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### “I’m fat. It’s not a cuss word.”: A Critical Content Analysis of Young Adult Literature Featuring Fat Female Protagonists

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**Abstract:** This critical content analysis examines the representation of fat female bodies within and across four contemporary young adult novels, two prose novels and two graphic novels: *Gabi, A Girl in Pieces* (Quintero, 2014), *Dumplin’* (Murphy, 2015), *In Real Life* (Doctorow & Wang, 2015), and *This One Summer* (Tamaki & Tamaki, 2015). Guided by the theoretical frameworks of Critical Fat Studies, Feminist Criticism, and Reader Response Theory, this study uses the methods of critical and comparative content analyses (Johnson, Mathis, & Short, 2017; Sulzer, Thein, & Schmidt, 2018) to explore the tension between prose and graphic novels with regards to constructions of fat female bodies. As a result of this analysis, the following themes emerged across the texts: fatness defined in relation to other bodies, the conflation of weight and desire, young women’s body surveillance by adult women, and precarious relationships with food. While the female protagonists in the texts under analysis demonstrate agency and complexity in the face of fat shaming, findings from this study reveal the visual nature of graphic novels make possible the ability to better disrupt narratives of fatness rooted in shame.

**Keywords:** fatness, body representation, young adult literature, graphic novels, critical comparative content analysis



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### Purpose<sup>1</sup>

**F**at women in fiction are often the friend, the sidekick, the comic relief, even the villain (Jensen, 2015; Parsons, 2016; Younger, 2006;).

In her essay “The Trash Heap Has Spoken: The Power and Danger of Women Who Take Up Space,” Carmen Maria Machado (2017) explores these dynamics in storytelling by centering Marjory from *Fraggle Rock* and Ursula from *The Little Mermaid* in her ode to fat female bodies. Machado writes of fat women in fiction: “They’re never romantic leads, or heroes. They never get to just be. It’s like writers can’t imagine fat women having sex or agency or complex lives.” Although there has been an increase in centering fat bodies as lead characters in young adult fiction, many of these texts position their fat characters in conflict with their body, a conflict they must overcome to find happiness, success, and internal peace (Jensen, 2015; Parsons, 2016; Quick, 2008).

For example, the protagonist Ashley in *Future Perfect* (Larsen, 2015) is described as being content with her body despite the pressure from her family to lose weight. The narrative arc of the story follows Ashley taking bribes from her grandmother to lose weight in exchange for trips, clothes, and ultimately her tuition to Harvard. The book cover is adorned with an image of two different dresses hanging from the words *future* and *perfect*, the tinier dress with a smaller waistline is hanging from the word *future*. The book jacket reads, “They all believe Ashley could be her best self if she would just listen to them. But what’s a girl to do when the reflection in her mirror seems to bother everyone but her?” In some ways this book is meeting Machado’s call for fat characters with agency and complexity; however,

Ashley’s narrative arc is still defined by her relationship (and her family’s relationship) with her weight.

As a reader, as a teacher of literature, as a teacher to pre-service educators, and as a fat woman, I seek more than representation of fat bodies in literature; I want to see, as Machado (2017) muses, fat women who “get to just be.” This is not to say I want to ignore or silence the very real ways in which fat women experience marginalization and degradation as they move through the world, but instead I want to see young adult literature that disrupts narratives of fatness rooted in shame as a way for young readers to imagine a world in which one does not need to equate fatness with shame, unhappiness, or an unhealthy lifestyle. I want 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. For these reasons, my research on young adult literature with fat female protagonists is guided by the following research questions:

1. How do young adult writers and graphic novelists construct a character’s fatness? What textual and visual resources does a writer utilize to communicate the fatness of a character to their readers, and what do these constructions reveal about the normalization or othering of fatness?
2. In what ways can the medium of young adult graphic novels disrupt narratives of fat women in conflict with their bodies?

These questions were formulated by considering the relationship between textual and visual features

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<sup>1</sup> I acknowledge that there is a gender spectrum and that myriad pronouns exist that I can use when referring to individuals in my writing. Throughout this article I will use “he” to refer to individuals who identify as male, “she”

to refer to individuals who identify as female, and “ze” for individuals who identify as gender-neutral. I have selected these pronouns because I believe they are more familiar for a diverse audience of readers.

within young adult fiction, and the implications for understanding how fat bodies are constructed in a story. A traditional prose novel relies on the written word to construct a character's fatness (i.e. dialogue between characters, narrator description, peritextual features such as book summaries, reviews, and author biographies); whereas, a graphic novel offers readers visual and textual elements to construct a character's body. However, not all prose novels are devoid of visual imagery. In fact, many include book cover imagery as well as visual elements within the story that contribute to reader's understandings of a character's body (such as Gabi's zine in *Gabi, A Girl in Pieces*; see Quintero, 2014). For the purpose of this study, I am defining a prose novel as one that relies mostly on written language to communicate constructions of body.

To better understand this relationship between the visual and textual, I have chosen to conduct a critical and comparative content analysis (Johnson, Mathis & Short, 2017; Sulzer, Thein & Schmidt, 2018) of prose novels and graphic novels featuring fat female protagonists to explore the opportunities that graphic novels may allow for a character's fatness to be distinctly separate from their story arc. For example, in *In Real Life* (Doctorow & Wang, 2015), Anda's body is not drawn in a manner that conforms to a conventional understanding of thinness, nor is her body hourglass shaped. Anda's story arc is about conflicts that arise from her participation in an online role-playing game and her evolving understandings of union activism and labor rights. Anda's body is never explicitly addressed with words; however, Anda's avatar in her online role playing game is taller and thinner than she is in real life and wears clothing that covers less of her body. Does this imagery indicate a tension Anda may have with her body image? If it does, who constructed that tension: the writer or the reader? The relationship between the reader and writer/artist here is one that may provide interpretive

possibilities that uproot tropes of fatness rooted in shame. A questioning stance towards the gaming world may result in a reading of the text that situates the tension not between Anda's relationship with her body but rather between women and the online gaming community. Is this moment in the text a critique of the options women are provided for avatars in online gaming systems? The page in which Anda creates her avatar shows the reader her choices: race (human, undead, pixie, planton, or beast), hair (twelve options of various styles), class (scholar, warrior, hunter, thief, healer, or priest), and dress (nine choices of clothing all on a similarly shaped body). The cursor of Anda's computer screen is drawn hovering over a dress option that included shorts, a short sleeved shirt, and boots (p. 14). How does the interpretation of this page change when a reader applies theories of fat studies, feminism, and/or reader response to the text? I will further explore these tensions and dynamics in later sections of this paper.

