empower their research. A marriage between Feminist Standpoint Theory (Hartsock, 1983; Smith, 1987; Harding, 1997) and Fat Studies (Wann, 2009; Cooper, 2010; Brown, 2016), Fat Standpoint Theory aims to “engage a number of scholarly, pedagogical, and community-based endeavors to combat fatphobia” (Cooper Stoll & Thoune, 2020, p. 94). It also encourages fat scholars, researchers, and activists to interact with their own intersectionality, as these intersections impact locationality. Situating my critical autoethnography in Fat Standpoint (Cooper Stoll & Thoune, 2020; Pausé, 2020) elevates my experience as I join the conversation regarding fat persons as “knowledge producers” (Cooper Stoll & Thoune, 2020, p. 98).

Additionally, Chapter Five is a critical content analysis which requires a critical lens through which to read the text. Fat Studies and Fat Standpoint Theory offered tenets through

which I can engaged with the text in a critical conversation. The text set was crafted with the following criteria: protagonist must self-identify as fat and the narrative must center fat experiences. In Western society, to be ‘fat’ is perverse and “obsessively ugly” (Wann, 2009, p. ix), and in response to this belief, Fat Studies emerged. With roughly forty years of study, Fat Studies aims to push back against critical obesity literature and highlights how the construction of fatness is politically driven and consumer driven. Brown (2016), in laying out four main tenets of Fat Studies, argues that they situate fat persons at the center of research because the “experiences of fat individuals do not mirror” those in dominant society (p. 204). The research questions guiding this dissertation seek to understand how Murphy’s texts center the fat experience and how the texts push back against the dominant social frameworks researched by fat scholars. When paired with critical content analysis, Fat Studies and Fat Standpoint provide the language to discuss how Murphy is giving voices to fat characters, and therein, fat persons.

Summary

The purpose of this chapter was to introduce the two methodologies used in this dissertation, as well as include the theoretical framework required to complete the study. Chapter Four will be a critical autoethnography detailing the social construction of my identity as a fat female and transition to fat researcher-activist after reading *Dumplin’* (Murphy, 2015). Chapter Five will provide a survey of the field regarding representations of fat experience in YAL. Chapter Three explained the guiding principles necessary to conduct a critical autoethnography and a content analysis, then located the study by explaining how I used the methodologies to answer the research questions outlined in Chapter One. Chapter Three concludes with a brief overview of Reader Response Theory and Fat Standpoint Theory, as they act as the theoretical frames in which the study is situated.

CHAPTER FOUR: A CRITICAL AUTOETHNOGRAPHY

Looking back, I have always been fat. From toddlerhood, I had round cheeks and a round belly. However, being fat and recognizing fatness are two very different things. In elementary school, I was always the biggest kid in my class, but I attributed that to being the tallest kid, always towering over my classmates. My height I was aware of; my weight, I was not. There was no notion of being fat. It wasn't until middle school that I truly experienced fat-shaming and fat-hatred. One moment – one bully – and my view of myself decreased rapidly and my own fat-shame grew exponentially. Over the last twenty-two years, I have struggled with the cultural expectations regarding my body and the implications attached to those expectations. This critical autoethnography documents several key moments that impacted my fat identity. Situated within Harro's (2008a; 2008b) *Cycles of Socialization and Liberation*, I share how school and my pediatrician's office acted as institutions of socialization, therein instilling in me fat-hate and the repercussions of self-hate. I then account how Julie Murphy's (2015) *Dumplin'* acts as the critical incident that allowed me to break loose from my fat-hate and self-hate tendencies and move forward and toward accepting my fat body.

Finding Julie Murphy

I read *Dumplin'* (Murphy, 2015) for the first time on the suggestion of a colleague with whom I taught. An avid reader of YAL like me, Cathy⁵ never let me down in terms of reading recommendations. She told me she had just finished this great book about a fat girl entering a beauty pageant. I was skeptical. Despite my skepticism, I found myself loving Willowdean and connecting with her in a way I had never connected with a character. Here was this teenage girl who was so confident in her skin. She scoffed at people who treated her poorly, and even hit

⁵ Name changed for anonymity

them to get her point across sometimes. She was full of charisma and determination. At 29, I did not have that kind of attitude. I worked out excessively, ate what Weight Watchers allowed me to eat to stay within my blue dot range, and still struggled with seeing the real me – the size 14 me – instead of the size 22 me of my past. Don't get me wrong – though I was in awe of Willowdean's character, the novel had some issues. For instance, how she spent an inordinate amount of time trying to get Bo's attention and then pushing him away. Nonetheless, this book was amazing. I loved the writing, the honesty, and the rawness of it. I wanted to be like Willowdean – a little less judgy – but courageous all the same (Davis, 2018). Where was she when I was in high school? Middle school? I could have learned so much from her.

Before *Dumplin'*: Institutions for Socialization

Considering I came to *Dumplin'* (Murphy, 2015) at the age of 29, it is critical for me to highlight the institutions that had constructed the version of me that first encountered the novel – the Before-*Dumplin'* Laura, so to speak. This Laura had faced implicit and explicit fat-biases for nearly two decades and internalized these biases. In preparing for this critical autoethnography, I sat down and thought long and hard on moments where I remember being the victim of implicit and/or explicit fat-bias. Initially, I noted six events I felt were important in the development of my fat identity. After further contemplation, I narrowed the six events down to three critical moments – two took place in school and one in a doctor's office. If we look again at Harro's (2008a) Cycle of Socialization (See pages 158-159 for figures), these three moments occur due to institutional and cultural socialization.

School as a Site of Socialization

Schools are a powerful setting for weight-based discrimination (Cameron & Russell, 2016). By the time children reach adolescence, they have already experienced victimization

through fat discrimination (Puhl, Luedicke, & Heuer, 2010). Saldana (2013) suggests that schools are sites for “maintain[ing] and perpetuat[ing] the status quo” (p. 230); therefore, in a world where thin people have institutional power, schools are going to implicitly promote thin-thinking which can lead to explicit fat-hate as seen in the following memory. Prior to the moment shared below, I cannot remember a time where I was a victim of weight-based discrimination.

I’m in middle school. Moving in the middle of a school year is never a good idea, but it’s even worse when it’s the middle of sixth grade. I’m a big kid – 5’8” and at least 165 lbs. I’m hard to miss, but add “new girl” to my identity, and I’m a walking bullseye. For the most part, I lay low. I’m in honors classes and band, so I haven’t experienced bullying. Not until P.E. Physical Education. There’s this girl. She’s a year older than me, but everyone knows she’s failed a couple of times. She’s probably closer to being a ninth grader than she is to a seventh grader. Oh man, she likes to pick on people. She’s in my P.E. class. Her taunting starts small – ‘you fat,’ ‘yo, fat ass,’ and ‘wide load’ – but she slowly progresses. Her heckling remains solely vocal throughout seventh grade. But in eighth grade, she shifts her tactics. Walking down the eighth-grade hallway, she pushes me into the locker bank. “Get out my way, fat ass.” She claims I’m taking up too much space. There aren’t any teachers around. People are laughing. I’m laughing to keep from crying. I start going to the nurse’s office regularly with “stomach aches” to avoid the halls at passing period. I don’t want to take up too much space as people are going from class to class.

It is only after this event that I can remember moments in which I was made to feel lesser because of my weight and size by others by my own implicit fat-hate. Though Jaffe (2008) found

that most fat identities are solidified in childhood, mine was solidified in middle school – in adolescence. That is when I started calling myself fat. The psychological trauma I experienced from the girl’s explicit fat-hate through verbal heckling and then physical abuse set me on a path of negative self-concept and implicit fat-bias. I began focusing on student council, band, National Junior Honor Society, the volunteer club, and other activities that centered my actions as important, rather than my size. I surrounded myself with friends who looked like me and tried not to impose on those who did not. I continued to foster this image into high school.

This transitions me to my second institutional moment in which I was highly aware of my weight and size. Unlike the story above, this instance was more implicitly fat-biased than explicitly fat-biased. It also extends outside the realm of the school building, as it reflects an explicit bias evident in athletic wear. For context, in the state of Texas circa 2003, students were required to have one physical education credit to graduate. Because I have always loved to dance, I chose to enroll in Dance I, Introduction to Dance, in ninth grade. The moment that follows reveals the implicit biases I endured during the class, and the explicit bias of athletic wear.

I’m in high school. To satisfy my Physical Education credit, I choose to register for Dance I. (Little did I know that marching band would satisfy this credit requirement. They really should have emphasized that in the orientation PowerPoint). On the first day of class, we receive the syllabus and requirements list: black leotards, black leggings, and jazz shoes. I’m a size 10 shoe, so I worried I would struggle to find my size shoe. The shoe store had plenty in my size though. However, the leotards and the leggings are far more difficult to find. Walmart? No. Target? No. We finally find a local dance store that carries the required uniform. Unfortunately, they don’t regularly carry my size. They

have to order it. When it finally comes in, I try it on. Never in my life have I worn something so tight that wasn't a swimsuit without a t-shirt over it. It's so high cut that it shows my belly rolls and brief cut underwear. It's so low cut in the back that it shows my back rolls and bra. The material pulls because even though it is my size, an XL, the spandex is stretched to its max. Maybe I should have asked for a XXL. I'm ashamed to leave the room to show my mom.

I have no choice but to wear it to class without a t-shirt. Just like middle school P.E., I detest changing in front of the girls in the locker room. I come to class already dressed in my leotard and leggings on, and when class is over, I don't shower or change outside of a bathroom stall for fear of my body being seen by others. In class, there's a girl who looks like me. Where I have a big belly and small boobs, she has a medium belly and big boobs. I stick with her. Even though I'm bigger than she is, at least, I don't feel as out of place when I dance next to her.

Despite the uniform, I love dancing, and despite my size, I'm pretty good at it. I love it so much that I decide that when drill team auditions post in the spring that I am going to audition. I go to the meeting. It's a Monday night in the cafeteria. My mom and I sit through the slideshow detailing the time requirement, cost requirement, and expectations for a Glittering Movement⁶ dancer. I'm excited. I can do this. I love dancing. At the end of the meeting, the director, a fellow big girl, asks if there are any questions. Too embarrassed to ask my question in front of the crowd of beautifully thin girls, I wait.

As the crowd clears, and it is just her and I, I ask with trepidation, "Is there a weight requirement for the drill team?"

⁶ Name changed for anonymity

She looks at me unsure of what I'm expecting to hear. "No. There's no weight requirement. As long as we can find a uniform big enough to fit you and you do the work, there is no weight requirement." In those words – 'as long as there is a uniform big enough to fit me' – I know I won't try out for the team. The uniform is a bright Kelley green leotard, sequined skirt, and jacket. It won't be a standard size carried. It'll have to be special made and that requires money. My love of dancing isn't enough to make me follow through with my desire to try out. I decide to stick to the marching band.

This story details two distinct instances of implicit fat-bias – my own and the dance instructor. First, even two years after the locker bank incident in eighth grade, I still struggled with my body taking up too much space. I was reiterating my own negative self-concept by refusing to change clothes in the locker room with the rest of the Dance I class. Second, the instructor participated in fat discrimination unknowingly. Nowhere in her response to my question about a weight requirement did she say dance was a thin-centric activity. She, herself, was on the larger size, so she was encouraging me to audition. However, the simple mention "if" there was a uniform big enough to get me, she was engaging in fat-bias.

This incident is not solely housed in the school. The instructor had no control over the availability of leotard sizes. In this statement, the instructor is unintentionally revealing the explicit fat-bias of the fashion world. Fashion is, by far, one of the more visible methods for stigmatizing fatness. Fat persons are often missing from the fashion industry's cat walks and magazines, and clothing for fat persons is often relegated to the backs of stores, specialized stores (Peters, 2014) such as Lane Bryant, Cato, and Catherine's Plus-Size, and online shops such as Roaman's and Woman Within. When plus-sizes are available in mainstream stores, their designs are often meant to "hide, cinch, and slim fat bodies through tactful styling" (p. 49).

Additionally, the mainstream sizing itself creates frustration. Most plus-size sections begin with size 14 (Plunkett 2015), while others include size 12 in their plus-size sections (Dunn, 2016). The availability of sizes does not represent the consumer, as the average size of an American woman falls between a 12-16 (Eaton, 2016). If everyday clothing is this difficult to find, the dance instructor's remark about dance clothes was valid. Greenleaf, Hauff, Klos, and Serafin (2020) found that most women are dissatisfied by the availability of plus-size athletic wear. Though strides are being made for more inclusive sizing (see Old Navy's Bodequality campaign), explicit fat-bias is still rampant in many corporate athletic brandings.

Doctor's Offices as a Site for Discrimination

Fat bias in the medical field is astounding, as fatness is often villainized by medical professionals. Many doctors and medical professionals ascribe to the Weight-Normative Approach to health care practices (Tylka et al., 2014). The focus of the weight-normative approach is to cater to "healthy lifestyle choices" and "healthy weights" (p. 2) which both place weight at the center of health and wellness. Tylka et al. (2014) challenges the weight-normative approach because it (1) emphasizes "that higher body mass index (BMI) *causes* poor health (p.3); (2) perpetuates negative judgment toward fat persons; and (3) healthy weight is a social construct that "may instill a sense of learned helplessness" (p. 3). Doctors who follow this method of medical care impact the overall well-being of their patients by perpetuating the negative attitudes surrounding body weight and size.

My pediatrician's office was the site of my third most influential experience of fat-bias. We were on CHIPS – Children's Health Insurance Plans – a program for low-income families to have children's health insurance. My sister and I had gone to the same office for most of our adolescent lives. Though he had made mention of my weight being a contributing factor to my

high cholesterol, the following moment was by far the start of the ugly weight cycling I'd spend nearly fifteen years partaking in:

I started taking cholesterol medication when I was fourteen. My lipids panels always came back over three hundred, so my pediatrician opted to prescribe daily cholesterol medication to lower my numbers. They worked. For most of freshman and sophomore year, I maintained my cholesterol. This year though, for my annual checkup, my lipids are back over three hundred which meant a visit to the office rather than a phone call. When they call me back, the nurse and I walk into the exam room. She takes my vitals. All normal. Now it's time for the dreaded scale walk. I don't know why they have the scale at the end of the hall. It's like walking the plank. You have to walk past all the other rooms to get to it. So embarrassing. When I step on the scale, it reads 283. I have never weighed that much. EVER! My heart starts racing, my face is hot, and I feel woozy. As I walk back to the exam room, I feel ashamed. What did I weigh the last time I was in? Not 280 something, that's for sure.

The doctor walks in the room giving me no greeting, just an up-and-down once over. "Now Laura, you've put on nearly 30lbs since we last saw you. Your weight is getting out of control. It's a wonder you don't have diabetes. You're right on the cusp. You need to straighten up and lose weight. Being fat isn't going to do you any good."

I start to cry. His aggression is painful. I didn't mean to gain weight. I don't even know how I gained that much weight in the year between visits. Has it been year? No. Yes? I can't remember.

"Laura, calm down. No need to get emotional. Just do better."

Though this conversation is based on memory-mining and is subject to emotional distress, it remains a very critical moment in my fat identity development. I immediately began restricting my food intake. I remember eating nothing but yogurt for breakfast, a baked potato for lunch, and baked chicken and green beans for dinner. This doctor's visit was early in the year, January – February of my junior year of high school. By May, in time for the annual band banquet, I lost 40 pounds and was in a size 14 ball gown. The next visit I had with him, he praised me for taking my morbid obesity seriously and changing my ways. He affirmed my actions as right, and I took them to heart.

