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**LI'L FATTIES:
A TEXTUAL ANALYSIS OF
GENDER, RACE, AND CLASS IDENTITY PORTRAYALS
OF OVERWEIGHT AND OBESE CHILDREN IN POPULAR CHILDREN'S FILMS**

A Thesis in

Media Studies

by

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ABSTRACT

Overweight and obese characters have and will always be part of society, culture, and narratives. This thesis uses textual analysis to examine the ways in which identities of overweight and obese child characters are constructed and portrayed in children's films. The findings indicate that overweight and obese children from the sample, which includes films from the past four decades, are likely to be white, working-class males. Females are nearly invisible as compared to boys; black and other raced characters are less present than white characters; and upper-class characters appear less often than working- or lower-class characters and are frequently used in moral judgment.

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Chapter 1

The big deal: An introduction

Watching a children's film, one may notice familiar or recurring characters. To name a few, one might see the nerd, the token minority character, the athletic girl, and the fat kid. In many children's films, these easily-reproducible character types show up as secondary characters to make up an ensemble cast, appearing to fall into formulaic, predictable molds which stereotype and flatten the characters. Of the aforementioned character types, the recent national concern of an obesity epidemic draws the overweight and obese characters under scrutiny and calls for considerable study of the functions of said overweight and obese characters in children's and family films. What roles do these children play? What function do they have in the narrative? What moral messages might they convey to the viewer? In what ways might formal techniques of the films influence the viewer's perceptions of the fat kid?

The purpose of this thesis is to begin to answer these questions by examining a collection of children's films about children protagonists in order to examine the ways in which overweight and obese characters are portrayed in the films and how this translates into ideologies and ideological messages. In order to consider the ideological implications of representations of these characters, it requires further considerations of cultural standards and influences beyond simple body image representations. In this case, it is important to consider, along with body image expectations, also film techniques, gender, and class issues.

At this point, it is fair to ask, "So what? Why fat kids? Why now?" To begin with the easiest answer, now is an important time to consider portrayals and ideologies of overweight and obese children in films as the population of overweight and obese children hovered just under 20% in 2007-08 (CDC, 2010). As this population increases as projected and grows into

adulthood, it is important to understand the identities and ideologies in children's and family films that are widely available. The use of overweight and obese children in films is not new (dating back at least to Spanky from 1922's *Our Gang*), yet the presence of an overweight and obese population within the United States is climbing and receiving national attention. As a mass medium, film's ability to present ideas about reality to an audience is undeniable, as is the medium's popularity among children. (Whether the audience invests in those ideas is beyond the scope of this paper—it should suffice that the ideas are produced and available for consumption by a willing audience.) Implicit in this ability to represent reality is the ability to name and identify those within it. The ability to name another person is the ability to take away his or her voice and independence, as well as manipulate his or her identity. That this happens everywhere is true, which is why we scholars must consider the ways in which naming affects different populations. At this time, as mentioned earlier, the increased presence of an overweight and obese population—particularly and notably among children—requires research to understand what messages are being constructed and conveyed about it, which ways identity is being changed or manipulated, and how ideologies change and reflect society. Since children's films have incorporated overweight and obese child characters for a long time, it seems pertinent to the study in this area.

Methodology

The methodology for this thesis will be a textual analysis of a selection of children's films with at least one notable fat character in either a primary or secondary role. The characters need to be integral to the cast of characters and plot (e.g. not a passerby in a street scene) but not necessarily the title character or protagonist. The method for selecting texts included selected

films from the author's prior knowledge of films with an integral fat kid. Other films were then added to the list by simply searching Google.com with keywords "fat kid films" and "fat kids in movies." Various websites provided lists of the authors' 'favorite' fat kids. The results of the searches enhanced my film sample in three ways. First, in returning results including the titles of films I had listed, my search showed that other people also considered these films to include fat kids and that this is not a personal or idiosyncratic construction I was imposing upon the characters' bodies. Second, the fact that other people had credited these films in online postings as having "fat characters" reinforces the notion that these characters are defined by 'fat' as their most salient and memorable characteristic. Third, this also suggests that the 'fat' character is a common enough character type to be noticed and circulated in public forums, thus warranting further study. This not only provided a way in which to accumulate additional titles of films that may be applicable for the study, but also to provide evidence that people other than the author do define a primary characteristic of these characters as their fatness, as well as justification for this study on what the ideological implications of such representations are in children's films.