### Theoretical Frames

Three theoretical perspectives guide my thinking and planning of this research: Critical Fat Studies, Feminist Criticism, and Reader Response Criticism. In line with scholars of Critical Fat Studies, I will use the word *fat* throughout my research, not to belittle or disparage but as a physical description of mass. Words such as *obese* and *overweight* pathologize fatness, implying one's health is determined by one's weight. Additionally, words like *curvy*, *big boned*, and *chubby* couch negative attitudes about fatness in positive euphemisms (LeBesco, 2004; Parsons, 2016; Wann, 1998). I also recognize the word *fat* as contested and contingent across intersections of race, class, and gender, and any attempt at neutralizing the word is not possible as readers will come to this work and word with their own culturally constructed understandings of fatness (Gross, 2005; Rothblum & Soloway, 2009; Tovar,

2018). These culturally constructed understandings will no doubt impact the writing, reading, and interpretation of these texts.

Additionally, I will apply a feminist lens to each reading of the texts included within this study, exploring patterns of thought, behavior, values, and power between the characters in the novels (Appleman, 2009; Trites, 1997, 2017, 2018). More specifically, reading with a feminist lens helps me analyze how the depictions of relationships between fat female protagonists and other characters position readers to make sense of the character's relationship with their bodies. By looking at dialogue exchanged and internal monologues of each character, I hope to come to a better understanding of the ways in which authors and narrators position readers towards particular and specific understandings of fatness.

While relying on the tenets of Critical Fat Studies and Feminism, I also situate this study theoretically within Reader Response Criticism.

My analysis is informed by theories of reading as a complex and dynamic relationship between the text, the context, and the reader (Beach, 1993; Rosenblatt, 1978; Serafini; 2013). By approaching the readings of each text with this frame in my mind, I seek to explore the textual, experiential, psychological, social, and cultural forces that contribute to a reader's understanding of fat identities within young adult literature (Beach, 1993).

### Review of Related Research

A review of literature related to my research questions reveals a gap in scholarship: fat bodies in graphic novels have yet to be systematically studied.

One reason is likely the small number of fat bodies currently represented in graphic novels, leaving little text as of yet to be studied. As a result, my literature review is organized into two sections. First, I will examine what scholarship suggests broadly about reader response to graphic novels, and then I will explore studies that examine trends about fat bodies within children's and young adult prose novels.

### Graphic Novels: Complex, Democratic, and Agentive

Recent scholars of graphica, a broad term used to describe texts featuring visual and written text, are complicating the assumption that graphica is easier to read than traditional prose novels (Botzaki,

Savitz, & Low, 2017). Through qualitative multiple-case studies, Jimenez and Meyer (2016) explored how youth readers make sense of the visual, linguistic, and spatial elements of graphic novels. Using think-aloud protocols and a researcher created attention-mapping activity, Jimenez and Meyer found

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that synthesis of visual, linguistic, and spatial resources within graphic novels is a cognitively complex task and highly variable and systematic depending on the reader.

In their systematic review, Botzakis, Savitz and Low (2017) convey the agentive role of comics, suggesting false crises of youth literacy that result from narrow definitions of literacy defined by school practices. Their review revealed comics are continually found to be motivational tools for all ages and reading levels and as such should not be used only with those students defined as struggling readers, doing a disservice both to medium and to the students in our classrooms. Botzakis et al. contend that use of

comics and graphic novels in classrooms is a step towards “more democratic notions of text, literacy, and curriculum” (p. 319), but suggest that educators must find a common language around graphic novel pedagogy.

McCloud (1993) began the work of creating a common language through his historical and sociocultural analysis of comics in our society. McCloud teased out the relationship between images and words by delineating between received and perceived information, suggesting that pictures are generally received with the message being clear and instantaneous while words are generally perceived with the message requiring specialized knowledge to decipher. However, McCloud complicated this binary between pictures and words:

When pictures are more abstracted from ‘reality,’ they require greater levels of perception, more like words. When words are bolder, more direct, they require lower levels of perception and are received faster, more like pictures. Our need for a unified language of comics sends us towards the center where words and pictures are like two sides of one coin. (p. 49)

The implications for meaning making suggest that the visual elements of comics do not actually create a story that is easier to understand or free from various interpretations.

According to Abate and Tarbox (2017), the lack of common language around graphic novel pedagogy may also be the result of the genre’s “scant critical attention” despite its increasing popularity in publishing (p. 9). Exploring the cultural history and evolution of graphic novels as a medium, Abate and Tarbox attempt to fill this gap with their collection of twenty critical essays about graphic novels. The essays featured within the collection utilize various

methods such as content analysis, critical discourse analysis, and critical multicultural analysis. The scholars in this collection offer readers, teachers, and teacher educators analysis of some lesser studied graphic novels.

In one such essay, Meeusen (2017) explored adult-child power dynamics in Neil Gaiman’s *Coraline* (2002) and Jeanne DePrau’s *City of Ember* (2008) by studying the differences between the film and comic adaptations of each text. Meeusen argued comic adaptations place a greater degree of emphasis on childhood independence and power, rather than the authorial directing (by adults) of mood developed by elements such as pacing and camera angles. Meeusen posits that the medium of comics versus film affords the reader a greater degree of agency over the meaning making process because readers have more control over their experience (through pace of reading, ordering of panels, and temporal inferences from panel to panel). Meeusen writes: “Each representation allows for a different kind of understanding, but I would suggest that comics offer more opportunities for reader engagement, and thus perhaps a greater agency in the reading experience” (p. 127). This claim echoes findings mentioned earlier in Jimenez and Meyer’s (2016) study: the pace and organization of students’ attention within the pages of a graphic novel was as complex as it was variable depending on the reader. The scholarship reviewed here suggests the complex, agentive, and democratic nature between the graphic novel and its reader.