The Results of Institutional Socialization

Unfortunately, institutional socialization breeds fear and insecurity. Though these moments occurred between the ages of twelve and seventeen, the impact they had on my psychological well-being were monumental. Being socialized by the schools and medical professionals that viewed fat as different / fat as bad forced me to believe that I was in the wrong for being fat. For the better part of my twenties, I engaged in weight cycling, an unhealthy cycle that refers to “repeatedly losing and regaining weight” (Bronwell & Rodin, 1994, p. 1325). I put myself through rigorous workouts that pushed my body to the limit which often led to injuries. I bought into multi-level marketing programs that supported quick fixes for fatness and wraps to eliminate belly fat. I joined and actively participated in Weight Watchers to control my eating. I would reach whatever goal was set for me to be successful (read “lose weight”) and back off the stringent regimens I made for myself, but I would immediately start putting the weight back on. Right back to the plans I would go, convinced this time I would lose the weight and keep it off. That time has yet to come. Weight cycling fueled my negative self-concept. I only felt beautiful

or desirable when I was on the positive side of weight cycling – when I looked most like the standard definition of beauty. I did not know there was another way.

During Dumplin': A Critical Incident

Across the four books selected for this study, each protagonist has someone or something they revere: Willowdean idolizes Dolly Parton, Millie wishes to follow in the footsteps of Christiane Amanpour, Faith is a devoted nerd-blogger for *The Grove*, and Waylon never misses an episode of *The Fiercest of Them All*. For me, I have Julie Murphy. Reading Murphy's books as an adult, for the first time, I saw myself reflected in the pages. Looking at the role *Dumplin'* (2015) played in my understanding of body and fat acceptance, the book is the location of my critical incident. Up until reading it, I had lived in my fundamental identity: a fat woman. Looking at the vignettes shared above, growing up fat, I was oppressed through incidents at school, with the bullying in middle school that initiated my fear of "taking up too much space," and again as I tried to find a "uniform big enough to fit me" so to audition for the drill team. At the doctor's office, with the doctor telling me to "do better," I learned that even my doctor saw that I was not good enough unless I was thin. I ascribed to the monolith that as a fat woman; I was in opposition to the thin woman – a socially derived binary. I was putting my body through unnecessary trials and tribulations to promote the status quo (Harro, 2008a).

However, reading *Dumplin'* (Murphy, 2015) challenged my thinking. It made me realize that there are fat persons who are happy with their bodies. There are fat persons who celebrate their fatness. Reading Willowdean's story offered me an entry point to begin questioning the system (Harro, 2008a) that had constructed my identity and instilled in me that fat equates to bad. After finishing *Dumplin'* (Murphy, 2018), I followed up with more fat YAL titles: *Puddin'* (Murphy, 2018), *To Be Honest*, (Martin, 2018), *Fat Girl on a Plane* (DeVos, 2018), *The Summer*

of *Jordi Perez (and the best burger in Los Angeles)* (Spalding, 2018), and *Food, Girls, and Other Things, I Can't Have* (Zadoff, 2009). As a fan of contemporary romance novels, I found that there were many titles that centered fat protagonists as the love interests. I devoured those. I positioned my entire doctoral application writing sample around body image in YAL. As I was reading and writing my writing sample, I was empowering myself through education about body image and the impact it has on people. I began questioning my own opinions of my body, and while I still have not completely accepted my body as is, I am far more lenient in giving grace than doling out punishments. And if I'm honest, this dissertation would not exist without *Dumplin'* (Murphy, 2015) as the location of my critical incident.

Seeing Myself in the Text – A Reader Response

As I situated *Dumplin'* as a critical incident, I thought it important to share some of the passages that impacted me as a reader. As I mentioned above, I initially read the novel for fun; therefore, the first reading was strictly emotional. This reading aligns with Rosenblatt's (1978/1994) transactional reader response. As I read *Dumplin'* (Murphy, 2015), I transacted aesthetically, meaning I relied on my lived experience to elicit meaning. I was just a former fat girl reading a book about a fat girl. I did not have the language or know-how to read it through Fat Studies as a critical lens. Additionally, there are no marginal comments to indicate passages that I found impactful. Instead, I rely on memory-mining and my 2018 Goodreads review to inform this section.

Raw and Honest

One of the first things I noticed about *Dumplin'* (Murphy, 2015) was the honesty in her writing. While the book was about Willowdean and the Miss Teen BlueBonnet pageant, at its core it is a book about relationships. When Willowdean talks about her relationship with her

Aunt Lucy, it is clear she is still grieving her loss. As she details her friendship with her lifelong best friend, Ellen, is waning, readers can feel the struggle she is experiencing. Returning to Rosenblatt (1978/1994), these moments were highly emotional. To transact with them meant pulling from my own lived experiences as a fat teenager and fat adult to create meaning. Murphy's use of language to provoke emotional response was effective. The following passages are two examples where, through memory-mining, I had an emotional response based on my own lived experiences.

One of the first passages I really remember kicking me in the gut was a memory Willowdean shares about Lucy. She is reminiscing about the funeral and how half of Clover City attended Lucy's funeral. She quickly shifts her thoughts from the funeral to the first time Willowdean went to dance class. Willowdean does not want to go to dance class because she thinks she is "too fat [...] too tall [and] didn't look like the other girls waiting to go into class" (p. 25). As shared above, I had my own experiences with dance and leotards. Lucy's response to Willowdean is such a powerful lesson delivered with compassion and authority. She tells her,

"I've wasted a lot of time in my life. I've thought too much about what people will say or what they're gonna think [...] there have been times when I really stopped myself from doing something special. All because I was scared someone might look at me and decide I wasn't good enough." (p. 25)

These words, delivered "like warm honey" with a "tissue from the front pocket of her house dress," were so potent. She wants Willowdean to understand that she has choices. In my own experiences in my freshman dance class, I did fear that I didn't look like the other girls, but I loved dancing enough to push my fears to the back of my mind and live in the moment. Lucy's authentic advice to Willowdean would have been vital to me my freshman year. When she tells

her, “If you go in there and you decide that this isn’t for you, then you never have to go back. But you owe yourself the chance” (p. 25), those were the words I needed to hear as a young fat girl.

Another scene I found full of emotion was Bo and Willowdean’s confrontation over their relationship. Only having experienced one relationship in my 29 years, the only knowledge I had of romance was in the pages of the books I read. If I’d read one breakup scene, I’d read them all. However, I had never read a breakup scene that was directly related to weight concerns. As the protagonists in the books I had read did not reflect my own image, I felt the pain of the break up, but it did not directly correlate with my own life. Willowdean and Bo’s breakup reflected my own fears of being romantically rejected due to my weight. I did not expect for anyone to fight for a fat person in a romance novel. Yet, the passion and pain in Bo’s speech to Willowdean showed me my fears were unwarranted. Willowdean does not think she and Bo should be together because they are not built the same, and people will question their relationship. Considering the narration is from Willowdean’s perspective, the pain Bo is feeling must come from the word choice. As I read his short and pointed sentences, noting the language, I remember hating Willowdean at that moment for not giving him a chance. He tells her,

“You never struck me as the type to give a shit what everyone else thinks.” His jaw twitches for a moment before he lowers his voice and says, “I want to go everywhere with you. I want to show you off. I want to wear a cheap suit and be your escort for that ridiculous pageant.” (p. 318)

Murphy emphasizes his pain in two ways in this statement. First, she draws attention to his jaw and his voice. She wants readers to know he is trying to control his emotions through lowering his voice. He clearly feels deeply for Willowdean, and I could feel that throughout the scene.

Secondly, Murphy's use of short sentences emphasizes his pain. His argument is blunt. He wants her and does not care who knows it. He even calls her out for her attention to others' opinions. My heart broke for him, not her. While I empathize with her fears, I truly sided with Bo.

The passage that stuck with me the most – the one that started my own internal perspective shift – did not trigger one specific memory as the conversation with Lucy did or hit me in the feels like Bo's plea to Willowdean. Instead, the passage made me question my whole understanding of my lived fat experiences. Early in the novel, when Willowdean introduces herself to Bo, she refers to herself as "resident fat girl" (p. 8). Never in my wildest imagination would I openly call myself fat to another person. I did not wear it with pride. I was one of those people that "the word *fat* [made] uncomfortable" (emphasis in original, p. 9). Willowdean's use of the word "fat," so flippant and unbothered, was a new concept for me. To her, it is just another way to describe herself, like "some girls have big boobs or shiny hair or knobby knees" (p. 9). As someone who wore clothes two sizes too big or avoided pictures unless shielded by another person, Willowdean's honest description of herself was impactful. She closes the chapter with "I'm fat. It's not a cuss word. It's not an insult" (p. 9). I remember thinking Willowdean was wise beyond her years for being so open about her fatness and wanting to be like her. This experience was like Rosenblatt (1978/1994) described for readers, where I brought my own "particular temperament and fund of past transactions" to a text, and in doing so, "live[d] through a process of handling new situations, new attitudes, new personalities, new conflicts in values" (p. 173). Experiencing Willowdean's resolve triggered in me a new perspective on my own fatness.

Rude and Fatphobic

Though I place this novel as my critical incident, I do feel there were moments where I did not want to see myself reflected in Willowdean. As transacting with the text relies on lived experiences (Rosenblatt, 1978/1994), I didn't want to admit to myself that I compared myself to other fat girls and thought: at least I wasn't as fat as they were. I have always been ashamed of my attitude toward fat people. Willowdean's description of Millie is so harsh, so rude. She describes her as "the type of fat that requires elastic waist pants because they don't make pants with buttons and zippers in her size" (Murphy, 2015, p. 5). She even chides her for her eyes being "too close together and her nose pinch[ing] at the end" (p. 5). As I read Willowdean's description, I found myself thinking about the times that I had used other's fatness to make myself feel better – thinking I was lucky I was tall because I didn't look as fat as I was. I never admitted my comparisons, now identified as implicit fat-biases. Willowdean does at least admit that she is "ashamed to admit [she's] spent [her] whole life looking at [Millie] and thinking, *Things could be worse*" (emphasis in original, p. 5). This moment pulled from my own funds of experience (Rosenblatt, 1978/1994). I reacted to her rudeness, even documented it in my Goodreads review as a character flaw, but I didn't want to admit that I was just like her.

Seeing Fatness in the Text – An Informed Reader Response

My second reading of *Dumplin'* was far more critical than the first. This reading occurred during the fall semester of my third year of my doctoral program. In preparation for my prospectus, I reread *Dumplin'* (Murphy, 2015) with terminology from Feminist Standpoint Theory (Hartsock, 1983; Smith, 1987; Harding, 1997), Fat Studies (Wann, 2009; Cooper, 2010; Brown, 2016), and Fat Standpoint Theory (Cooper Stoll & Thouné, 2020; Pausé, 2020). I read it with a more informed understanding of why the book was so important in the discussion of fat

acceptance. The marginal comments reflected a more direct conversation with the way the text functioned as a tool for social commentary. Fish (1980) would argue the interpretive strategies - read terminology and understanding of fatness and cultural construction – influenced how I read the text the second time. Additionally, at the time of the second reading, I was involved with my now husband, then fiancé. I found myself connecting to Willowdean’s fears and concerns about Bo, as I navigated my own relationship. I realized many of Willowdean’s insecurities were like my own internalized insecurities. While the second reading was more critical than the first, in that I had the language to assess the book’s discussion of fatness, I still found it an emotional read as my situation had shifted from the first read.

Aligning with Fat Studies

When I reread *Dumplin’* (Murphy, 2015) through a critical lens, I found myself constantly questioning the narrative about its representation of the fat experience. LeBesco and Braziel (2001) argue society has positioned the fat body as “symptomatic,” a result of “reckless excess, prodigality, indulgence, lack of restraint, violation of order and space, transgression of boundary” (p. 3). While there are several moments that align with the concept of the symptomatic body throughout the novel, the first scene I noted followed an incident in which Willowdean punches another student for calling her “Dumplin’.” This fight instigates an argument between Willowdean and her mom regarding her mom’s consistent implications regarding Willowdean’s fatness. Whether it is the “weight-loss show[s]” or sharing a friend’s success on the “latest fad diet” (p. 132), Willowdean feels her mother hates her because she’s fat: “My body is the villain. That’s how she sees it. It’s a prison, keeping the better, thinner version of me locked away” (p. 133). As I read this passage, I noted the phrase “My body is the villain” (p.133). Society has villainized fatness because it goes against the norm. Companies profit off

people who reinforce this idea. I can't count how many times I have subscribed to Weight Watchers or researched Noom, Keto, or Whole Thirty. Though they suggest they want what's best for their customers, they still profit on people victimized by the social definition of beauty. And though she questions her body image regularly, Willowdean does understand that losing weight is not the key to happiness which pushes back against the notion that fat people are unhappy.

If we return to Willowdean's breakup scene noted in the initial reading of the text, my reading of the passage shifted to a more critical response following the research I conducted on fat representation and the social frameworks in which Murphy situated the book. Willowdean's concerns regarding how society will view her and Bo are warranted. In the thin/fat binary, romance is equated to thin, while lonely is equated to fat. Willowdean asks Bo, "'Why do you want to be with this?'" as she "wave[s] [her] arm up and down the length of [her] body" (p. 317). Her negative self-concept is driven by society's dominant social framework. She even acknowledges she is the one placing the emphasis on weight, not Bo. Though he likes her and wants to be with her, she cannot get past the negative self-concept instilled in her. After his declaration, she internally grapples with her fears:

My teeth chatter. I'm trying so, so hard not to cry. Because it's all there. I like him. He likes me. But there's so much more. I can't believe that it even matters to me, but I'm not going to be skinny anytime soon, and I shouldn't care. (p. 317)

In the margins, I noted "Why does skinny = romance?" This represents the difference in readings from the first read where I focused on Bo's pain and suffering to this reading where I questioned why romance was exclusive to thin. This passage's implications are further explored in Chapter Five as I looked at how Murphy situated romance in her novels.

Lived Experiences

Holland's (1975/1975) Psychological Reader response criticism claims that we read to fill the conscious and unconscious needs and desires of the psyche. As I searched for a passage that best illustrated how I'd not only engaged with Will's story but was triggered by the events occurring in the story, I identified two key passages. The first passage is early in the novel. As readers, we know very little about Will, other than she's a "Cashier, Dolly Parton enthusiast, and resident fat girl" (Murphy, 2015, p. 8). There is mutual attraction between her and Bo, her co-worker. We also know before the book takes place, Willowdean lost her Aunt Lucy. When Willowdean walks in to find her mother cleaning out Lucy's room, Willowdean becomes distraught, upset that her mom is packing up Lucy's belongings to donate to the shelter. In the narration, Willowdean expresses that "She's gone. And we don't even have any pictures of her. The reality of her body wasn't something she liked having reflected back at her in the form of photography" (p. 22). In the margins, I wrote "Truth – wedding pictures."

It was not her grief I connected with. It was not even her pain and frustration. I connected with the idea of Lucy not wanting her body documented in pictures. This passage hit me hard. Reading it, all I could think about is I'm weeks away from my engagement pictures, and I don't want my body in its current size documented and shared with the world. Then I thought about my wedding dress, and how it's sheer and fitted and how I don't want my rolls to be exposed for the world to see. The night I read this passage I had a full-on anxiety attack. I texted my mom about alterations and looked at different dresses that would hide more of my body than the one I chose. I looked on Pinterest for bridal workouts and shakes that would help me lose weight. I fell asleep with my phone in my hand. Honestly, there will be more moments like this one as I move through the readings for my dissertation because the process of reading/writing/revising runs

parallel to planning my wedding. Considering Holland's (1975/1975) reader response theory, this passage triggered my subconscious fear that my engagement and wedding pictures will not show me as a beautiful, blushing bride, but instead, as a fat girl in an ill-fitted dress.