Through careful, thoughtful and critical detailed observation, I intend to read the texts with sensitivity as to the ways in which fatness is demonstrated, displayed or developed through the fat kid character. As such, it is important to look at the nuances in the ways in which formal techniques of a film project the fat kid, as well as the subtle and implicit messages communicated through visual motifs, speech patterns, costuming, props, physical humor, and storyline. Potentially everything about the fat kid—what he does and does not do, is and is not able to do, says and does not say, where he goes and does not go—is significant to understand the meanings around "fat kids" in these films.

The films analyzed in this study are *The Addams Family* (1991), *The Bad News Bears* (1976), *Bad News Bears* (2005), *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* (2005), *Diary of a Wimpy Kid* (2010), *Fat Albert* (2004), *The Goonies* (1985), *Heavy Weights* (1995), *Hook* (1991), *Little Giants* (1994), *Stand by Me* (1986), *The Little Rascals* (1994), *The Mighty Ducks* (1992), *The Monster Squad* (1987), *The Sandlot* (1993), *Willy Wonka and the Chocolate Factory* (1971), and *When Zachary Beaver Came to Town* (2003).

Intentions and areas of interest

When trying to understand how the fat kid character is constructed in films, one area to consider is certainly the ways in which gender affects fatness. In the films, boys are exclusively the fat characters. There is a certain level of tragedy when females are overweight, as in *Little Miss Sunshine* (2006), *The Mirror Has Two Faces* (1996), *The Sisterhood of the Traveling Pants* (2005), *Bridget Jones's Diary* (2001), or *Precious* (2009). This persists through all stages of life for women, from young girls to older women. We do not see this same level of tragedy as associated with male weight issues; instead, we seem to view more comedy and complacency. What does this say about the way in which we view weight and sex? And, in connection, how does this influence the way we, as the audience, are invited to interpret weight and gender? How does the prevalence of fat, male characters normalize weight and body types? In what situations do the presences of excessive weight and masculinity intersect and define the characters?

Another area that deserves close consideration is what the fatness of the character signifies. In some cases, it seems parents are to blame, as in *Willy Wonka/Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* and *The Mighty Ducks*, where they overindulge and spoil their children. In another case, *Diary of a Wimpy Kid* presents a fat kid who is completely happy with himself,

even with weird quirks and an unusually close relationship with his mother. This relationship is posed as abnormal, yet the character seems to be a moral compass in the film. Some films have absent parents or single parents, as in *The Goonies* or *When Zachary Beaver Came to Town*. In *Little Giants*, the fat kid's parents are also fat—mirror images of the overweight child and seemingly responsible for his shape and size. How do we sort through these messages? What are the roles of parents in these films? What are the claims made about parenting through the mechanism of an overweight or obese child? How do these familial issues influence the way we understand the fat kid characters? What are the ideological implications about parenting presented in this manner? What is the social commentary imposed or stated about fatness?

Class is also an important issue to consider when thinking about the construction of the fat kid character. In many instances, the children are of working class or middle class families. And with the rhetoric associating poor and fat, and fat with poor, the construction of class cannot be taken lightly. The children in the sports films are clearly working class, as are the fat kids in the more adventure-themed films such as *The Goonies*. An exception to this collection of middle- and working-class characters is Augustus Gloop, the overindulged and overweight boy referenced earlier from *Willy Wonka/Charlie and Chocolate Factory* who is used to show the dangers of upper class excess in morals and character development. Yet overall, it is clear that most of these characters come from limited means. What does their class tell us about them? How is class expressed? In what ways is their weight associated with being middle class? How are their attitudes constructed to show their class? What are the over-arching statements and ideas the audience is invited to understand about class issues through watching the fat kids?