### **Fat Bodies in Children’s and YA Literature: Miserable, Irresponsible, Obsessive or Absent Entirely**

Although scholarly literature on fat female protagonists within graphic novels is currently understudied, scholars of children’s and young adult literature have conducted several content analyses

of fat protagonists within traditional prose novels. I will discuss four studies that provided useful overviews of the current trends and tropes of fat bodies within children's and young adult literature.

Quick (2008) explored the representation of obesity and body image in five young adult novels published between 1998-2003. Quick draws on disability studies (although does not seem to conflate obesity with disability) to deconstruct the normal/abnormal binaries associated with attitudes about weight. Quick posits that problem novels about weight loss do not pit protagonists' weight against health concerns, but rather focuses on their self-worth and acceptance by peers, upholding thinness as the ideal. Quick's analysis reveals that most of the novels' protagonists only experienced a "happy ending" when weight is lost. Only two of the protagonists in Quick's study came to see themselves and their bodies as legitimate forms of beauty despite the norms of thinness upheld by their family and friends.

Younger (2008) examined the ways in which cultural assumptions about women are reinforced and complicated through representations of young women in young adult literature. Younger analyzed body image depictions of young women in a content analysis of 10 YA novels published between 1975-2003. Younger's analysis illustrated trends of thin characters symbolizing control, responsibility, assertiveness, and sexual monogamy, while heavier characters represented passivity, irresponsibility, and sexual availability. Younger argued,

YA Fiction encourages young women's self-surveillance of their bodies, and in these stories a pattern emerges connecting female sexuality and body image. Promiscuous sexual activity is often linked to a character's

weight and signals the character's lack of sexual restraint. (p. 4)

Younger further argued that the relationship between weight and sexuality signals to readers that a fat character is to be "read" as socially and sexually suspect. Whether thin or fat, characters' attempts to attain a certain body were always linked to attempts for status and power (p. 19).

While Quick (2008) and Younger (2008) drew conclusions about the ways in which fat characters existed within young adult novels, Wedwick and Latham's (2013) study of fat bodies in 71 Caldecott Medal Winners between 1938-2008 revealed fat bodies barely exist at all in picture books. Using a comparative structural analysis, *fat* characters were identified as those drawn larger in comparison to other characters in the book.

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Their research aimed to draw conclusions about the prevalence of fat images, whether said prevalence changed over time, gender

variance of fat images, and connections between body size and character role. Results from their comparative structural analysis revealed that young readers are not exposed to images of *fat* characters at the same frequency as *not fat*. While the study did not find significant differences over time or across gender, Wedwick and Latham posited that Caldecott Medal Winning texts may be contributing to body dissatisfaction in youth readers.

Most recently, Parsons (2016) examined how fat female protagonists are represented in YA literature by conducting a content analysis and critical discourse analysis of eight young adult novels featuring fat female protagonists published between 2003-2013. Positioning the analysis at the crossroads of the obesity epidemic, a cult of thinness, and discourses of food additions, Parsons argued that

researchers must “make visible the version of reality authors construct and convey to adolescents” (pp. 4-5). Parsons’ analysis revealed four trends in the novels studied: obsession and self-loathing, increased desperation and negative intentions, hitting bottom, and recovery and identity transformation. Parsons argued:

Although the fat female protagonists in this study recover from food addiction, transform their conception of self and self-in-representation, and achieve self-acceptance with or without weight loss, I believe this (re)presentation must be problematized. The novels perpetuate rather than deconstruct the ideal female body and the lengths to which fat females should go to attain it. (p. 24)

Parsons urges readers, teachers, and teacher educators to problematize the ideals of body perpetuated by the novels. Presently, scholarship suggests that representation of fat bodies in children’s and young adult literature has yet to reveal a reality in which health, happiness, and joy is possible in a fat body.

## Methods

### Stance of the Researcher

As a critical scholar, I see myself as the primary research instrument (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016); my own social and cultural backgrounds and political stances informed my selection and interpretation of the texts included within this study. In this study, my stance towards the politics of gender and body also mattered. As a white, middle class, cisgender woman with a history of weight fluctuation, I approached my coding and analysis with an awareness that my experiences and attitudes regarding fatness informed my category building and meaning making and at times may have limited

or afforded interpretative possibilities within each text.

### Critical & Comparative Content Analysis

In line with Johnson, Mathis and Short (2017) and Sulzer, Thein and Schmidt (2018), I seek to answer my research questions by conducting a critical and comparative content analysis of young adult novels featuring female identified protagonists whose bodies do not adhere to traditional understandings of thinness. Johnson et al. (2017) argue critical content analysis is, “embedded in a tension, a compelling interest in exploring texts around a focus that matters to the researcher and... for young people’s perceptions of themselves and the world” (p. 7). I am interested in exploring the tension between prose and graphics, comparing features across both mediums to analyze the extent to which graphic novels can afford freedom to their readers to define and ultimately understand what it means for a character to be fat. I attempted to uncover these tensions by looking for stereotypes and representations of fatness that position characters as “resistant to existing narratives, and to offer new possibilities for how to position ourselves in the world” (p. 6). Citing Freire, Johnson et al. encourage scholars to use a critical lens that “moves from deconstruction to reconstruction to action” (p. 6). Further, Beach et al. (2009), argue that a critical content analysis must “focus on locating power in social practices by understanding, uncovering, and transforming conditions of inequality” (p. 129). I see my work as taking up this call: deconstructing the ways writers create fat characters in prose, understanding how readers and writers reconstruct understandings of fatness within graphic novels, and prompting teachers and educators to consider the ways our text selections in classrooms may be contributing to the further dehumanization and othering of fat bodies.

## Criteria for Selecting Texts

All of these texts were read prior to this project's conceptualization, each inspiring my interest in analyzing current representations of the fat female body within young adult literature across mediums. Of the four selected texts for this study, two are traditional prose novels (Murphy, 2015; Quintero, 2014) and two are graphic novels (Doctorow & Wang, 2015; Tamaki & Tamaki, 2015). I narrowed my analysis to texts published after 2013 in hopes of highlighting young adult literature not already analyzed in the work of those scholars I referenced in my literature review. I excluded any texts where the major narrative arc of the story was tied directly to weight loss as a way to amplify Machado's (2017) call for books that allow fat characters "to just be." Additionally, I chose texts for their themes of fat positivity and their ability to "never render her body the object of the story" (Jensen, 2015). I highlighted texts that were attempting to resist the tropes and trends of fatness seen within the novels previously studied by scholars. The texts selected for this study have been organized into Table 1 below with brief summaries outlining their narrative arcs.