Where Will's mentioning of Lucy's lack of pictures triggered my insecurities regarding my wedding dress (i.e. Holland's fear mechanism), her commentary while she and Bo kiss for the first time sent me on a very pleasant trip down memory lane. First, funny enough, my fiancé's nickname is Bo. When he was little, his family had a dog named Hobo, but Tony couldn't say it. He called the dog, Bobo, and his family thought it was so cute that they started calling him Bo. Thirty plus years later, he's still Bo. When I first read *Dumplin'* (Murphy, 2015), Tony and I were not together and wouldn't be for two more years. So, I read the romance as something that I wanted but doubted I would encounter. Now that he's in my life, as I read, I can't help but see myself in the scenes where Willowdean is interacting with Bo because I have my own Bo. There's even a comment further in the novel where I say, "I have my own Bo." The experience I'm having with this book is impacted by this fact. As they are experiencing firsts, my firsts with Tony are triggered. When Willowdean feels insecure, I remember being insecure. When Willowdean feels bashful, I remember being bashful. The first passage I indicated my connection with Willowdean and Bo is the first time that they kiss behind the Harpy's restaurant. After crushing on him for the duration of his time at Harpy's, Willowdean is in disbelief when he returns her affection.

I part my lips to respond, but he leans in, pauses for a second, and pushes my words away when his mouth meets mine. I don't have time to think about his tongue in my mouth and my tongue is answering his. Not sure what to do with them, I hold my hands at my sides,

my fingers balled into a fist. He tastes like artificial cherry and toothpaste. I want to kiss him until my lips fall off.

He pulls away.

My first kiss. It's the fastest thing that lasts forever. (pp. 51-52)

Their whole exchange is pure and innocent. At the end of the chapter, I noted "All I can think about is how Tony kissed me so unexpectedly on my front step – 'there. Now you can say you've been kissed.'" Again, Holland's argument about the engagement between the reader and the text implies that pleasures and desires must also be met for there to be meaning created. Connecting to the innocence in the scene between Willowdean and Bo and the triggering of my own first kiss experience suggests I created meaning.

Observations Across the Readings

I argue across Chapter Four that *Dumplin'* (Murphy, 2015) is responsible for my moving from the Cycle of Socialization (Harro, 2008a) to the Cycle of Liberation (Harro, 2008b). In the passages analyzed in this section, it is evident that even during the first reading, though a pleasure read, the book sparked in me a new point of view. As Lucy shares her memory of the dance class and Lucy's response, it reminded me of my own experiences with leotards being too small to fit my frame. Willowdean's open discussion of fatness spurred in me an envy to have her resolve. As a scholarly informed reader, I identified Willowdean's conversation with her mother and how Willowdean's body is a villain as representative of the social construct regarding fatness. I find it interesting that during both readings, Willowdean and Bo's breakup scene was significant. First, the scene represented my sympathizing with Bo as he clearly just wanted to be with Willowdean. The second reading spurred a conversation regarding why love and romance is equated to the thin side of the thin/fat binary. The same notes, but with different

impacts and implications. Additionally, as a woman in a relationship for the first time, I also noted how the second reading was impacted by my own insecurities with my fiancé. From first kisses to wedding dress shopping, *Dumplin'* hit differently as my funds of experience (Rosenblatt, 1978/1994) had broadened. If we return to reader response theory, our lived experiences influence the way we transact with the text. Evident in the reactions of the initial and secondary reads, as I became more involved with my scholarly research and my relationship with my fiancé, my reading of the text was impacted. I moved from emotional responses to more critical responses which led to my shift to liberation (Harro, 2008b).

After Dumplin': A Direction for Change

According to Harro's (2018b) Cycle of Liberation, I am working through the "getting ready" stage of liberation, as reading *Dumplin'* (Murphy, 2015) acted as my wake-up call. I am empowering myself through research and education – learning about Fat Studies and building a foundation to be a critical researcher. I am gaining inspiration through the scholars with whose work I have engaged in the research process. Also, in exploring this transformation through a critical autoethnographic method, I am working authentically to tell my tale and dismantle my own beliefs, internalized oppression, and work toward crafting a dissertation that will be enlightening and may act as a tool for reaching out and seeking allies. The work is not done. I recognize that breaking social construction is difficult and requires a substantial amount of time and effort and support. As I continue to move through Harro's (2018b) Cycle of Liberation, I can only hope to reach the maintenance phase where I am part of the larger discussion regarding weightism, fatism, and fat-phobia.

When I look back at how impactful reading *Dumplin'* (Murphy, 2015) was for me as an adult, I think about how it could be impactful for adolescent readers dealing with body image

issues and negative self-concept due to the social narrative surrounding their fatness. If books are windows, doors, and mirrors (Bishop, 1990), then books that center fat characters do not idolize the fat quest (Shelton, 2019) or perpetuate thin-thinking (Averill, 2016). They afford readers the chance to experience the fatphobia and fatism thrust on fat people. In experiencing the fatphobia, the reader could experience, as I did, a critical incident that moves them out of the socially accepted understanding of fatness into what it means to be fat.

Chapter Summary

The purpose of this chapter was to look critically at my own fat identity development and how Murphy's (2015) *Dumplin'* acted as a critical incident. Situated in Harro's (2008a) Cycle of Socialization and Cycle of Liberation (Harro, 2008b), I presented a critical autoethnography that explored three critical moments in my identity as a fat adolescent female, and how that identity impacted my adult life. It then describes how reading *Dumplin'* (Murphy, 2015) allowed me to break free of the social construction I had lived within for nearly two decades. During this exploration, I include pivotal scenes from the book, both from the initial reading and informed reading, that impacted my identity. Chapter Four concludes with next steps as I continue to work through the Cycle of Liberation (Harro, 2008b) and grow in my fat acceptance. Chapter Five will present findings from a critical content analysis using Shelton's (2016) fat quest as the frame.

CHAPTER 5: CRITICAL CONTENT ANALYSIS

Chapter Four discussed how, as an adolescent, my fat identity was solidified by implicit and explicit fat-biases. Using Harro's Cycle of Socialization (2008a) and Cycle of Liberation (2008b), I autoethnographically explored how schools and the doctor's office were sites for socialization. I then described how reading Murphy's (2015) *Dumplin'* acted as the critical incident that allowed me to break the Cycle of Socialization (Harro, 2008a) and move into the Cycle of Liberation (Harro, 2008b). Lastly, it concluded with next steps in my journey through liberation. This chapter presents analytical findings developed from the critical content analysis of the four of Murphy's YA texts: *Dumplin'* (2015), *Puddin'* (2018), *Faith Taking Flight* (2020), and *Pumpkin* (2021a). As outlined in Chapter 3, each text was selected due to its centering a self-proclaimed fat protagonist. The text set was analyzed using critical content analysis (Short, 2017) which was guided by the following two-part research question:

How do the protagonists/casts of characters resist the dominant cultural perception of fatness? How do her books act as an avenue for awareness and change?

I began this analysis by first close reading each text and utilizing theoretical memos (Short, 2017) to keep track of my transactions with the text (Rosenblatt, 1975). I specifically noted any moments that addressed representations of fatness, cultural understandings, or cultural underpinnings of fatness, and how the character resisted the cultural perceptions of fatness. After reading each text a second time with Fat Standpoint Theory (Cooper Stoll & Thoun, 2020; Pausé, 2020) as the theoretical lens, I documented all marginalia and determined the themes present in each text. During this period of collecting marginal comments, I read Shelton's (2016) "As their waistlines recede': Tracing and Challenging the Fat Quest in Young Adult Literature,"

published in *Fat Studies: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Body Weight and Society*. Upon reflection and analysis of the marginal comments, it became evident that Murphy's works were engaging with Shelton's framework for disrupting the fat quest, and I operationalized it for this chapter.

Book Summaries

The following are books summaries for the four novels in this study. It is important to note that because *Dumplin'* (Murphy, 2015), *Puddin'* (Murphy, 2018), and *Pumpkin* (Murphy, 2021) are all set in the same universe, the characters will appear in texts where they are not the protagonist. For example, Millie's first appearance is in *Dumplin'*, while her story is the focus of *Puddin'*. Waylon is the only protagonist that is not present in all three of the Clover City novels. Based on and adapted from the character Faith Hebert from the 1992 (Shooter & Lapham) Harbinger comic series, *Faith Taking Flight* is a standalone novel for the purpose of this study.

Dumplin' (Murphy, 2015) – Willowdean Dickson – *Dumplin'* follows sixteen-year-old Willowdean Dickson, self-proclaimed fat girl and lover of all things Dolly Parton. Until meeting Bo, Willowdean is confident and proud of her body. When romance and a rocky relationship with her mother shakes her fat positive resolve, Willowdean enters the Miss Teen Blue Bonnet beauty pageant to regain her confidence and reclaim her body.

Puddin' (Murphy, 2018) – Millie Michalchuk – *Puddin'*, the companion to *Dumplin'*, follows Millie Michalchuk after her adventures in the Miss Teen Blue Bonnet pageant. After circumstances bring Millie and resident "mean girl," Callie Reyes, together, Millie and Callie must learn to work together to achieve their dreams. They must put aside their own preconceived notions and learn to embrace who they are and go after what they want.

Faith Taking Flight (Murphy, 2020) – Faith Hebert – When people and animals start disappearing from her hometown, Faith Herbert seems to be the only one who notices the connection between the disappearances and the new designer drug spreading through the halls of her high school. She must confront her past and embrace her ability to fly to save the day.

Pumpkin (Murphy, 2021) – Waylon Brewer – *Pumpkin*, the conclusion to the *Dumplin'* universe, introduces Waylon Brewer. Waylon loves drag, and when his plans to move to Austin suddenly change, he chooses to enter a drag competition, but when the tape is leaked to everyone in his school and he is nominated for Prom Queen as a joke, Waylon decides to run and show everyone just how amazing he is.

Literature Review

Murphy's novel catalog primarily focuses on productive representations of fat characters. *Dumplin'* (2015), *Puddin'* (2018), *Dear Sweet Pea* (2019), *Faith Taking Flight* (2020), *Pumpkin* (Murphy, 2021a), *If the Shoe Fits* (2021b), and *Faith Greater Heights* (2021c) all center fat characters taking on the world. Her work spans middle grade (*Dear Sweet Pea*) to contemporary adult (*If the Shoe Fits*). At the center of each text, Murphy wants readers to understand that “fat people [are] human beings, [but] they comprise so much more” (Smith, 2018). She wants readers to know that fat people are more than just fat. She highlights the characters' intersectional identities as she displaces the master narratives of fatness.

The critical work done on Murphy's catalog centers on *Dumplin'*, as it is the most recognized and circulated of her texts (Shelton, personal communication, 2022). There are some book reviews of *Puddin'* (2018), *Faith* (2020), and *Pumpkin* (2021a) (see Shelton, 2020, Stevenson, 2018 for *Puddin'*; Rose, 2021 for *Faith*; and Stevenson, 2021 for *Pumpkin*), but the

critical work looks mostly at Willowdean and her body positive⁷ messages. Byers (2018) approaches YAL centering fat-bodied characters through queer theory. She argues each character in her text set experiences conversion points: friendship/romance, family, and self-concept. For the narrative to occur, Willowdean must come to terms with and accept being viewed as desirable by Bo, not being in opposition with Ellen because of her size, inspiring her mother to be more self-compassionate, and lastly, she must orient herself with happiness and claim her friends, lover, space, and ultimately herself. Byers concludes with a call for a YAL world where “complex, intersectional characters” can exist “beyond thin-thinking and fat-hate” (p. 168). There should be a place for fat characters to just be. After her content analysis seeking to understand the construction of fat bodies in prose and graphic YAL, Amato (2019) identifies how Willowdean’s story deviates from the traditional fat narrative present in YAL (see Chapter Two: Literature Review for definition). Along with the other protagonists in? Amato’s study, Willowdean has “agency and complexity,” she is not defined by her body, and she is “consistently talking back to harmful stereotypes and dehumanizing expectations of body and gender” (p. 18). Amato, like Byers (2018), concludes by asking if there is a place in prose fiction where the author does not have to invoke “fatphobia to show the reader [the protagonist’s] fatness” (p. 18), and if there is a way fat characters to exist without the necessity of negative environments.

Septiani, Devi, and Zurmailis (2021) take an alternative approach by conducting a dialectical analysis to determine Julie Murphy’s worldview, how it is depicted in the novel, how the character relations work to fight social construction, and how the American beauty standard

⁷ Fat scholars are moving away from positive to describe fat representations. Now, instead, scholars are pushing for the use of “productive.” The term positive has been associated with the Body Positivity movement, and while they do speak back and forth, it can erase fat bodies. (Shelton, personal communication, 2022).

is the genesis of the narrative. Their analysis is both within the text and outside of the text to determine Murphy's attitudes. Septiani, Devi, and Zurmailis find that Millie and Willowdean act as characters opposing the social construction of beauty, while characters such as Callie Reyes and Patrick Thomas work to perpetuate the construction. They also argue Murphy positions Willowdean as the "21st generation," meaning Willowdean "represents the group of society who has big size bod[ies] to challenge and fight the ideal body construction" (p. 104). Ultimately, they find that *Dumplin'* (Murphy, 2015) aligns with the view of the National Association to Advance Fat Acceptance, or NAAFA, and the Fat Acceptance Movement, as Murphy works to counter the social framework in which she situates her novels. What connects Byers (2018), Amato (2019), and Septiani, Devi, and Zurmailis (2021) is their reverence for Willowdean as a body positive character. While they seek different outcomes with their research, researchers repeatedly find that *Dumplin'* (Murphy 2015) seeks to combat fatphobia through Willowdean and her friends. She is a positive representation of a fat girl living in a thin world.

Cultural Perception of Fatness in YAL

The focus of this chapter was to determine how Murphy's novels resist the cultural perception of fatness and how the books themselves act as an avenue for change. Over the course of the four novels, Murphy actively disrupts the fat quest (Shelton, 2016). Murphy utilizes counter-storytelling to actively engage with all three methods of disrupting the fat quest: (1) frustrating it; (2) talking back to it; and (3) not engaging it at all. In this chapter, I briefly define the fat quest and counter-storytelling, then move into Murphy's key moments that align with each category of the fat quest and how she works to disrupt it, and I conclude with how Murphy situates her books as artifacts of fat activism.

What is the Fat Quest?

Weight loss continues to be at the center of cultural constructions as body privilege remains the dominant narrative. As Kwan (2010) explains, like “structures that privilege whiteness, cultural and social structures privilege the thin, or at least what has been deemed a ‘normal’-sized body” (p. 146). Those persons who align with the normal-sized body construct possess “an invisible package of unearned assets that [they] can take for granted on a daily basis” (p. 147). Traditionally, body privilege has been propagated through the pages of young adult literature, as fatness is represented as “shame, unhappiness, or an unhealthy lifestyle” (Amato, 2019, p. 2). Averill (2016) pinpoints how YA novels perpetuate “thin-thinking” which “describes the dominant viewpoint [...] embraces the notions of thin-privilege and fat-phobia or fat-hate. From this worldview, thin is understood as necessary for life achievement” (p. 15). Sustaining this social narrative does not allow for productive conversations or authentic representations of fat voices.