Next, considering race is important. The films (except *Fat Albert*, *Heavy Weights*, *The Mighty Ducks*, and *The Sisterhood of the Traveling Pants*) all feature fat characters that are

white. (The other films have African American, Jewish American, and Latino American overweight characters.) What is this overwhelming presence of whiteness? What does the lack of other races and ethnicities suggest? How does whiteness influence the presentation of the fat kid? Does race change the audience's interpretation or acceptance of weight?

When we juxtapose the ideas of class, gender, and race, we can see some interesting ideas begin to surface. The precedents of fat, white, males established by old Hollywood are a constant. Chunk, Karp, and Ham seem to be smaller versions of Ralph Kramden, Homer Simpson, and Dan Connor. What do these films say about the white, working-class male? How do these earlier characters influence the characters we see in modern children's films? What ideological statements regarding white, working-class males, are these films making and how? This area seems to be the most fruitful and interesting angle for analyzing the films.

Concerning formal aspects of the films, how is the fat kid shot? Is his body fragmented, with certain body parts consistently in the frame over others? Is he frequently filmed in wide shots? What are the visual motifs, such as constantly eating or holding food? Another area to consider is the way in which the fat kid is portrayed in relation to the protagonist or other roles in the narrative. Since many of the fat kids in the film sample are secondary characters, understanding the role they play is important, whether as a sidekick, moral compass, 'extra baggage,' or any other numerous ways they match up next to the main character.

Catalysts for study within the research

Research in many of these areas—body image, class, gender, race, film studies, childhood studies—is plentiful, but there seems to be a lack of research where all of these areas

converge. As such, it is important to compile research from all of these areas in hope that what is found, and the gaps of what is not found in others' work, will help to inform this research.

To begin, Staffieri's research in social psychology establishes a vital idea when considering the importance of this thesis: children do stereotype humans by body type, assigning more negative qualities to overweight frames and more positive qualities to average and thin body shapes (1967). Pair this idea with Himes and Thompson's (2007) notion of fat stigmatization: "Fat stigmatization is the devaluing of an individual due to excess body weight" (p. 712). This idea that young children engage in fat stigmatization pushes us to consider what in their media—such as films with overweight and obese characters—gives them mechanisms for learning such behaviors, as Himes and Thompson suggest through Bandura's social learning model (2007, p. 716). It also is important, when we consider how the characters in the films stigmatize the fat kid, to remember that the script was written by a human with biases and a subjective view of reality that translates onto the silver screen.

Morrison presents findings from a content analysis of top-grossing action films that main and secondary adult male characters are increasingly becoming leaner (2009) which, when compared with reports from the Centers for Disease Control, is not the case for the wider population. If we look at what the lean, male characters are not, it may help us to understand what is left for the overweight, male characters to be. Greenberg et al. (2003) finds that on commercial television, "deviations from 'normal' weight may serve to stigmatize men" (p. 1347) and are more likely to be portrayed in comedies than dramas (p. 1347). Overweight men (in situations comedies) are underrepresented and self-deprecating regarding their body shape for comedic intent (Fouts and Vaughn, 2002).

As it stands, the literature on fat film characters is rather slim. I have tried harvesting information from various areas, including social psychology, sociology, film studies, and television studies. Further research needs to be done in order to make this productive, though it seems that research is very new, very scarce, or very well hidden in places I have not thought to research yet. One option is to pursue this from a queer studies perspective, which should complement my critical/cultural and film studies perspectives. It seems complementary, as well, to spend time looking at female and male body image literature outside of a film studies context but in the realm of mass media. Generating an adequate literature review with prior research has been the most arduous task facing me in this study, but will provide for including a multidisciplinary perspective.