## Data Analysis and Emerging Codes

Initially, I read each of the texts listed in Table 1 for aesthetic enjoyment (Rosenblatt, 1978; Johnson et al., 2017). For my second reading, I inductively coded the prose novels and comparatively coded the graphic texts (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). I made this choice because I wanted to look at how writers of prose were textually constructing fat identities similarly or differently from those graphic novelists. Saldana (2016) describes a code as a "word or short phrase that symbolically assigns a summative, salient, essence-capturing, and/or evocative attribute for a portion of language-based or visual data" (p. 3). Using post-it notes and guided by my research questions, I tagged every explicit mention

of weight, body, and food. After a round of coding for each prose novel, I went back and began writing descriptive codes (Saldana, 2013, p. 7) on each post-it note that indicated briefly what was happening in those instances. Attempting to capture the essence of each instance, initial notes included phrases like: *desire to lose weight, passion for food, shame for food, positively identifying as fat, negatively identifying as fat, ambivalently identifying as fat, peer group support, parental shame, friend shame, clothing.*

I repeated a similar process with the graphic novels listed in Table 1; however, as I started this process again, tagging post-it notes of visual images became more challenging, because instances of weight, body image, and food were less direct than in the prose novels. Anda and Windy never identify as fat, and the word is only invoked in one scene within *In Real Life* (2015) and not at all by any characters in *This One Summer* (2015). The codes I defined for the prose novels were not always possible to identify within the graphic novels. There was little to no dialogue or textual evidence of fat identification (positive, negative, or ambivalent) in the same ways I noticed within the prose novels. This led me to begin tagging panels where I thought the characters bodies were drawn in ways that could indicate to readers the character was larger than their peers. I also tagged panels where food was pictured and discussed, where characters facial expressions and gazes were directed towards other character's bodies. I wrote notes on the post-its indicating whether the visual images of bodies were hourglass, pear shaped, or other. I also noted moments of positive, negative, or ambivalent interactions with food. All four book covers and peritextual features were included as part of the analysis and coding procedures. Specifically, I examined imagery on the front and back covers, dedication pages, about the author sections, and book jacket language. As a



**Table 1*****Overview of Selected Young Adult Texts***

<i>Title</i>	<i>Genre</i>	<i>Medium</i>	<i>Protagonist</i>	<i>Brief Synopsis</i>
<i>Gabi, A Girl in Pieces</i> (Quintero, 2014)	Realistic Fiction	Prose novel with some visual elements depicting Gabi's school work	Gabi	Written in diary format, Gabi Hernandez chronicles her senior year of high school as she navigates complex relationships with her family and friends, applying to college, and the poetry that inspires her writing and developing identity. Winner of ALA's William C. Morris Debut Award.
<i>Dumplin'</i> (Murphy, 2015)	Realistic Fiction	Traditional prose novel	Willowdean	Sixteen-year-old Willowdean, aka Dumplin', is a self-proclaimed fat girl. Written in 1st person, Dumplin' shares the details of first boyfriends, friendships, and beauty pageants in a small Texas town. Ranked #1 on the New York Times Bestseller list.
<i>In Real Life</i> (Doctorow & Wang, 2015)	Realistic Fiction	Graphic novel	Anda	Anda prefers to spend her time in Coarsegold, an online multiplayer role-playing game. While in Coarsegold, Anda befriends a gold farmer and starts to understand the real world implications of her virtual gaming, complicating her understandings of right from wrong.
<i>This One Summer</i> (Tamaki & Tamaki, 2015)	Realistic Fiction	Graphic novel	Windy & Rose (Rose is the narrator)	Best friends Rose and Windy spend a slow summer in Awago Beach sharing stories, watching movies, and paying close attention to the behavior of the adults around them. Caldecott Honor Book, New York Time Bestseller, and ALA's Printz Honor Book.

**Table 2*****Emerging Codes and Categories***

<i>Textual Codes</i>	<i>Visual Codes</i>
Protagonist self describes as fat <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Positively</li> <li>● Negatively</li> <li>● Ambiguously/Ambivalently</li> </ul>	Drawings/images of female protagonists' bodies <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● In relation to drawings of other characters</li> <li>● In relation to an ideal of thinness               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Hourglass? Pear shape? Other?</li> </ul> </li> </ul>
Other characters describe protagonist as fat <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Positively</li> <li>● Negatively</li> <li>● Ambiguously/Ambivalently</li> </ul>	Gaze/facial expressions of other characters towards female protagonists
Protagonist expresses fear, worry, shame while thinking about other character's perceptions of their body	Gaze/facial expressions of female protagonists towards other characters
Description of food <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Food they love</li> <li>● Food that makes them feel guilty</li> </ul>	Images of food <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Being eaten</li> <li>● Being offered</li> </ul>

result, my codes were divided into two categories: textual and visual.

Merriam & Tisdell (2016) argue analytical coding is more than descriptive coding and requires researchers to interpret and reflect on meaning (p. 206). After both rounds of inductive and comparative coding, I began to analytically code looking for themes across each text that might offer answers to my stated research questions. My analytic coding revealed a variety of themes that illuminated varying attitudes towards fatness, and

its relationship to peer groups, family, desire, and food.

### **Findings**

I offer four findings as a result of my analysis: defining fatness in relation to other bodies, relationships between weight and desire, relationships with adults, and relationships with food. In this section, I present these four findings in relation to their treatment across prose and graphic novels. I start each section discussing the prose texts followed by discussion of the graphic novels.

## Defining fatness in relation to other bodies

*Gabi, A Girl in Pieces* (Quintero, 2014) is a prose novel about high school senior Gabriela Hernandez. Although Gabi most frequently self identifies as a fat girl, she also at times uses the language of *chubby* and *overweight* to describe her body. Gabi compares herself to other young women in the story, most frequently Sandra, a classmate who dated boys that Gabi was also interested in dating. Writing about a boy she liked in her math class, Gabi says:

But turns out (surprise, surprise), he doesn't like fat girls. Or at least he doesn't like this fat girl. Of course he didn't say, "Gabi, I don't like you because you are a fat girl," but he did start going out with Sandra and she is the total opposite of me (p. 31).