When YAL novels push thin-thinking, Shelton (2016) suggests authors are engaging in the master narrative of fatness in YAL, which she deems the fat quest, “a culturally constructed set of steps a fat protagonists must take before he/she can be considered worthy” (p. 172). If the fat quest is the master narrative (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012) in YAL, then YAL maintains life is only joyous when thin, and worth is only attained with thin; life, otherwise, is miserable (Shelton, 2016). According to Shelton (2016), there are nine steps in the fat quest that a character must experience to “be considered human enough, thin enough, and worthy enough of dreams and quests that ‘normal’ teen protagonists get to undertake” (p. 180). These steps are:

- A. The character is identified as overweight
- B. The character suffers because of his/her weight

- C. A person, circumstance, or epiphany forces the character out of his/her "destructive" pattern
- D. The character notices through nonmirrored ways (the fit of clothes, sight of toes, etc.) that he/she is losing weight
- E. Life begins to look up for the character; he/she begins to exhibit self-confidence and/or do things he/she never would have dared to do before
- F. A person or circumstance threatens to derail the character's journey (he/she may fall off the diet wagon)
- G. The character overcomes the obstacle and continues to lose weight
- H. The character begins to experience or fully enters the able social location (the realm of the thin)
- I. The character is celebrated for becoming thin, and the reader feels that the character is much better off (p. 173)

The fat quest others the fat character, though the novel centers their story. The focus of the narrative structure is to get the character to an entry point in the accepted social location – the thin world. Shelton identifies three ways in which a novel can challenge the fat quest: (1) to frustrate it – encouraging the reader to reconsider their beliefs about fat characters; (2) to talk back to it – allows the reader to experience body-positivity; and (3) to never engage in it – the narrative structure has little to do with weight (Shelton, 2016). Murphy uses counter-storytelling to engage with each of these disruptions.

Activism through Counter-Storytelling

Scholars, when engaging in activism or resistance, can engage in counter-storytelling to disrupt dominant narratives. Counter-storytelling is a “method of telling the stories of those

people whose experiences are not often told [...] a tool for exposing, analyzing, and challenging the majoritarian stories [...] which] can shatter complacency [...] and] challenge the dominant discourse” (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002, p. 32). Attributed to Critical Race Theory (CRT), (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012), counter-storytelling is employed to challenge master narratives surrounding race and racial privilege (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002). In Fat Studies, counter-storytelling appears in the call for exemplifying the fat voice. Ellise Smith (n.d.) created *Fatness Fiction*, an online platform sharing the “journey of counter-storytelling pertaining to larger bodies of society.” Schoppelrei (2019) analyzes poet Rachel Wiley for her work in “creating counterhegemonic stories and dismantling oppressive structures” (p. 84) regarding the “spectrum of hypervisibility and hyperinvisibility” of fatness p. (76). By amplifying fat voices through counter-storytelling, as Smith and Wiley do, we can displace, disrupt, and dismantle the fat master narrative.

In fiction, authors become “critical storytellers” (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012, p. 48) when they “use counterstories [sic] to challenge, displace, or mock these pernicious narratives and beliefs” (p. 49). Delgado and Stefancic indicate

Some of the critical storytellers believe that stories also have a valid destructive function. Society constructs the social world through a series of tacit agreements mediated by images, pictures, tables, blog postings, and other scripts. Much of what we believe is ridiculous, self-serving, or cruel but is not perceived to be so at the time. Attacking embedded preconceptions that marginalize others and conceal their humanity is a legitimate function of all fiction. (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012, p. 48)

Critical Race scholars seek to dismantle the institutional structures that maintain oppression (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002). The use of counter-storytelling in CRT aims to share the stories of

marginalized voices to disrupt the master narrative. This connects counter-storytelling as a method of disruption to Fat Studies and Fat Standpoint Theory (Cooper Stoll & Thouné, 2020; Pausé, 2020). In line with Fat Standpoint Theory, counter-storytelling focuses on giving a voice to fat people oppressed by institutional fat-biases. Telling an authentic story from the fat person's perspective disrupts cultural constructs and social metanarratives that locate fat persons as lesser. Murphy provides us with productive representations of fat characters because she centers their stories. By centering complex characters who happen to be fat, Murphy's counter-storytelling directly opposes the fat quest's notion that thin is the only way to live.

Frustrating the Fat Quest

Shelton (2016) situates frustrating the fat quest within Iser's (1974/1980, 1978/1980) reader response theory. As Chapter 2 explains, Iser (1974/1980, 1978/1980) posits when a reader transacts with a text, the reader is left with gaps, known as indeterminates, the reader must fill in to fully comprehend the text. Shelton (2016) implies frustrating the fat quest lies in these indeterminates. To successfully frustrate the fat quest, a novel must elicit "[e]xperience-through-reading":

The text sends [the readers'] anticipations/expectations back to them and makes them reexamine what they had decided about a character or an event. Readers then reflect on what they have read, at which point possibilities that had been hidden or obscured before, usually by their own bias in predictions, come to the foreground. Suddenly they are engaging in a much richer anticipation. In fact, it is here, in the middle of a dynamic reexamining of what will and should happen, that readers encounter the unique position where biases and prejudices can be altered through experiencing an "other" they might never encounter otherwise. (p. 182)

For Shelton, the indeterminates the readers must fill in are their own preconceived notions regarding fat experience. When their own understandings do not align with the material on the page, they must reexamine these notions. Positive representations of subverting the fat quest stimulate critical thinking and therein, change.

To achieve critical thinking and change, Murphy utilizes counter-storytelling. The four books selected for this study all emphasize fat is not bad through the plots of the stories. In traditional YAL, fat characters “can get the girl or boy” if they follow the fat quest (Shelton, 2016). Murphy frustrates this concept by interweaving romance among the subplots of each text. Willowdean, Millie, Faith, and Waylon all mention how their bodies are not reflected in the pages of the books they read or the shows they watch, calling attention to the lack of fat representation across the media. In the acknowledgements for *Pumpkin* (Murphy, 2021a), she even admits to wanting a story where the fat characters “just wanted to take up space and find love,” so she wrote it. Although each book may not focus on love as the main plot, Murphy does provide readers with love stories showcasing fat lovers. Willowdean, Millie, and Faith all experience reciprocated romantic attraction for the first time, while Waylon learns what it means to love someone rather than be someone’s lustful secret. And though weight does play a small factor in the protagonists’ insecurities, it is not a deterrent for the potential partner.

Setting the Scene by Addressing the Stereotype

Before actively frustrating the fat quest by sharing each character’s burgeoning love story, Murphy addresses the stereotypes surrounding fat people: fat persons are unattractive, undesirable, and desexualized (Harris, 1990; Regan 1996; Pearce, Boergers, & Prinstein, 2002; Chen & Brown, 2012). In *Puddin’* (Murphy, 2018), as Millie is parsing out her feelings for Malik and trying to understand their exchanges via online messenger, she likens it to a good

book, “the kind that makes you feel like you’ve swallowed fireflies – except this time I’m the main character of the book. I’m the love interest! I’m the girl who gets the guy!” (p. 134). She emphasizes the importance of this experience because “girls like [her]? You don’t find [them] in fairy tales or on the covers of romance novels” (p. 134). Millie’s lament is in direct response to fat characters not being written as love interests in contemporary YAL fiction. While she has read books that document the feelings of budding romance, she has not seen herself reflected in the pages.

Willowdean and Waylon step outside the realm of fiction to discuss the social constructions of fat romance. Willowdean waffles with her attraction to Bo. She knows how she feels about him, and she knows he cares for her; however, she cannot get past the idea that, as Hannah iterates, “guys like Bo don’t date girls like” her and Willowdean. She worries that no one “else will understand what [Bo] sees in her” (Murphy, 2015, p. 308). Society has made her believe that fat and skinny people do not belong together; therefore, she and Bo cannot be in a happy relationship. Waylon (Murphy 2021) has similar concerns about his budding relationship with Tucker, who is a football player, fit, and handsome; therefore, as a fat, femme, gay man, Waylon worries he is not attractive enough to get Tucker’s attention. He echoes Willowdean’s sentiment as he laments,

The only gay guys anyone fawns over online are ripped with like twelve-pack abs or whatever [...] when you're gay, if you want to be the object of anyone's desire, you better have washboard abs and a phone full of thirst traps [...] Being fat is hard enough without adding gay guy to the equation. (p. 87)

Willowdean and Waylon’s concerns align with the master narrative surrounding fat love. As the master narrative associates romance with thin privilege, both Willowdean and Waylon believe

that because of their bodies, they are not seen as attractive. Waylon complicates the master narrative even further due to his intersectional identities – as he is fat and gay. Neither one of them believe they deserve romance because society has ousted them due to their size.

Murphy turns this concept on its head during one of the monthly sleepovers in *Puddin'* (2018). As Willowdean, Millie, Amanda, Hannah, Ellen, and Callie sit around sharing stories, Millie brings up Malik which spurs a conversation regarding first kisses. Millie, after sharing that she has, in fact, kissed a few guys while at fat camp suggests the guys “acted like [she] should be so lucky to kiss them. Like they were doing [her] a favor” (p. 209). This comment leads the girls to a very relevant conversation supporting Willowdean’s concerns in *Dumplin'* (2015).

Regarding fat romance:

“It’s like people get in their heads that fat people can only date fat people, which is also annoying.”

“Yes! Most guys treated me like I was their only shot at love. It didn’t help that the guy-to-girl ratio was like one to ten.” [...]

“That’s how it felt with Mitch sometimes,” says Willowdean. [...]

“It’s like if I date a guy like him [read fat],” she continues, “people will think, ‘oh of course, two fatties together. At least they’re not contaminating the gene pool with their fatness.’ And that just pisses me off. Then people see me with Bo and they’re like ‘Well, what kind of favor does he owe her to pretend he’s her boyfriend?’” (Murphy, 2018, p. 209)

In this brief exchange between Willowdean and Millie, Murphy highlights how society relegates fat relationships. “Contaminating the gene pool with their fatness” is particularly significant as it reiterates the notion that fatness is bad, and if fat people date/engage with fat people, others are

not subjected to their badness. Ellen responds in a very progressive and productive way: she “groans, throwing her hands up in the air. ‘Why can’t you date whoever the hell you want – or no one! – without people making assumptions?’” (p. 209). Ellen’s quote pushes back against the master narrative, not only for fat people, but for anyone who does not follow the heteronormative tendencies of Western society. Though not present until *Pumpkin* (Murphy, 2021a), Waylon’s intersectional identity is also addressed. There are several characters in the Clover City trilogy who identify as queer, not only does Murphy address fat love in Ellen’s statement, but she is also subverting the heteronormative master narrative.

Fat Kids in Love

After addressing the lack of representation in fiction and challenging the master narrative, Murphy moves to depicting fat love. Though the driving plot of *Dumplin’* (Murphy, 2015) is Willowdean’s involvement in the Miss Teen BlueBonnet pageant and her relationship with her mother, her love story plays a prominent role in the forward progression of the novel. When we first meet Willowdean and Ellen, after a day at the pool, Ellen’s boyfriend, Tim, picks her up for work. They embrace, and Willowdean mentions not being jealous of what they have, but instead, wishes she had someone too, “a person to kiss hello” (p. 3). Not long after, we are introduced to Bo, the cute guy Willowdean works with at Harpy’s Restaurant. We learn quickly that Willowdean is harboring a “hideous crush” on him (p. 7). Within the first twenty-five pages of the novel, Murphy is already establishing fat persons as sexual beings. Willowdean fantasizes about Bo’s lips as he sucks on a lollipop, and she admits his lips are “something [she] would very much like to taste” (p. 23). As her and Bo’s relationship blossoms, they share several passionate make out sessions, some behind the restaurant and others in Bo’s truck. Their hands roam all over each other’s bodies as they explore the sexual side of their relationship.

Unfortunately, Willowdean is insecure about her body and how people will see her and Bo together. Bo, in confronting her about not wanting to be his girlfriend, he says “I like you. I think I might even feel a lot more than that for you, Willowdean. [...] It’s you. You’re the one that drives me crazy” (p. 317). Bo’s attraction to Willowdean is not indicative of her weight. His feelings toward her are genuine and unconditional. However, she cannot comprehend why someone who looks like Bo – tall, thin, and handsome – would want someone like her. Bo counters her concerns with, ““Willowdean Opal Dickson, you are beautiful. Fuck anyone who’s ever made you feel anything less”” (p. 318). He wants her to realize he sees her as attractive. Murphy does not have Willowdean engage in any kind of physical transformation to earn Bo’s affection. Bo sees her as beautiful without attributing attraction to weight loss as the fat quest would suggest.

In *Puddin’* (Murphy, 2018), Murphy is less concerned with social acceptance as she tells Millie and Malik’s story. Where Bo was vocal about what he wanted with Willowdean, Malik is more reserved and distant. At night, during their online conversations, he openly flirts and engages with Millie, but at school, he is more aloof. Millie worries Malik’s hot and cold actions mean he is ashamed of being attracted to a fat girl. When Millie gives him a little push – “Either you talk to me in person the way you talk to me through this screen or you don’t talk to me at all” (p. 175) – Malik opens up and admits he does, in fact, have feelings for Millie, but he’s shy and tends to “overthink every little thing” (p. 178). With clear evidence that their attraction is mutual, Millie makes the first move and kisses Malik. At the end of the evening, as she is coming down from the high of hers and Malik’s first kiss, she realizes “[h]e said he liked me – with his mouth! Then he used that same mouth to kiss me. After I kissed him first, which – OH MY GOSH – I’m realizing is a thing I did” (emphasis in original, p. 188). Their relationship

begins. For most of the book, after this moment, Millie and Malik have a relatively easy relationship. Their relationship is not attached to body weight concerns or fear of social discrimination. The only threat to their relationship is Millie's mom, who is convinced that happiness is only found when thin.

For Waylon, in *Pumpkin* (Murphy, 2021a), his relationship with Tucker is much more of a slow burn romance. Unlike Bo and Malik, Tucker is more covert in sharing his affection toward Waylon. After being paired together for the prom court, Waylon and Tucker work to complete the tasks required for participation in the race. Because of past experiences with Tucker and the fact he is not openly out, Waylon is skeptical about Tucker's behaviors. Tucker's flirting starts small with comments like "I never said you weren't good with your hands" (p. 112) and "it matters to me" when Waylon questions if he really cares about the authenticity of his audition tape for *The Fiercest of Them All*. When they decide to do oil changes for their service project, Tucker makes first contact by reaching under the table and touching Waylon's thigh. This is the first time Waylon thinks there may be something between them. Their relationship changes completely the night of the party at Kyle's house. As everyone is in the pool, Tucker convinces Waylon to get in, clothes and all. This is when Tucker makes his move. Waylon thinks "This isn't him just tugging on my wrist. This isn't some indecipherable touch. This is his lips on my neck. His lips. I can barely breathe. I want to kiss him" (p. 229). In this one moment, Murphy not only solidifies Tucker's attraction to Waylon, but she also sexualizes Waylon and Tucker's relationship. As Waylon points out, the moments leading up to the pool scene can be interpreted as accidental, but kissing him in a crowd of people sends a clear message of attraction. Though it takes the remainder of the book for Waylon and Tucker to become an official couple, it is evident from their first exchange at the prom court meeting that they are going to end up

together. All three of the Clover City trio find love in their respective stories. Murphy wants readers to see that fatness does not mean love is impossible. The three suitors, Bo, Malik, and Tucker do not concern themselves with the weights of Willowdean, Millie, or Waylon. They simply fall in love unconditionally.

Talking Back to the Fat Quest

Murphy structures the narratives of *Dumplin'* (Murphy, 2015), *Puddin'* (Murphy, 2018), and *Pumpkin* (2021a) to be character driven. Willowdean, Millie, and Waylon are all self-identified as fat, and while they occasionally engage in negative self-concept regarding their weight, their stories counter the master narrative. Murphy's novels place the emphasis on the experiences and aspirations of fat characters at the core of each story. Willowdean wants nothing more than to prove her worth to her mother. Millie wants to chase her dreams of becoming a journalist and abandon her mother's incessant attempts to combat her waistline. Waylon simply wants to survive senior year and move to Austin to live his life out, loud, and proud. They should not have to physically change to reach these goals. Therein, lies the fat quest. It emphasizes thin is the way to reach happiness. For a novel to talk back to the fat quest, it must show the "dangers of buying into [...] fat shaming" (Shelton, 2016, p. 184). In each of the characters' lives, Murphy includes a supporting character that has experience adhering to the fat quest that cause them to exhibit implicit or explicit fat-bias. Murphy not only places the character in the story, but she also allows Willowdean, Millie, and Waylon to confront the character's implicit or explicit biases. Murphy's use of counter-storytelling creates a place for her characters to impart upon the opposing character, and the audience, that a shrinking waistline is not the be all end all.

Although Willowdean and Millie endure fat-bias at school through bullying, most of their strife is located at home because of their mothers' views of fatness. Rosie Dickson,

Willowdean's mom, was a "big girl" before she "trimmed down before high school," entered the Miss Teen Bluebonnet Pageant, won, and as an adult, became the director (Murphy, 2015, p. 133). To commemorate the occasion, she wears the same dress year after year and adheres to a strict regimen to guarantee it fits come pageant season (Murphy, 2015). Mrs. Michalchuk, Millie's mom, attended the same fat camp Millie references throughout *Puddin'* (Murphy, 2018), Daisy Ranch. During her time there, Mrs. Michalchuk lost "forty-four pounds" (p. 57) and fit in a size ten, found her husband the summer after her weight loss, and vowed to never be fat again. Unlike Rosie, Mrs. Michalchuk gained most of her weight back and struggles with fad diets to lose weight. Rosie and Mrs. Michalchuk both engage in fat discrimination regarding their daughters. During pageant season, Rosie puts herself on a diet, and as Willowdean points out, when Rosie is on a diet, "so is everyone else" (Murphy, 2015, p. 12) – "Protein bars in fourth grade. Weight Watchers in fifth. Salads in second" (p. 313). Mrs. Michalchuk is always working on new and inventive ways to cook dinner, such as "zucchini alfredo or mashed potatoes made of cauliflower" (Murphy, 2018, p. 56). Neither Willowdean nor Millie particularly enjoys their mothers' attempts at forcing healthy eating on them. Millie goes as far as to "wonder who [her] mom would be without all the fad diets and calorie counting and the absurd workout plans" (p. 138). As both girls are well into their teens, their mothers' behavior is not new, but they deal with it because it is their normal. However, they do internalize it, and as a result, they struggle with seeing themselves beyond the fat girls that their mothers despise, which impacts their relationships.

Additionally, both Rosie and Mrs. Michalchuk project their own insecurities onto their daughters. Rosie lost her sister, Lucy, from a heart attack before the start of the novel. As a result, much of Rosie's critique of Willowdean's physique is directly related to her own fears of

losing Willowdean like she lost Lucy. She puts diet shows on television, shares success stories of friends who lost weight and kept it off, and she even “inventor[ies] the pantry” to monitor Willowdean’s food – all for the sake of Willowdean’s happiness (Murphy, 2015, p. 133). Rosie even chastises Willowdean for idolizing Lucy: ““I wish you wouldn’t idolize her so much [...] She’d still be here, you know. If she’d just lost the weight” (p. 133). It is in this moment that Willowdean comes to realize that her mom sees her body as “the villain [...] a prison, keeping the better, thinner version of [her] locked away” (p. 133). This same sentiment is echoed in Mrs. Michalchuk’s actions and words toward Millie (Murphy, 2019). Mrs. Michalchuk insists Millie return to Daisy Ranch for a ninth summer in a row and swears “This is the year, baby. I can feel it” (p. 138). She goes as far as to print out the application, fill it out, and without Millie’s permission, mail it in with the deposit check. Mrs. Michalchuk emphasizes the “thin girl in [Millie] just waiting to get out” (p. 336). When the weight is lost, she will be happy and can do whatever her heart desires. Though Rosie is not as direct as Mrs. Michalchuk, both women imply that their daughters cannot be happy until they lose the excess weight holding them back.

Waylon, on the other hand, does not live in a fatphobic household. Instead, his size and shape are embraced by his family (Murphy, 2021a). The character who centers weight loss and exhibits implicit fat-bias is Kyle, his one-time friend, and now frenemy. Waylon describes his relationship with Kyle as “divided into two distinct chunks of time. BWL = before weight loss and AWL = after weight loss” (p. 86). For most of the novel, when Kyle addresses weight, he does so negatively. When at lunch with Waylon, Clem, and their friends, Kyle mentions being “bad over the weekend, so salads for” him, implying he overate and must compensate by eating salads (p. 63). When his boyfriend, Alex, counters with “a burger won’t kill you,” he snaps back with ““No [...] but it will make me fat again”” (p. 63). While Kyle does not direct his fat-hate

toward Waylon, Waylon is often irritated by it. Though Kyle believes he is supportive of Waylon, repeatedly he inadvertently villainizes Waylon's fatness. When Kyle finds out about Waylon's audition tape for *The Fiercest of them All*, he champions him for being "brave" and "putting himself out there like" he did because as a former "bigger" person, he understands "it's not easy for people like us" (p. 57) implying being fat is a deficit. Waylon distances himself from Kyle due to his implicit bias; however, Kyle is good friends with Waylon's twin sister, Clem, so escaping him is not as easy as he wishes it would be.

Discussion

In the analysis so far, the characters are contextualized within fat-biases. Murphy, however, does not stop at simply placing the characters in fatphobic environments. She allows them to push back against the narratives being disseminated. For Murphy, Rosie, Mrs. Michalchuk, and Kyle represent the master narrative in which fatness equates lesser than. The rhetoric each character engages in places Willowdean, Millie, and Waylon in the thin/fat binary. However, because she is talking back to the fat quest, Willowdean, Millie, and Waylon represent productive fat rhetoric – symbols for fat activism. Willowdean's activist moment occurs early in *Dumplin'* (Murphy, 2015) when she officially enters the Miss Teen BlueBonnet pageant. When Rosie discovers Willowdean and her friends are entering the pageant, Rosie exclaims "I don't want you to embarrass yourself [...] And more so, it's not fair to subject those girls to this. They'll be ridiculed Dumplin'" (p. 158). Whether she means to or not, Rosie is exhibiting implicit fat-bias by not wanting Willowdean to participate in the pageant so as not to "embarrass herself." Willowdean pushes back against her mother's bias by insisting that "If you don't sign that form, you're saying I'm not good enough. You're saying that most every girl in that room right now is prettier and more deserving than me. That's what you're telling me" (p. 158).

Equating pretty and deserving to the thin-centric language of thin and worthy, Willowdean actively challenges those beauty standards by entering the pageant. She places herself among the traditional contestants, thin and beautiful, calling for her mother, and readers, to see her as belonging among the beautiful contestants.

Throughout *Puddin'* (Murphy, 2018), Millie works toward her dreams of becoming a broadcast journalist, a historically thin-privileged career. Rather than supporting her daughter, Mrs. Michalchuk reiterates the same message: first lose weight, then chase dreams. Instead of a ninth year at Daisy Ranch, Millie applies to a journalism camp at the University of Texas, Austin. When Mrs. Michalchuk discovers her plans and refuses to let Millie fight for her dreams, she stands up to her:

“No. No.” My voice is soft but firm. “There’s no skinny girl trapped inside of me, Mom. Just like there’s not one in you. This ...” I grip my thighs and my thick arms. “This is me. And I’m done waiting to be someone else. I know what I want to do with my life. Isn’t that incredible? Some people wait their whole lives, figuring out who or what they want to be. But I know. [...] “I’m okay with this body no matter what package it comes in. I just wish you would be, too.” (pp. 336-337)

Unlike her mother who possesses fat self-hate, Millie accepts her fat as being a part of who she is. Her fat identity is embodied. She uses rhetoric that embraces her fat as part of her identity, rather than villainizing it. When she confronts her mother’s explicit fat-bias again at the end of the novel, insisting that she “can’t spend the rest of [her] life obsessing over diets and searching for the miracle fix” (p. 395), Murphy speaks through Millie, encouraging fat readers to embrace their bodies and encouraging non-fat readers to consider their own beliefs about fat and fatness. This allows readers to experience productive experiences of fat embodiment and acceptance.

Waylon (Murphy, 2021a) takes the same approach as Millie and confronts Kyle about his fat-bias by drawing his attention to it. Even though Kyle's fat-bias is often self-directed, Waylon informs him that he is hurting others by engaging in anti-fat rhetoric. He challenges him, saying "“You're not fat anymore. But some of us are and some of us are okay with it! My body contains me and that's what makes my body good. That's enough”" (p. 262). Waylon believes that people should be able to do whatever they want with their bodies. Kyle's rhetoric does not support that idea. Waylon asserts:

“Did you ever think about how all those times you talked about your former fat self, you were talking about me too? Every time you called yourself sad or in need of a lifestyle makeover, you weren't only talking about yourself. You were talking about everyone who looked like you. So, yeah. I'm not going to lie. You do things I think are annoying and silly, but the reason I cringe every time I see you is because when I see you, I see the person the world thinks I should be ... the person you think I should be.” (p. 263)

Waylon implies that Kyle's rhetoric is inflammatory because it implies the only way to exist is to be thin. Kyle is well-liked, he's the president of Prism, vice president of the student body, and a loving boyfriend – all identities he assumed after his weight-loss. Waylon even shares that Kyle's student body campaign featured his before-and-after pictures as a sign of dedication. Kyle found success through his transformation; therefore, he now fits into the thin majority and fears returning to the fat minority. Waylon challenging Kyle's implicit fatphobia calls attention to how other fat people or formerly fat people can be agents of fatphobia.

Section Summary

Looking back at the purpose of counter-storytelling in fiction, critical storytellers aim to disrupt master narratives (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002). To combat the dominant social framework

in which fat people are situated, Murphy tells Willowdean, Millie, and Waylon's stories. They do not focus on their need to lose weight to meet the social beauty standards set forth by the master narrative. In *YAL*, the fat quest is a set of rules fat characters must follow to be deemed successful. With Willowdean's, Millie's, and Waylon's stories, Murphy allows her characters to engage with characters who are actively exhibiting and/or spreading fat-bias. By employing counter-storytelling, she can situate her characters in opposition to the fat quest, and in doing so, actively engage is disrupting it.

Not Engaging with the Fat Quest

Unlike the *Dumplin'* (Murphy, 2015), *Puddin'* (Murphy, 2018), and *Pumpkin* (Murphy, 2021a), *Faith Taking Flight* (Murphy, 2020), from here on referred to as *Faith*, rarely engages in conversation regarding weight. To echo Machado (2017), *Faith* just gets to be. Of the four novels in this study, *Faith* is the least weight driven text. While there are mentions of weight, such as Miss Ella's "That's a sight I'd like to see. That girl running" (p. 32) and Faith mentioning cutting the tags out of her clothes so her classmates would not see what size she wears when she changes for PE, Murphy primarily focuses Faith's story on her own understanding of her abilities, grappling with her grandmother's dementia diagnosis, and navigating her burgeoning sexuality. She is simply telling the story of a fat girl living her life. In doing so, Murphy is not engaging with the fat quest (Shelton, 2016).

The central plot of *Faith* (Murphy, 2020) is Faith coming to terms with her ability to fly. As a result of her being identified as a psiote, a supernaturally gifted individual, and being activated at the Harbinger Foundation, Faith must learn what it means to be a superhero. After escaping the Harbinger Foundation, Faith keeps her abilities concealed, only flying occasionally and briefly. However, when animals and then people begin to go missing in Glenwood, she feels

compelled to solve the mystery. A longtime fan of comic books and popular culture, Faith believes she knows what it means to be a superhero, but she quickly learns she does not “quite know how to control” her flying (p. 66). She just knows that her flying ability feels like “currents of electricity constantly buzzing beneath the surface of [her] skin” (p. 66). Several times throughout the course of the novel, Faith questions whether she is worthy of her abilities, but not only does she learn to control her flight and master the landing, she finds her courage and decides to save the day as a true superhero would. As she prepares to save Ches, Colleen, and the animals being kept against their will at *The Grove* studios, Faith straps on her uniform, “high-waisted skinny jeans and white t-shirt with a homemade white cape with blue trim tied around [her] neck” (p. 300). She uses her love of the show to figure out the locked keypad on the door, saves Ches from the burning building by flying her through a window, and releases the animals from their cages and gets them to safety. Faith learns how to control her abilities and use them to save Glenwood. During her quest to become a superhero, Faith is not concerned with how her weight will impact her abilities. Her concerns lie in learning how to be a superhero, overcoming her fears, and figuring out how to save the day.

Amid trying to understand her superpowers, Faith also grapples with her grandmother’s early-stage dementia. Established early in the novel, Faith’s parents were killed in a car accident when she was young leaving her in the care of her paternal grandmother. Grandma Lou and Faith’s relationship is first of the secondary plotlines occurring in the story that impacts Faith’s faith in her superhero abilities. Faith begins noticing Grandma Lou’s behaviors are off, noting “tonight’s events with Grandma Lou linger like a fog. I feel it in the pit of my stomach [...] but I’m not brave enough to speak it out loud - scared that if I do, it might just be true” (p. 96). Murphy’s inclusion of Grandma Lou’s dementia locates the story in human emotion and

complicates Faith's journey as a superhero. When Grandma Lou goes missing after Faith goes out with friends, Faith questions her identity as a hero:

I'm no superhero. I'm no flying wonder. I'm just a girl stuck in a rinky-dink suburb, slowly losing whatever family she has left. Flying, no matter how high I go, will never solve the problems waiting for me on the ground, because the problem with flying is that eventually you have to land. (p. 225)

In her lamentation, Faith seems to understand flying is the easy part, insinuating she cannot escape her grounded life by flying. Her insecurities regarding her abilities are not related to her weight; they are directly connected to her fear of losing her grandmother. She spends her time watching over her grandmother and reading articles about possible cures and what it means to live with someone with dementia. Faith's struggles are relatable to anyone learning how to adapt to a new "normal." Fat or skinny, tall or short, human or superhuman, learning a loved one has an incurable disease impacts every facet of life.