Speaking about Eric, another boy she was interested in dating, Gabi explains, "...I am hardly his type. A short, fat, nerdy Mexican girl? Try tall blonde skinny athlete" (p. 45). When Gabi admits her self-consciousness to her best friends, they respond by situating her weight on a continuum: "Seriously, Gabi, you are not fat. Seriously, you're average... okay maybe a little chubby. I'm not going to lie and say you're super skinny, but you're not fat!" (p. 46). Later in the novel, Gabi refers to herself as "super fat" and her mother replies that she is not super fat but would benefit from losing some weight (p. 215). Each of these interactions illustrate Gabi's understanding of her own body in comparison to other bodies, often bodies she deems thinner, and thus more desirable and socially acceptable than her own.

Conversely, within *Dumplin'* (Murphy, 2015), Willowdean's points of body comparison are two women who are larger than she is: Lucy, her aunt who at the time of her death weighed over 400

pounds, and Millie, a classmate who is bullied often by her peers for her weight. Willowdean explains:

Millie is that girl, the one I am ashamed to admit that I've spent my whole life looking at and thinking, *Things could be worse*. I'm fat, but Millie's the type of fat that requires elastic waist pants because they don't make pants with buttons and zippers in her size" (p. 5).

Even though Willowdean often invokes pride about her fatness, this line of thought indicates that she believes there are socially acceptable levels of fatness. For Willowdean, Millie and Lucy seem to fall outside of those boundaries. In many ways though Willowdean is radically resistant to narratives depicting fat women as miserable and calls out fat shaming culture:

I hate seeing fat girls on TV or in movies, because the only way the world seems to be okay with putting a fat person on camera is if they're miserable with themselves or if they're the jolly best friend. Well, I'm neither of those things (p. 90).

Willowdean refuses to define herself in those terms. Within the first chapter of the text, Willowdean calls out the emotional weight of the word fat:

The word fat makes people uncomfortable. But when you see me, the first thing you notice is my body. And my body is fat. It's like how I notice some girls have big boobs or shiny hair, or knobby knees. Those things are okay to say. But the word fat, the one that best describe me, makes lips frown and cheeks lose their color. But that's me. I'm fat. It's not a cuss word. It's not an insult. At least it's not when I say it (p. 9).

Even though both Gabi and Willowdean are depicted as resisting society's expectations of their bodies, the reader is positioned to understand that they are fat through the language used to describe their bodies. However, as I'll discuss next, the depiction of Anda and Windy, two characters from the graphic novels in this study, position the reader to understand their body through visual elements.

Anda from *In Real Life* (Doctorow & Wang, 2015) and Windy from *This One Summer* (Tamaki & Tamaki, 2015) are two fat female protagonists in graphic novels who never self-identify as fat or are described by others in the text as such. I recognize that some readers may not see Anda and Windy as fat and may resist using the word fat to describe them since neither character self-identifies as such. I am choosing to call them fat, not as a form of disparagement, but as a way to reinforce the disruptive potential of their drawn bodies. Anda and Windy are both characters whose bodies I immediately noticed as ones not often pictured in graphica. I was excited to see young women whose bodies did not conform to an ideal body as defined by white eurocentric standards of beauty. This presented an interesting point of departure in terms of analyzing how the authors were positioning readers to read Anda and Windy's bodies, if they were at all. As I looked for the ways the authors were constructing Anda and Windy's bodies, I read the drawings of their bodies in relation to other characters in the story. Anda's face is round and her stomach rounds out, rather than mimicking the desired hourglass. Windy's body is drawn more boxy, almost without curves but still significantly larger than Rose, her best friend. Coincidentally, both front covers for *In*

*Real Life* and *This One Summer* feature images of the young women standing side to side with another character. Anda is seen next to an image of her gaming avatar who is taller, thinner, and wearing clothes that cover less of her body. Windy is seen jumping into the ocean with her best friend Rose, who has a much taller and thinner frame than Windy. Windy is wearing a two-piece bathing suit and her stomach is drawn slightly rounded and protruding. Immediately upon picking up these texts, readers see Anda and Windy's bodies juxtaposed next to thinner bodies. Without the language of fatness attached to Gabi and Willowdean's narratives, the imagery of Anda and Windy allows readers to witness diverse bodies

without stigma and shame written into their story.

#### Relationships between weight and desire

One major plot point that dominates Gabi's narrative is the changing dynamics between her and her now pregnant best friend, Cindy. When Cindy first suspected she was pregnant, Gabi took

her to a pharmacy to get a pregnancy test. Georgina, a classmate, was the cashier at the pharmacy: "Well, Gabi, I know this isn't for you. No one would be fucking your fat ass" (Quintero, 2015, p. 15). Despite this incident, Gabi's character is not without male admirers throughout the story. However, her fatness is often tied to her anxieties about whether or not young men will find her desirable: "I don't know though. I don't want to get too excited. I am always afraid that boys will only pretend to like me as a joke. Because, really, who would like the fat girl?" (p. 46).

**“Without the language of fatness attached to Gabi and Willowdean’s narratives, the imagery of Anda and Windy allows readers to witness diverse bodies without stigma and shame written into their story.”**

Similarly, Willowdean is suspicious of the interest and affection received from Bo, her coworker at Harpy's and eventual boyfriend. During one of their first make out sessions in Bo's truck, Willowdean thinks:

But then his fingers trace down my back and to my waist. I gasp. I feel it like a knife in the back. My mind betrays my body. The reality of him touching me. Of him touching my back fat and my overflowing waistline, it makes me want to gag. I see myself in comparison to every other girl he's likely touched. With their smooth backs and trim waists...I'm not that girl. I don't spend hours staring in the mirror, thinking of all the ways I could be better. Me shrinking away from his touch embarrasses me in a way I don't entirely understand. (Murphy, 2015, p. 58)

Willowdean is surprised by her behavior and is confronted with the idea that she may not be as confident about her body as she originally projected in chapter one.

Anda and Windy's relationships with boys are less explicit, which left me wondering if this same finding about the relationships between weight and desire would be visible in their stories. Neither Anda or Windy actually engage in dating but are at times in the presence of and engaging with male secondary characters. In one particularly compelling scene, Anda is seen leaning over the edge of her bathtub dyeing her hair. She is wearing checkered boxers and just her bra. Her bare body is more exposed in this scene than any other. In the following panel and presumably the next day, Anda is walking through the hallway at school and the reader can only see the back of her head and book bag. Her hair is now bright red, like her avatar in *Coarsegold*, a multiplayer online role-playing game. The only faces the reader can see in this panel are

those of her classmates staring at her; their mouths are drawn in a way that invites the reader to believe they are surprised by the change in her look. In the following panel, readers see Anda's face for the first time since dyeing her hair and she is beaming with pride, her cheeks are rosy, and there are stars drawn in the background of her picture. This is also one of the few panels that gives the reader a head to toe look at Anda's body. Her cheeks are rounded, her midsection is drawn rounded out, and her legs are thick. An adjacent panel zooms in on her passing by two male peers who awkwardly wave, saying, "Oh hey, Anda." Their cheeks are also rosy, potentially indicating blushing (Doctorow & Wang, 2015, pp. 118-119).

Alone, this scene may not indicate a relationship between Anda's weight and the way she thinks about male attention. In fact, it was the act of dyeing her hair to be more like her avatar that caused the attention from her peers, not a change in her dress or body shape. However, earlier in the text, Anda and these same two boys are in a computer class together when the teacher announces that Liza McCombs, a guild organizer for online role-playing games, is there to speak to their class about participating in a project. The first panel of Liza is a zoomed in look at only her legs and high heels. In the adjacent panel the students' eyes, including Anda's, are drawn wide open, mouths straight, staring at Liza's legs (Doctorow & Wang, 2015, pp. 7). This group gaze implies a potential sexual objectification of Liza's body, specifically her legs. In the next panel, readers see for the first time Liza's body from head to toe. She has long black hair with a side shave, is wearing a t-shirt with the phrase "GAME OVER" printed on it, a short black skirt with a long sheer overlay, high heel boots, and her fingernails are painted red. Liza's body is long and lean, and she rests against the ledge of the dry-erase board. In the panel immediately below Liza, Anda is pictured sitting in a row between the same two boys

from the later hallway scene I described earlier. All of them are facing towards the reader with the implication they are staring at Liza. Their eyes are drawn wide, their mouths straight, one slightly ajar. Again, their facial reactions to Liza's presence indicates to the reader a relationship between attraction, attention, and body. The boys are enamored. What is Anda thinking and feeling? When these scenes are juxtaposed together, Anda receives the same gaze that Liza did. These images of Anda serve as a moment of resistance to negative stereotypes about fatness for Anda. Her body is larger than Liza's and yet she is drawn walking down the hallway with a sense of confidence that up until this point was only reserved for her behavior in the virtual gaming world, and her weight played no apparent role in this sense of confidence.

### **Relationships with adult women**

Both Gabi and Willowdean have tense relationships with their mothers. Frequently throughout each novel their mothers are seen commenting on their bodies, both in relation to dating and their general health. Gabi, writes of her mother: "Sometimes she's wonderful. Sometimes not so much. When she says, 'No comas tanto. You're getting fatter than a pregnant woman,' she's not so wonderful" (Quintero, 2014, p. 26). Gabi's mother frequently discusses Gabi's weight in relation to her dating opportunities: "Ay, mijo! Obviously there's a boy who likes your sister and cares about what she likes. Now imagine if she lost a little weight and took more care of herself, how many more boys would like her?" (Quintero, p. 126). This is one of many moments throughout the text where Gabi indicates she feels like her mother is surveilling both her eating and her body.

Willowdean reveals that her mother was fat in high school but lost weight through a combination of puberty and dieting. She now expects Willowdean to

follow in her path, putting her on fad diets as early as eleven. In a flashback to a conversation between her mother and aunt Lucy, her mother remarks: "I want her to be healthy. Surely you understand where I'm coming from Luce?" (Murphy, 2015, p. 91). After an incident where Willowdean physically assaults a boy who made oinking noises at Millie, her mother's scolding devolves into a conversation about Willow's own weight: "I want you to be happy," her mother says, implying Willowdean's weight is the root of her unhappiness (Murphy, p. 132). Willowdean contemplates: "...I can't imagine that fifteen or even twenty pounds would change how much I miss Lucy, how confused I am by Bo, or the growing distance between me and El" (Murphy, p. 132). Here, Willowdean reveals the very complicated personal relationships that are contributing to her happiness. Willowdean's mother equates happiness with thinness and attention from the opposite sex, but Willowdean is continually seen pushing back against the narrative that fat women cannot find joy or love: "My body is the villain. That's how she sees it. It's a prison, keeping the better, thinner version of me locked away. But she's wrong. Lucy's body never stood in the way of her happiness" (p. 133). Willowdean frequently flashes back to memories of her aunt Lucy as she continues to grieve from her loss.

While Anda's relationship with her mother is mostly pleasant (they fight briefly over Anda's gaming habits), there is one particular scene that reinforces the trend of weight management by adult women. Anda joins her mother and father on trip to get ice cream towards the end of the novel. Up to this point in the story, Anda has been grappling with her role and behavior in the online gaming world and its overlapping implications in real world labor issues, specifically the lack of health insurance afforded to some of her new virtual friends. As her and her parents are standing in line ordering ice cream, Anda gets put in the center of an argument her

parents are having about dieting, calories, and ice cream. After her dad orders a triple scoop sundae, her mother advises against it. Anda declines eating ice cream at all and her father believes this is because of her mother's language about dieting: "Sweetheart, don't listen to your mother, ice cream won't kill you," to which her mother replied, "It won't kill you, but it'll make your butt bigger!" In this moment, as they are oblivious to what is actually troubling their daughter, Anda screams in frustration: "Jesus Christ, what's wrong with you, it's JUST ICE CREAM!! At least if I get fat and fall over I'll have enough health insurance to suck all the ice cream outta me! Not everyone does!" (Doctorow & Wang, year, pp. 136-137). Anda's frustration in this moment is not about a personal struggle with dieting and weight loss, and she uses the moment to speak back to her parents' discourse about body image and health.