Murphy also interweaves Faith's flourishing sexuality as a third part of her journey. Faith recognizes she is not solely attracted to men, nor solely attracted to women. Sexuality is a complex exploration as a teenager. Having never been in a relationship, she does not understand to whom she is attracted. On one hand, there is Johnny, Faith's friend and long-time crush from her journalism class. Matt and Ches, Faith's best friends, swear he has had a crush on her since freshman year. On the other hand, there is Dakota Ash, the hot, young television star of Faith's favorite show, *The Grove*, that has just moved to town with the show. After witnessing their first encounter, Ches exclaims "That Dakota girl [...] She was super gay for you" (p. 70). Faith admits "figuring out what exactly [her] sexual orientation is has felt a little more abstract. One thing [she] know[s] for sure is [she] feel[s] a spark with Johnny *and* Dakota. Very different kinds

of sparks” (emphasis in the original, p. 70). Faith is not sure how she identifies; she just knows she is attracted to both Johnny and Dakota. As she spends more time with Dakota, Faith feels herself understanding what it means to be attracted to someone on an intimate level. Their relationship grows, and she experiences her first kiss, first cuddle session, and first heartbreak. Toward the end of the novel, she can confidently reply to Grandma Lou’s ““And you know I wouldn’t think anything of it if you and Dakota were ... more than friends, right?”” with ““I have a feeling it won’t be the last time I have feelings for a girl. Or boy.”” (pp. 270-271). She is even able to joke with Grandma Lou when she refers to Faith’s response as being called “switch-hitting back in [her] day,” identifying her sexuality as either bisexual or pansexual (p. 270). Things with Dakota may have gone south, considering her association with Margaret, and the human experimentation happening on set, but her experiences with Dakota allowed her to explore her sexual preferences.

Discussion

When working with the fat quest, it is important to note that when a novel follows a pure fat quest structure, the fat quest “drives all character and plot development” (Shelton, 2016, p. 181). Using Shelton’s (2016) “Figure 1. The fat quest and its steps” (p. 173), as a model, Table 4 (see pages 152-153) places Murphy’s novels in conversation with the steps of the fat quest. The grayed areas denote where each text diverges from the fat quest. Clearly, all four books have protagonists that self-identify as fat; therefore, they appear to be fat quest texts. For *Faith* (Murphy, 2020), her alignment ends with the protagonist being identified as fat. From there, *Faith* engages in the superhero journey as Faith learns to control her abilities, grief as Faith comes to terms with Grandma Lou’s dementia, and burgeoning sexuality as Faith figures out how she identifies in terms of sexual orientation. There is no mention of her suffering due to her

weight, as Step B requires. Murphy does make mention of Willowdean, Millie, and Waylon suffering at the hands of Patrick Thomas, the bully that spans the Clover City trilogy. His taunting does not lead them to seek weight loss; instead, they push back against his fatphobic tendencies. Beyond Steps A and B, Willowdean, Millie, and Waylon's stories disrupt the fat quest. Murphy's counter-storytelling provides fat characters with stories that do equate physical transformation to happiness and worth.

As detailed in the analysis above, Murphy disrupts the fat quest by telling stories of complex teenagers who happen to be fat, existing in a thin-centric world. Their stories are not without complications. Willowdean's own internal fat-bias is evident in her discussions of Millie's fatness in the early pages of *Dumplin'* (Murphy, 2015). Millie, though she has broken out of the fat quest prior to her introduction, still struggles with what-ifs surrounding her weight and wonders if her mother is right (Murphy, 2018). Waylon grapples with his intersectional identities as a fat, femme, gay male in a very conservative West Texas town (Murphy, 2021a). Faith's story complicates the fat quest just by existing, as her story acknowledges her fatness but does not depend on it as a key plot point (Murphy, 2020). These aspects make the stories more realistic and relatable. Productive examples of fat protagonists, like Willowdean, Millie, Waylon, and Faith, "push the mainstream understanding of what is actually positive for teen readers – thin and fat alike" (Shelton, 2016, p. 187). Whether Murphy is subverting the fat quest, as seen in *Dumplin'* (2015), *Puddin'* (2018), and *Pumpkin* (2021a), or abandoning it completely, as seen in *Faith* (2020), her novels fit into a larger conversation about representation in YAL. As Murphy shares in her acknowledgement of *Pumpkin* (2021a), there is a growing number of artists and activists taking on fatphobia and "the conversation around bodies have changed astronomically" (acknowledgement). Authors are sharing stories where the fat characters experience life without

the need to lose weight or ascribe to thin-centric ideologies. Counter-stories showcasing productive representations of fat characters serve as tools for discussion that can spur constructive conversations that are non-confrontational.

An Avenue for Change

In addition to determining how Murphy's casts of characters push back against the cultural perception of fatness, this chapter also seeks to determine how the books act as an avenue for change. Murphy uses counter-storytelling to engage with the fat quest. Willowdean, Millie, and Waylon's stories allow Murphy to frustrate and talk back to the fat quest, and Faith's story completely abandons it. A long-supported trope in young adult fat fiction, the fat quest perpetuates the master narrative that fatness is equivalent to unworthy and lesser than. However, with characters like Willowdean, Millie, Waylon, and Faith, Murphy displaces the fat quest and offers productive representations of fat teenagers, which situates her works as artifacts of fat activism. She does this in two ways: (1) by engaging in micro fat activism through her characters; and (2) creating and publishing narratives that disrupt the master narrative which act as cultural activism.

Micro-Analysis

In conducting the micro-analysis detailed above, it is evident that Murphy is engaging in micro activism. Micro fat activism (1) takes place in everyday spaces; (2) generally performed by 1-2 people; (3) requires few material resources; (4) does not rely on collective action; and (5) generally involves very small acts undertaken in isolation (p. 78). By pushing back against the fat quest through Willowdean, Millie, and Waylon's actions and speeches, Murphy is engaging in micro fat activism (Cooper, 2021). Willowdean, Millie, and Waylon address fat phobia in their homes and at school, and by standing up to those characters who focus on weight loss, they are

“drawing people’s attention to micro-oppression [...] in an unthreatening way and bringing fat consciousness” (p. 79). In no way are they making a big scene that attracts a crowd of people of any size. Instead, they are engaging with just the one person who is implicitly or explicitly exhibiting fat-bias. Willowdean and Waylon take advantage of one-on-one conversations to combat Rosie and Kyle’s implicit fat-biases. And while Millie’s dad and Callie are present in her confrontation with her mom, Millie’s message only addresses her mother’s explicit fat-biases. These small acts of activism occur in isolation but carry big ramifications for the characters on the receiving end of the activism: Rosie allows Willowdean to compete in the pageant with the understanding she will not give her any breaks which leads to their reconciliation, Mrs. Michalchuk begrudgingly lets Millie go to Austin to refute her denial into the journalism camp at the University of Texas at Austin, and Kyle apologizes for ostracizing Waylon through his own self-hate. Each character’s push back against the fat quest left at least one character’s opinions changed. Readers reading the books and experiencing Willowdean’s, Millie’s, and Waylon’s stories can experience fat acceptance and witness productive conversations with which they can engage in real life.

Meta-Analysis

As we zoom out and conduct a meta-analysis, Murphy’s books act as fat activism through cultural work (Cooper, 2021). Cooper (2021) defines cultural work as “cultural production [that] encompasses art and photography that makes fat embodiment and fat activist community visible” (p. 68). Fat representation in fiction is paramount. Stinson (2009) argues fat representation allows fat and non-fat readers to “cultivate the ability to make skilled and daring imaginative leaps” (p. 234). This echoes Shelton’s (2016) argument that reading novels that subvert the fat quest act as entry points for readers to experience fat acceptance. *Dumplin’* (2015), *Puddin’*

(2018), and *Pumpkin* (2021a) function as cultural activism as they detail the romance of fat characters. Murphy pushes back against the master narrative that fat people are unattractive, undesirable, and desexualized with her counter-storytelling. In frustrating the fat quest, she produces works of art that center complex characters who find love regardless of their size. *Faith* (Murphy, 2020) functions solely as cultural work. Through Faith's story abandoning the fat quest, Murphy tells a complex story of a fat girl grappling with her intersecting identities as a superhero, a granddaughter, and a member of the LGBTQ+ community. Faith is a character to which fat readers can relate, and which offers a different portrait of a superhero. It stimulates conversation regarding intersectionality, as it is not a note that ignores her weight, but it does not depend on her weight for forward progression (Shelton, 2016). Through these four books, Murphy opens a door for readers – thin and fat – to discuss the master narratives surrounding fatness and fictional portrayals. It challenges their understanding and elicits critical thinking regarding fatphobia and fat-bias.

Summary

The purpose of this chapter was to look critically at the four texts identified in Chapter Three to determine how the protagonists/casts of characters resist the cultural perception of fatness and how Murphy's books act as an avenue for awareness and change. Using critical content analysis, I found that Murphy frustrates, talks back to, and abandons the fat quest (Shelton, 2016). She does so by using counter-storytelling (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012). In using counter-storytelling to displace the fat quest, she engages in two types of fat activism: micro fat activism – as seen in the conversations and actions of Willowdean, Millie, and Waylon, and cultural activism – as seen in the mere existence of books centering fat characters living complex lives. Chapter Six will provide implications for educators, first by defining fat pedagogy, and

then discussing its placement in the secondary English classroom. It will conclude with future directions for research regarding the fat quest, fat representation, and fat activism in YAL.

CHAPTER 6: DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

The purpose of this qualitative study was to (1) employ critical autoethnography to understand my cultural construction regarding fatness and explore my transition from the Cycle of Socialization (Harro, 2008a) to the Cycle of Liberation (Harro, 2008b); and (2) conduct a critical content analysis to survey the representations of fat experience in Julie Murphy's *Dumplin'* (2015), *Puddin'* (2018), *Faith Taking Flight* (2020), and *Pumpkin* (2021a). The research questions that guided this study were:

1. What was my experience reading Murphy's (2015) *Dumplin'* as an adult reader of YAL? What did the texts do for me as a fat reader?
2. How do the protagonists/casts of characters resist the dominant negative cultural perception of fatness? How do her books act as an avenue for awareness and change?

To answer these questions, I situated the study in Fat Standpoint Theory (Cooper Stoll & Thoune, 2020; Pausé, 2020). Fat Standpoint Theory lies at the convergence of Feminist Standpoint Theory (Hartsock, 1983; Smith, 1987; Harding, 1997) and Fat Studies (Wann, 2009; Cooper, 2010; Brown, 2016); both theories emphasize the significance of centering lived experiences in research. In this chapter, I review the findings in Chapter Four and Chapter 5, provide the critical elements for fat pedagogy to suggest its implementation in the secondary English classroom, and conclude with limitations and directions for future research.

Answering the Research Questions

Chapter Four sought to autoethnographically explore how Murphy's (2015) *Dumplin'* reflected my own experiences as a fat female. Following the proposed "Doing Autoethnography" methodology (see Chapter Three or Figure 2 on page 155 and Figure 3 on page 156), I conducted

a memory-mining activity in which I wrote down six important events that led to my construction as a fat woman. Of those six, I narrowed it down to three instances, one in middle school and two in high school. Using Harro's (2008a) Cycle of Socialization, I detailed how the three moments acted as institutional socialization and led to negative self-concept and weight cycling that I continued well into my late twenties. The autoethnography then explained how encountering *Dumplin'* (Murphy, 2015) acted as a critical incident that allowed me to break free of the Cycle of Socialization and break into the Cycle of Liberation (Harro, 2008b). I provided textual examples indicating responses as an uninformed reader and as an informed reader. I concluded the chapter by recognizing that I am in the "waking up" stage of Harro's (2008b) Cycle of Liberation, as I am learning about Fat Studies, productive vs. positive representations, and working my way to reaching out and building a community of scholarly acquaintances. While the purpose of Chapter Four was to determine how the novel represented my own experiences as a fat woman, it ended up being more of an exploration of my identity and how the novel impacted it. The process was far more vulnerable than I expected it to be, but it was cathartic as well.

Chapter Five detailed the findings of the critical content analysis seeking to understand how Murphy's protagonists resisted the cultural perception of fatness and how the books act as an avenue for awareness and change. Regarding the first part of the question, the findings show that Murphy is actively engaging with and challenging the fat quest (Shelton, 2016), a set of rules a protagonist must follow to be deemed worthy in traditional representations of fatness in YAL. Shelton (2016) offers three methods for engagement with the fat quest: (1) frustrating it; (2) talking back to it; and (3) abandoning it. After conducting the critical content analysis, it was evident Murphy is frustrating the fat quest by including romance as a subplot in the *Dumplin'*

(Murphy, 2015), *Puddin'* (Murphy, 2018), and *Pumpkin* (Murphy, 2021a). In doing so, she challenges the master narrative set forth by society claiming fat people are unattractive, undesirable, and desexualized (Harris, 1990; Regan 1996; Pearce, Boergers, & Prinstein, 2002; Chen & Brown, 2012). Additionally, she talks back to the fat quest in *Dumplin* (Murphy, 2015), *Puddin'* (Murphy, 2018), and *Pumpkin* (Murphy, 2021a) by including characters who exhibit implicit and or explicit bias. Willowdean, Millie, and Waylon have the opportunity to confront the character to challenge their bias. Unlike *Dumplin* (Murphy, 2015), *Puddin'* (Murphy, 2018), and *Pumpkin* (Murphy, 2021a), *Faith Taking Flight* (Murphy, 2020) abandons the fat quest by not situating Faith in a fatphobic environment. While Faith does make mention of her weight, it does not deter her from embracing her superhero identity, nor does it impact the way she handles her grandmother's dementia or her burgeoning sexuality. Murphy challenges the fat quest through counter-storytelling (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012). Counter-storytelling is a tool critical scholars can use to dismantle oppressive master narratives. Instead of following the fat quest, Murphy offers complex stories about complex teenagers who happen to be fat. None of them seek physical transformation to appease the master narrative. Additionally, in allowing Willowdean, Millie, and Waylon to confront the implicit and explicit biases of the person in their story, Murphy engages in micro fat activism (Cooper, 2021), a type of fat activism involving one to two people, occurs on a small scale, and does not include large actions. The existence of the books also acts as cultural fat activism, (Cooper, 2021) as the simple act of publishing a counter story centering on fat characters challenges the social norm. The critical content analysis ultimately proved that Murphy's *Dumplin* (Murphy, 2015), *Puddin'* (Murphy, 2018), *Faith Taking Flight* (Murphy, 2020), and *Pumpkin* (Murphy, 2021a) are productive representations of fat YAL characters and novels.

A Direction for Change: Implications for Classroom Teachers

Vasquez, Janks, and Comber (2019) offer critical literacy as a tool that can be both “pleasurable and transformational” and “pedagogical and transgressive” (p. 300). As readers engage with a text, they are “making sense of the sociopolitical systems through which we live our lives and [question] these systems” (p. 306). YA continues to push boundaries and share stories that question dominant narratives; therefore, including fat characters to disrupt the narrative is key. Previously, as Nolfi (2011) emphasized,

Many authors include fat characters only to further the agency and growth of the main characters (read thin), to provide instruction about bullying, or as a vehicle for character development through the magic of weight loss [...] Often the fat girl is the sidekick, sexless and hungry or desperately oversexed. The fat boy is sloppy, grotesque, and lonely; sometimes he’s the funny man. Either way, fat characters are pathologized.

In the current YA trend, more fat characters are written as strong, embodied characters. For example, Amato (2019) called for more representation, wanting “readers to see fat women, even if it is in fiction, living joyfully, and either free from or actively resisting the societal stigmas associated with fatness” (p. 2). Across Murphy’s novels, she does just that. Each character lives his/her life joyfully.

Returning to Harro’s (2018a) Cycle of Socialization, the key to breaking the cycle and entering the Cycle of Liberation (Harro, 2019b) is identifying the direction for change. Many Fat Studies scholars are calling for fat pedagogy (Cameron & Russell, 2016) that works to dismantle the social stigmas surrounding weight and fat. Educators across disciplines are working to create educational spaces that not only identify but combat social injustices, such as gender, race, class, and sexuality (Cameron & Watkins, 2018). However, little work is being done to improve the

educational experiences of fat students; therefore, “there is an urgent need to identify curricular examples and pedagogical approaches” (p. 1) to facilitate the discussion on body weight, shape, and size. Fat pedagogies are being designed through “progressive curricular design” (Royce, 2016, p. 23), but there is still room for growth.

Cameron and Russell’s (2016) *The Fat Pedagogy Reader: Challenging Weight-Based Oppression through Critical Education* offers not only the current state of critical fat pedagogy but also calls for expansion recognizing there is still room for improvement and engagement. In their “Conclusion: A Fat Pedagogy Manifesto,” Cameron and Russell offer the following list as important elements to fat pedagogy⁸:

- Fat pedagogy must improve the lived experiences of fat persons
- Fat pedagogy should be rooted in research and scholarship and should engage in interdisciplinary conversation and collaboration
- There should be discourse between scholars and practitioners creating accessibility
- Fat pedagogy should build on the lived experience so fat persons and those who grapple with thin privilege and wish to seek critical self-reflection as a tool to dismantle weight oppression
- While fat pedagogy should span K12 and higher education, there is no one-size-fits-all approach. The pedagogy should match learning environment
- Fat pedagogy should embrace the educational theories already in practice, especially those that tackle dismantling oppression in a caring and compassionate manner

⁸ The following list is summation from Cameron & Russell (2016): Conclusion: A Fat Pedagogy Manifesto

- Fat pedagogy should raise awareness and incite critical thinking
- Fat pedagogy must acknowledge the emotions related to fat oppression and must work within the “affective turn” occurring across research disciplines
- Fat pedagogy requires scholars and educators to push beyond their own knowledge and continually engage in reflexivity (pp. 254-255)

The scholars included in Cameron and Russell’s (2016) anthology provide frameworks for conducting fat pedagogy across disciplines. A good representation of fat pedagogy at work is *Fat Fashion Pedagogy* (Christel, 2018). In an attempt to combat the “thin-centric orientation” of fashion education (p. 47), Christel proposed a framework that relies on connection, critical reflection, and activism through attention to language, equipment, and physical environment (see Table 6 on 159 for descriptions). She wants her students to engage in critical discourse that “enhance[s] learning and social transformation” (p. 51) and encourages other academics to consider the role FFP may play in other interdisciplinary fields.

While fat pedagogies are making their way into college classrooms and coursework, there is still a lack of representation at the primary and secondary level. Focus in elementary and secondary schools tends to be on physical education classes (Alberga & Russell-Mayhew, 2016; Li & Rukavina, 2009). There is little discussion of fatness in the English classroom. With the push for diversity, inclusion, equity, and inclusion, educators should consider how fat bodies are being represented in their classrooms. Using Cameron and Russell’s (2016) elements of fat pedagogy, particularly fat pedagogy must improve the lived experiences of fat persons and fat pedagogy should raise awareness and incite critical thinking, teachers can assess how they are including or excluding fat voices. Amato (2019) offers the following set of questions to start the conversation:

1. What truths does your text selection and/or classroom library portray about fat characters?
2. Do the fat characters in your texts, as Machado (2017) muses in her essay, “get to just be”?
3. What questions can you post to students to support them in taking critical stances towards readings of fat bodies in young adult literature, in the media, and within their social circles? (p. 19)

Amato’s questions act as a jumping off point for determining how curricula, libraries, and classroom libraries are exhibiting implicit and/or explicit fat-bias. By engaging in this conversation, educators can make strides toward being more inclusive in what they are offering students.

Limitations and Future Research

I acknowledge that there are limitations to the critical content analysis conducted in Chapter Five. In determining the books to analyze for this study, I chose to focus on four of Julie Murphy’s novels. By focusing solely on Murphy’s novels, I excluded diverse representations of fat characters. Though she does include representations of male and female fatness, straight and queer fatness, there is a lack of representation regarding bodies of color, representations of religion and fatness, and representations of disability and fatness. Additionally, because the fat quest is a dominant social framework in Western society, by excluding diverse representations, there is minimal discussion of intersectionality. As intersectionality is part of a larger conversation occurring in YAL, I would like to continue the work I started in this dissertation and conduct critical content analyses to better understand the impact the fat quest has on protagonists with intersectional identities.

Next Steps in Fat Representation Research

I am very much in the beginning stages of the Cycle of Liberation (Harro, 2008b). As detailed above, through my research into fat representations in YAL, I am working to educate myself on terminology, theories, and work in Fat Studies. The next phase of Harro's (2008b) Cycle refers to reaching out and building a community. I offer this dissertation as a method of taking a stand, as it does aim to understand how YAL perpetuates the master narrative and how Murphy's books are an avenue for change. Through the critical content analysis present in Chapter Five, I demonstrated how Murphy's books are productive representations of fat experience. Their mere existence is a chance to stand up the institutional socializations in place currently. Considering *Faith Taking Flight* (Murphy, 2020) had a sequel published in 2021, *Faith Greater Heights* (Murphy, 2021b), I would like to see how the narrative takes on the fat quest in the continuation of Faith's story. I also look to extend this critical content analysis to include books that include intersectional identities, such as race, ethnicity, gender, ability, and sexual orientation. As the fat quest is a very white construct, future research should include discussion regarding the presence of intersectionality. 2021 and 2022 have seen several fat publications with characters of color. I would like to extend the analysis completed in Chapter Five to determine how the protagonists in new publications engage with the fat quest (Shelton, 2016).

Moving forward, I would like to work closely with other fat scholars in the field and build a strong community. As more discussions regarding fat pedagogy are occurring, I would like to work to bring those discussions into secondary English classrooms. Recently NCTE added a Size Inclusive Language and Literacy resolution to their ballot (NCTE, 2022). While the resolution has not yet been passed, it is unclear how it will address fat representation, but I am

hopeful it is meant to include fat voices. If it passes and when it is released to the public, I look forward to working with other fat scholars to create a framework for assessing and including productive representations of fat characters as part of English Language Arts curricula.

Conclusion

Undertaking this study has been a very insightful experience. In reading critical scholarship regarding fatness and engaging in critical analyses of productive representations of fat protagonists, I have learned more about my own fat embodiment which has helped me disassociate from some of the negative thoughts I have possessed over the last two decades. Murphy's characters are complex, and in their complexity, I see the complexity of my identity. The autoethnographic process was not easy. It was difficult to untangle memories deeply repressed to better understand why I found *Dumplin'* (Murphy, 2015) so impactful. In completing this dissertation, I found that disrupting the fat narrative was exactly what I needed. In the end, the research process encouraged me to be vulnerable and give myself grace. My fat identity was solidified twenty years ago, and it is not going to dissolve because of one research study. Books like Murphy's have the potential to help many teenagers and adults see there is a place for them in the world. One size does not, in fact, fit all.

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APPENDIX

Table 1: Guiding Principles of Autoethnography

<i>Principle⁹</i>	<i>Description</i>
<i>An Emphasis on Personal Experience</i>	<i>Autoethnographies emphasize the lived experiences of the research; can be presented chronologically or episodically; focuses on the researcher and their connection to the group of people they are observing/researching.</i>
<i>Familiarity with Existing Research</i>	<i>Autoethnographers must have inside knowledge concerning the topic on which they are writing so to provide readers with the most accurate representation of the experience; readers should be welcomed into the reading experience.</i>
<i>Using Personal Experience to Describe and Critique Cultural Experience</i>	<i>Autoethnography focuses on beliefs and practices to help readers understand the inner workings of the culture; power derives from the researcher's ability to be vulnerable and reveal complex descriptions of culture life; as the researcher reveals beliefs and practices, autoethnography can critique lived experiences as products of cultural construction; it can act as an avenue for awareness and change.</i>
<i>Taking Advantage of and Valuing Insider Knowledge</i>	<i>Autoethnography has the privilege of the researcher having a fluid relationship with the culture intricately intertwining insider and outsider status; being an insider affords the research authentic language and discourse that an outsider would not necessarily have.</i>
<i>Breaking Silence, (Re)Claiming Voice</i>	<i>Autoethnography grants the researcher the unique opportunity to relay their stories within an academic setting; vulnerability and complexity are key aspects of autoethnographic work, so sharing the tales with a more personal mission acts as an entry point for lived experiences disregarded in traditional academic settings.</i>

⁹ Information in Table 1 is attributed to Ellis and Adams (2020). The principles are directly quoted while the descriptions are summations.

Table 1: Cont.

<i>Principle</i>	<i>Description</i>
<i>Healing and Maneuvering Through Pain, Confusion, Anger, Uncertainty</i>	<i>Through autoethnographic work, the researcher is sharing lived experiences which can be both emotionally and physically draining; therefore, the process of writing acts as both catharsis and cultural understanding as the researcher reveals their story and works through their emotional vulnerabilities.</i>
<i>Writing Accessible Prose</i>	<i>Autoethnography, because it comes from the lived experience of the researcher and is delivered through first-person narration, is accessible to a wider audience; its use of non-traditional techniques widens the scope and increases the interest of varied audiences.</i>

Table 2: Six Procedural Steps for Conducting a Content Analysis

Step ¹⁰	Definition
<i>Design</i>	<i>Define context, explore data source(s), and adopt an analytical construct to formalize the data-context relationship</i>
<i>Unitizing</i>	<i>Defining and identifying units of data. This can be sampling units, creating a statistically representative sample of units, or recording units, meanings independent of each unit</i>
<i>Sampling</i>	<i>Undoing the statistical biases inherent in the analyzed data and ensuring the conditional hierarchy of chosen sample is representative of the organization under investigation</i>
<i>Coding</i>	<i>Recoding and/or classifying of units into categories of analytical constructs</i>
<i>Drawing Inferences</i>	<i>Stable and defensible knowledge of how the variables are related to the phenomena chosen by researcher</i>
<i>Validation</i>	<i>Making attempts to produce replicable findings</i>

¹⁰ Information in Table 2 is attributed to Krippendorff (1989). The principles are directly quoted while the descriptions are summations.

Table 3: Six Conceptual Components of Content Analysis

Concept¹¹	Definition
<i>Text</i>	<i>Data that must be read, interpreted, and understood by other people. Researchers must acknowledge that their interpretation of the text(s) is not the only reading of the text.</i>
<i>Research Question</i>	<i>The question(s) driving the analysis. They will be answered by examining the body of the text(s) and making inferences from the data in the text(s).</i>
<i>Context</i>	<i>The situation/context in which the text is situated. Context will be important to understanding the overall analysis as it specifies the world in which the text can be related to the research question(s).</i>
<i>Analytical Constructs</i>	<i>The theory operationalizing the analysis.</i>
<i>Inferences</i>	<i>The answers to the research questions as induced, deduced, or abducted from the analysis. Inductive inferences proceed from specific elements of the text to broad generalizations. Deductive inferences are the product of generalizations applied to specific elements of the text. Abductive inferences connect logical concepts across the text(s).</i>
<i>Validating Evidence</i>	<i>The validation of evidence allows for the content analysis to stay true to the research question.</i>

¹¹ Information in Table 3 is attributed to Krippendorff (2004). The principles are directly quoted while the descriptions are summations.

Table 4: Julie Murphy and the Fat Quest (Shelton, 2016)

Fat Quest Steps	<i>Dumplin'</i> (2015)	<i>Puddin'</i> (2018)	<i>Pumpkin</i> (2021a)	<i>Faith Taking Flight</i> (2020)
A. The character is identified as overweight	“Cashier, Dolly Parton enthusiast, and resident fat girl!” (p. 8)	“Fat camp. Yes, I went to fat camp” (p. 4)	“Ten years from now, when someone asks me how to survive life as a fat gay kid in a small West Texas town, I will tell them to become best friends with the school nurse” (p. 1)	“I am not a tiny girl. Fat. Plus-size. Curvy. Whatever you want to call it” (p. 32)
B. The character suffers because of his/her weight	““Mitch! My man. Finally met a lady your own size”” (p. 129)	““Hey fatass,’ says Patrick Thomas. I don’t even have to turn to know it’s him. ‘Have you thought about life as a phone sex operator? You keep doing that morning announcements all sexylike and I might forget what you look like long enough to trick myself into thinking you’re hot”” (p. 216)	“Patrick laughs. ‘Yeah, it’s like a supersized version of me.”” (p. 194)	
C. A person, circumstance, or epiphany forces the character out of his/her "destructive" pattern				
D. The character notices through nonmirrored ways (the fit of clothes, sight of toes, etc.) that he/she is losing weight				

Table 4: Cont.

<p>E. Life begins to look up for the character; he/she begins to exhibit self-confidence and/or do things he/she never would have dared to do before</p>				
<p>F. A person or circumstance threatens to derail the character's journey (he/she may fall off the diet wagon)</p>				
<p>G. The character overcomes the obstacle and continues to lose weight</p>				
<p>H. The character begins to experience or fully enters the able social location (the realm of the thin).</p>				

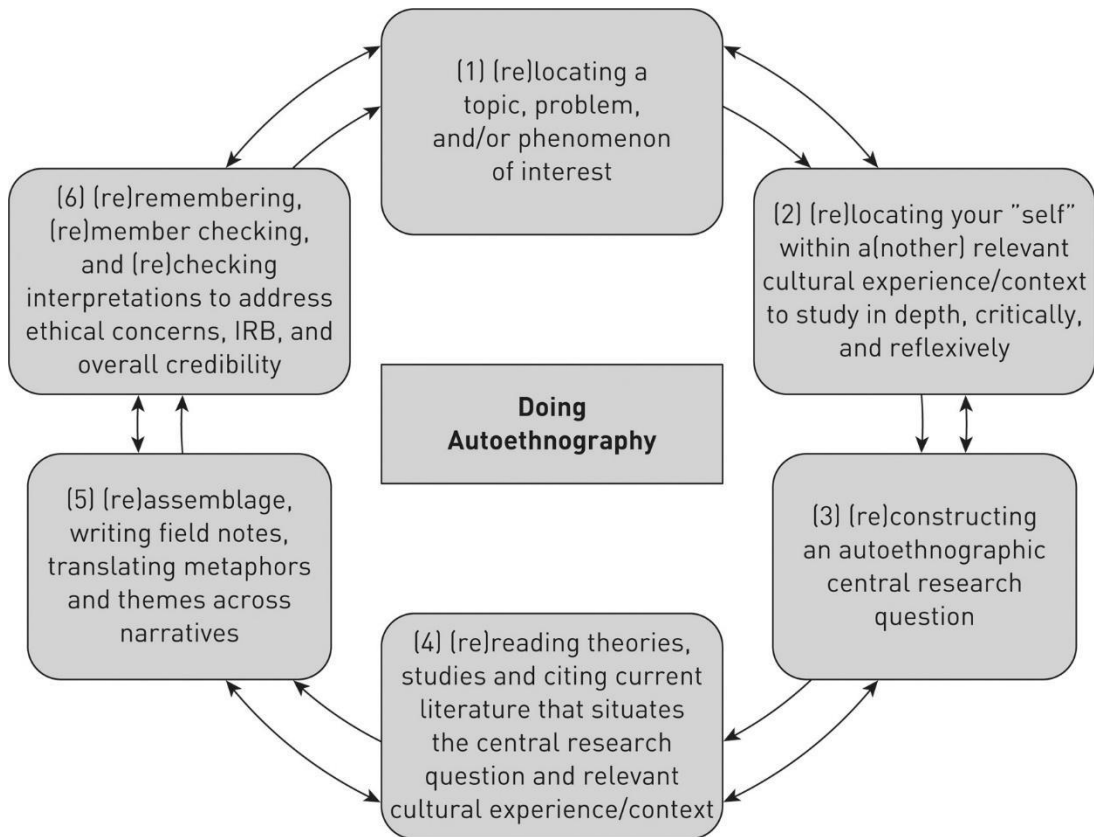


Figure 1: Doing Autoethnography (Hughes & Pennington, 2017)