Although not relating to body weight specifically, another interesting element of gender and body surveillance in Anda's storyline is her initial invitation into the gaming world. When Liza McCombs came to speak to Anda's class about participating in Coarsegold, Liza offered the girls probationary memberships into Clan Fahrenheit, an exclusive all girl guild. The catch, however, was that the girls must play using a female avatar. Liza reveals to the girls that in her early days of gaming, she always played under a male avatar, a detail she was not proud of but felt pressured to do as a result of gendered expectations in the gaming world. If girls can't be girls in a virtual world, what does that say about society's expectations of women in the real world? This storyline pushes against the expectations of women's bodies to exist in ways defined by others. Liza encourages Anda to embrace

**"All of the young women in these texts experience policing of their bodies and behavior and to varying degrees they work to resist those expectations."**

her identity in the virtual world which ultimately influences Anda's confidence in real life.

Windy experiences a similar moment of gendered body surveillance while playing on the beach one afternoon with Rose. They are both discussing how their classmates' breasts have been growing. Windy reveals that she is adopted, and as a result of not knowing her birth mother, she often thinks about her inability to know what her body might look like as she ages. This conversation erupts in giggles from both girls as they begin to take turns exchanging all the words they know for breasts such as "bazooms", "tits", and "ta-tas." Windy stands up, cups her breasts in her hand, and shakes her belly joyfully as she repeats those words. As this is happening, a pair

of older women walking by them, address them with a parental gaze and scolding tone: "This is a public beach, girls" (Tamaki, 2015, pp. 35-36). These women, unknown to Rose and Windy, reinforce a societal expectation that the women in public should behave in particular ways,

ways that silence conversation about bodies. All of the young women in these texts experience policing of their bodies and behavior and to varying degrees they work to resist those expectations.

### **Relationships with food**

Across all four texts, the eating habits of each girl were noted frequently and in various ways. Gabi's relationship to food was perhaps more central to her story than Willowdean, Anda, or Windy. Gabi unapologetically describes her love for food in many of her diary entries. Most of the time her language about food reads as enthusiasm although there are moments when Gabi's description of food indicates a more complicated relationship:

Never ask a fat girl if she is hungry. She's hungry. She's always hungry. Even if she is not, she is, because food is safe and controllable and soothing and salty and sweet, and it doesn't scream at you or make you feel bad unless you are trying on clothes. (Quintero, 2014, p. 222)

Her mother is often shaming her eating habits resulting in Gabi hiding the food she loves in various places in her room:

My mom found the Cheez-its. I don't get it. It's not like she's a supermodel. Why does she always have to be telling me to lose weight? "Es por tu bien! You need to be healthy. Do you want diabetes like your grandma?" (Quintero, p. 78)

Gabi's relationship to food is also evident in her writing style, often employing metaphors of hunger and desire in her poems for Ms. Abernand's English classes. In one poem about her dad's substance abuse, she writes: "Guilt of gluttonous/ consumption/ on corners/ corners him" (Quintero, p. 119). Consumption is a theme evident not just in relationship to Gabi's eating but in the way she voraciously reads, writes, and makes sense of her relationships with others.

In an early scene of *Dumplin'* (Murphy, 2015), Willowdean reveals that dieting is often a source of tension between her and her mother:

The last few days of school mark the start of pageant prep season, which means my mom is on a diet. And when my mom is on a diet, so is everyone else. Which means dinner is grilled chicken salad. It could be worse. It has been worse (Murphy, pp. 12-13).

Willowdean works at Harpy's, a local fast food restaurant, and her mother is often questioning whether or not she has been eating the "greasy food" served there (Murphy, p. 13). Despite these moments of tension about food with her mother, Willowdean is unapologetically enjoying her favorite foods without shame or guilt. Willowdean comically writes about the grilled chicken salad: "I sit down to eat and liberally spread salad dressing across my plate, because on the eighth day God created ranch dressing" (Murphy, 2015, p. 13). Readers are also treated to details of her snack habits, ranging from peanut butter, pretzels, potato chips, and cherry lollipops. Unlike Gabi, Willowdean seems better situated to separate her mother's insecurities from her own and carries little to no guilt about her eating habits, only annoyance with her mother for bringing it up incessantly. Both girls are positioned by their mothers to feel shame about their relationship to food, but neither text indicates that Gabi or Willowdean eat more than any other character in the book, nor do they eat as a means to cope with trauma.

In *In Real Life* (Doctorow & Wang, 2015), Anda's mother is often pictured cooking for her throughout the story. The very first panel of the novel is an image of huevos rancheros. Anda is pictured asleep in bed in the panel below, her mother calling to her from the kitchen: "Anda, wake up! I made your favorite! Huevos rancheros!" (Doctorow & Wang, 2015, p. 1). Early in the novel, Anda receives a postcard and a t-shirt from her grandmother. The shirt is adorned with a logo from Phil's BBQ in San Diego, where Anda and her family just moved from: "Thought you must miss that place!" her mother explained (Doctorow & Wang, p. 2). Anda's facial expressions upon receiving this gift offer readers an interesting moment of analysis: What does Anda think about this gift? Within the first two pages of the text, readers are made aware of two of Anda's favorite foods. As mentioned earlier, the cover of the



book also shows Anda's body in juxtaposition next to a thinner, taller body. What message, if any, about Anda's relationship to her weight and food is implied by the sequence of these visual and textual features? These are not the only instances of food in Anda's story. Anda is pictured later in her bedroom with a bowl of popcorn next to her desk and a poster hanging above the desk of a hamburger. She is also seen smiling and snacking on potato chips during a game of Dungeons and Dragons with a group of new friends.