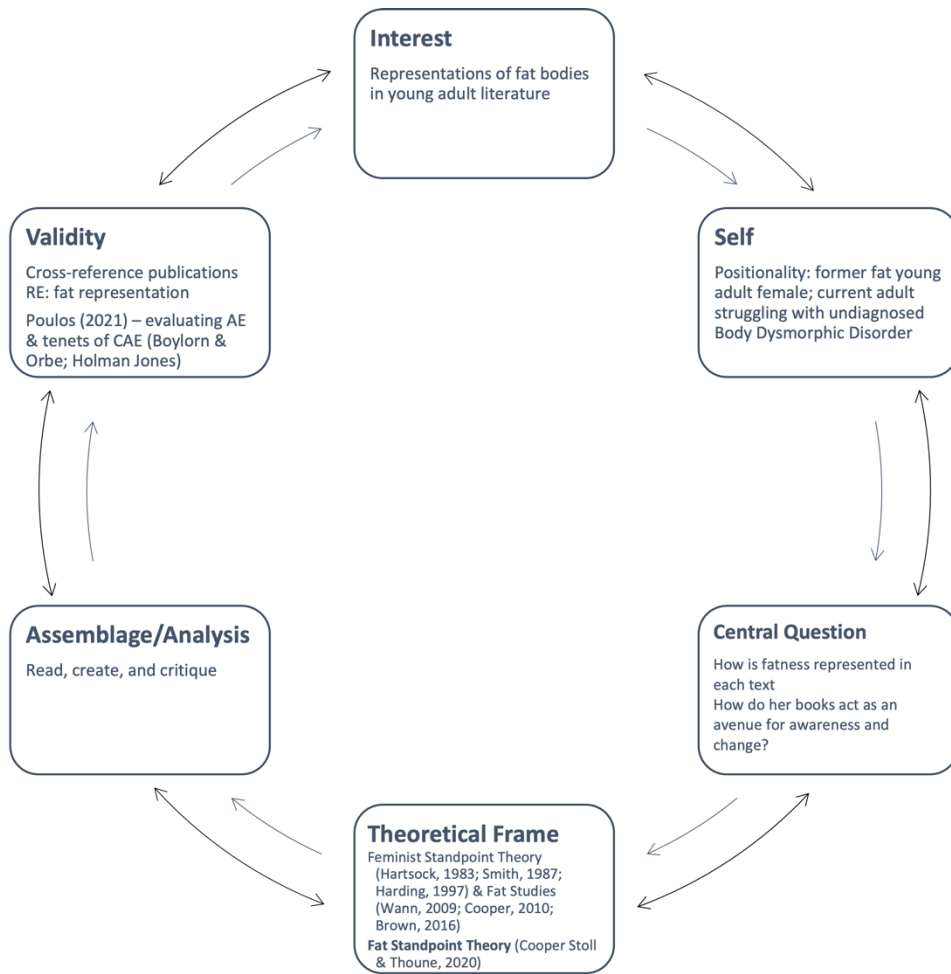


Figure 2: Adapted from "Doing Autoethnography" (Hughes & Pennington, 2017)

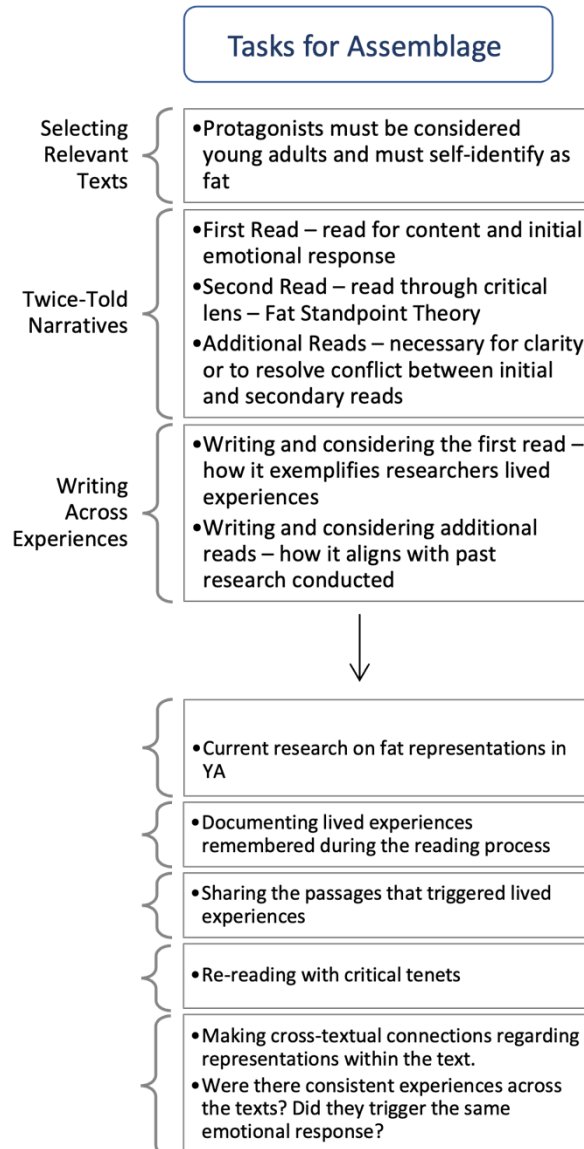
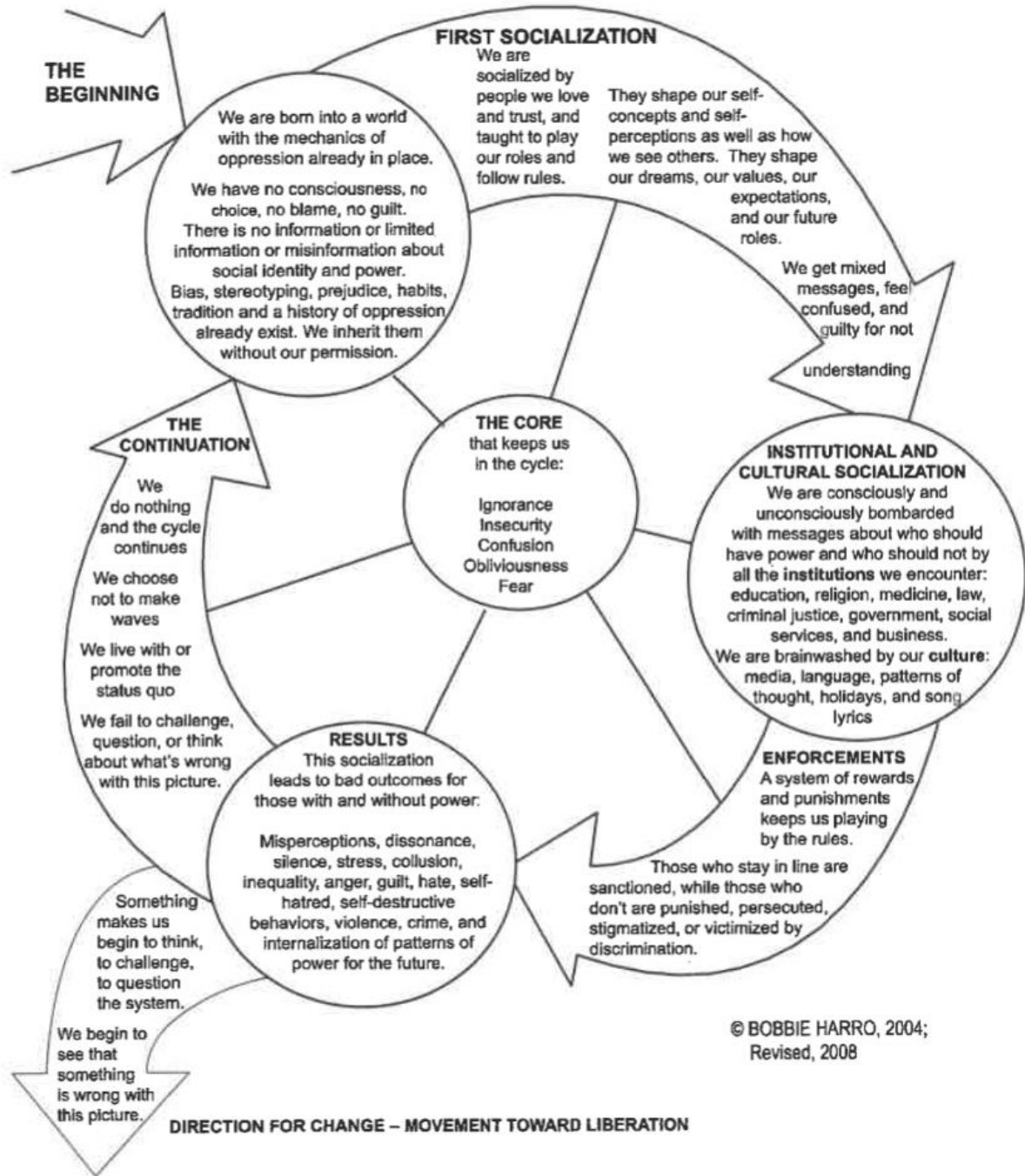


Figure 3: Tasks for Assemblage

CYCLE OF SOCIALIZATION



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Revised, 2008

Figure 5.1 The Cycle of Socialization

Figure 4: Cycle of Socialization (Harro, 2008a)

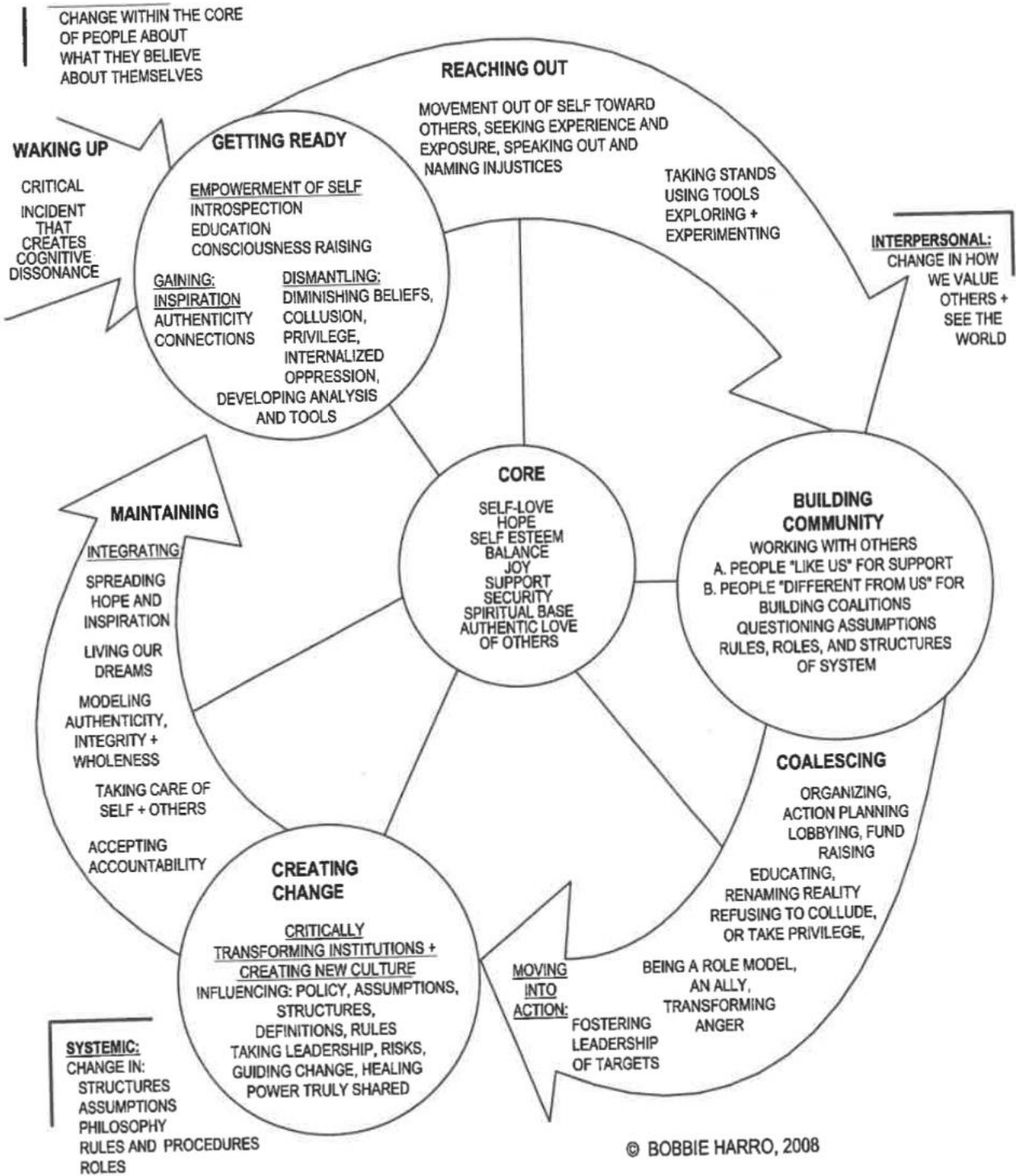


Figure 134.1 The Cycle of Liberation

Figure 5: Cycle of Liberation (Harro, 2008b)

Steps	Implementation
<i>Connection</i>	<i>A community anchored in trust; collaborative timelines; ownership and authenticity; empathy</i>
<i>Reading and Critical Reflection</i>	<i>Read and reflect on articles related to “weight bias, thin privilege, Fat Studies, the Health at Every Size paradigm, personal experiences of stigma and discrimination, and portrayals of ‘obese’ individuals in the media (Christel, 2016)” (p.49)</i> <i>Students engage in anonymous interactions to work through their thoughts and biases</i>
<i>Language</i>	<i>Establish intolerance for weight-based language; discuss how to talk about “fat or plus-size” (p. 49); shift student perspective to “agents for change” (p. 49)</i>
<i>Equipment</i>	<i>Using tools that do not perpetuate weight-bias; asking models how they felt about knowing their measurements</i>
<i>Environment</i>	<i>Creating a space that did not marginalize larger bodies</i>
<i>Creating a Sense of Activism and Advocacy</i>	<i>Creating opportunities to expose students to “alternative perspectives where they can begin to make connection between course materials and broader social implications” (p. 50); conducting pre- and post-assessments to quantify the students’ “personal growth and development” (p. 51)</i>

Figure 6: Fat Fashion Pedagogy (Christel, 2018)

VITA

Laura M. Beal graduated from Stephen F. Austin State University with her Bachelor's degree in English and Secondary Education in 2011 and her Master's degree in English Literature in 2014. For the next five years, she worked as a high school English teacher in a suburban city in Texas teaching ninth and tenth grade Pre-Advanced Placement for one year, and eleventh and twelfth grade dual credit English for four years. In the fall of 2019, Laura began her doctoral program at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville. During her coursework, she became fascinated with how young adult literature impacted readers of all ages which led her to investigate Reader Response Theory. Additionally, she found autoethnography as method to be increasingly interesting. Laura married the two together and birthed this dissertation. Her goal was to add to conversations regarding representation in YAL and use of diverse texts as tools for empathetic discourse. Laura plans to work with pre-service teachers and share her passion for teaching with them.