Another worthwhile panel sequence for analysis is a moment when Anda is shown watching TV on the couch and flipping channels. Four panels of the same size are shown side by side, and Anda is drawn underneath them with the remote in her hand. Each of the four panels above her head indicate the image on the screen as she was flipping from channel to channel. The reader sees here an image of a double cheeseburger, a dog, a fat man with a double chin sweating, and a female musician dancing and singing "Ooh ooh, girl!" while dressed in what appears to be a white bikini with eight adoring hands (presumably of fans) reaching out to her. Anda's face looks annoyed in this moment, but the reader also knows she has just been grounded by her mother (Doctorow & Wang, 2015, pp. 96-97). The reader is not privy to Anda's private thoughts in this moment, but readers are seeing what she is watching on TV. What do these images reveal about the relationship between food, weight, and the female body? Are these images reinforcing or resisting tropes of weight and fatness? How is the reader positioned here to understand Anda's relationship to these commercial images? Although readers see this story through Anda's eyes, they do not always have access to her thoughts in the same way they do to Gabi or Willowdean. This leaves space for the reader to interpret Anda's relationship with food in ways that a reader cannot with Gabi,

where her language is telling us she wavers back and forth between enthusiasm and shame in her eating.

There is similar room for interpretation with Windy's relationship to food. Windy is frequently pictured drinking soda or eating (apples, Pringles, gummies, celery, ice cream, Twizzlers, and peanut butter to name just a few). In one panel, while holding a can of Pringles in the ocean, Windy explains to Rose: "The best foods to take with you in a floatie are apples and chips in a sealable containers. Apples are better because you can just toss the cores into the water afterwards and the fish will eat them" (Tamaki & Tamaki, 2015, p. 113). She feeds a Pringle to Rose from her floatie. In another panel, Windy is seen rummaging through Rose's refrigerator and asks if there is any more pop left. Rose replies: "You're addicted like it's crack cocaine!" (Tamaki & Tamaki, p. 72). Is Rose shaming Windy's soda consumption in this moment? What sense of Windy's eating is the reader making? Does the reader see a fat body overeating, potentially making assumptions about Windy's emotional attachment to food? Or is Windy showing delight and enthusiasm for food universally enjoyed by many different body types? In the scenes preceding Windy searching the refrigerator, readers see her with a can of soda in her hand joyfully and unapologetically dancing around Rose. She is pictured in her bathing suit bottom with a t-shirt tucked into itself exposing her belly. She finds the remote to the stereo to play music and over the next four pages, Windy continues dancing enthusiastically around Rose. What sense are readers making of Windy's relationship to her body? Will Windy's character be interpreted as a young girl with an unhealthy relationship to eating? To what extent might readers conflate Windy's eating with the shape of her body as compared to Rose? The interpretive possibilities in these moments rely on the reader, not necessarily the text itself, thus allowing a reading of Windy that

can disrupt ideas about food, body, and health. Windy can just be if readers let her.

### Discussion

My goal in comparing constructions of fat bodies within and across prose and graphic novels is not to imply a superiority of either medium of storytelling. All four texts in this study offer a “version of reality” (Parsons, 2016, p. 1) in which the female protagonists represent understandings of body infrequently explored in young adult literature. The female protagonists in these stories have agency and complexity; their stories were not defined by their bodies; and they were consistently talking back to harmful stereotypes and dehumanizing expectations of body and gender. These stories contribute to a corpus of young adult literature about diverse bodies in ways that are new and refreshing.

However, the visual nature of graphic novels offers readers opportunities to see stories with fat bodies without the language often used to talk about fatness. The visual permanency of Anda and Windy’s bodies coupled with little to no language inciting self-consciousness or fatphobia can allow readers to disrupt narratives of fatness rooted in shame. What do readers see when they imagine Gabi or Willowdean? The prose novels in this study position readers to believe the protagonists are fat, but is it possible that a reader might interpret Gabi and Willowdean as not being fat at all? Can their characters be read as just highly self-conscious because of the expectations to lose weight by their families and society at large? If that interpretation of Gabi and Willowdean is possible, readers are then potentially reading over the literal existence of a body that is fat. In the graphic novels,

**“By identifying discourses of fatness in prose and graphic novels, we can begin to disrupt the assumption that to be fat is to be unhappy and unhealthy.”**

the fatness of a character is drawn into a permanent existence across each page.

I am left wondering: to what extent is it possible for prose to write fat characters into our imagination without relying on language (by the protagonists themselves as well as secondary characters) that invokes fatphobia to show the reader their fatness? Even though Gabi and Willowdean’s stories were not about weight loss, they were still negotiating their bodies within a fatphobic world. Anda and Windy’s stories, while not entirely devoid of fat shaming and body policing, provide possibilities that a future of storytelling exists where readers see and read bodies as just different, without societal impositions of stigma or shame narrated into the story. There are certainly possibilities that a reader

will bring that stigma to the graphic novels as they read, especially since we, as readers, live in a culture that overemphasizes the relationship between weight, health, and happiness. However, the visual permanency of Anda and

Windy’s drawn bodies on the page makes it harder for a reader to deny their existence as fat.

### Educational Significance

Jerome Harste of Beach et al. (2009) calls teachers to consider their curriculum as a metaphor for lives they hope to lead and the people they want to be: “As educators we first have to be philosophers, envisioning not only the kind of lives we want to live but also the kind of people we want to inhabit the place” (p. 142). This study sought to illuminate texts that offer a counternarrative of body image for young girls. It is not enough to teach young women self-love and acceptance if educators are also not teaching society at large to dismantle prejudices

about fatness. I am not sure that work can happen if exposure to fatness in literature is reinforcing negative tropes and misinformation about what it means to be fat. I believe situating this work within the analysis of Young Adult Literature is one path towards combating fatphobia. Ultimately, the significance of this work lies in its potential to influence the way in which teachers, preservice teacher educators, and scholars approach critical analysis of characters, interrogate constructions of fatness, and make meaning within YAL. Critical Fat Studies, Feminist Criticism, and Reader Response Theory offer frameworks for examining assumptions and expectations about fatness and consider how these assumptions may be perpetuating unfair and irresponsible representations of female bodies in young adult literature. By identifying discourses of fatness in prose and graphic novels, researchers, teachers, and readers can begin to disrupt the assumption that to be fat is to be unhappy and unhealthy.

Johnson et al. (2017) write: “A critical stance often includes questioning the concept of “truth” and how it is presented, by whom, and for what purposes...A critical stance focuses on voice and who gets to speak, whose story is told, and in what ways.” With this understanding of critique in mind, I ask classroom teachers to consider the following questions:

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 pose to students to support them in taking critical stances towards readings of fat bodies in young adult literature, in the media, and within their lived social circles?

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