Because of the increasing overweight and obese population, the obesity epidemic in the United States, the prevalence of children's and family films, the power in naming identities of others, and because of the lack of research in this area, this thesis will pursue understanding ideological implications and the ways in which overweight and obese child characters are constructed in children's and family films through textual analysis informed by cultural studies. This thesis should add to the body of literature concerning not only how fat kid characters are portrayed in children's films, but also regarding the ways in which identity of overweight and obese child characters is constructed, manipulated, and conveyed.

Chapter 2

The corpus of work: Literature review

Introduction

In America today, there is a growing concern regarding the rising number of overweight and obese citizens. The rise is attributed to many different factors, including a sedentary lifestyle that comes with a loss of industry and agriculture; increases in processed food and fast food; sedentary entertainment activities (like television, movies, and watching professional sports); and sedentary nature of the technology age. Some suggest that weight is a health epidemic while others consider it a moral epidemic. Yet looking beyond the recent focus, overweight and obese people have always been part of society, including our storytelling. In the same way, overweight children have been present in children's entertainment for years, dating back at least to 1922's *Our Gang* as a notable example of an overweight character in children's film. Because of the relatively unexamined portrayals of 'fat kids' in films, as well as the current state of America's fascination with weigh (whether too much or not enough), my research interests lie in studying how these two areas of society and culture intersect on the silver screen.

If you have seen a family film or a children's movie, you have likely seen them. They are the goofy kid, the slob, the blissfully unaware, the pansy, the loudmouth, the human blob. They are the fat kids of film. There is something about ensemble casts that elicits the presence of an overweight or obese child into the narrative. For storytelling purposes or otherwise, just as we often find a nerd, an ethnic or minority character, a tomboy girl, and a hero, we also find the fat kid filling in the dynamics of a group cast. The fat kid is easy to pick out, often a notable character with unusual or obviously different personality traits, and a body that stands out from the other characters.

For the duration of this paper, the term ‘fat’ will be used interchangeably with the terms ‘overweight’ and ‘obese.’ Even though there is a medically recognized difference between these two categories of body size, the way in which they are treated socially is incredibly similar. As such, the treatment of these two, medically-differentiated conditions is often identical without regard for the established medical and scientific distinctions. As to reflect the general grouping and disregard of the nuances (of which one may wonder if they are really necessary or important at all in a social or cultural context—is there really a social difference between being overweight or obese?), ‘fat’ will be used in reference to both overweight and obese characters.

The purpose of this study is to examine the construction of the identity of overweight and obese individuals as manifested by children in film. As noted above, the research based on film and television concerning overweight and obese children is very limited, so it is important to incorporate a broader spectrum of work in order to draw informed and educated conclusions. Because of this, this paper will incorporate some studies based on both film and television that incorporate both children and adults. This thesis will look at existing research on how others (which social science would have us believe consists of the population at large) perceive overweight and obese individuals, inasmuch naming those of this body type and thereby assigning an identity. The thesis will do this by examining each topic—using gender, race, and class. This will aid in addressing why it is necessary to consider identity formation, portrayal, and projection in this area of children’s film studies. It will also consider the ways in which race, gender, and class influence how others learn to identify overweight and obese people. Finally, the thesis will suggest ways in which the field can look further and forward.

Basic framework and justification for study

The formation of identity is both individual and societal. Individuals understand themselves with innate feelings of their own person and simultaneously take cues from societal standards and expectations. Society not only views the masses with shaped identities for designated groups, but is transformed by many individuals asserting their own identities. Judith Butler accounts for this social-personal interaction, “Although we struggle for rights over our own bodies, the very bodies for which we struggle are not quite ever only our own. The body has its invariably public dimension; constituted as a social phenomenon in the public sphere, my body is and is not mine” (Butler, 2004, p. 21). Though she writes from the perspective of sexuality and gender, this idea that the body is simultaneously public and private is certainly applicable to the notion of fat studies. The body as a site of construction of identity takes its influence to areas beyond white, black, male, female, gay, straight. And so now, we will consider the identity of overweight and obese individuals.

Study of the body has primarily focused on women. From looking at the ways in which African-American women view weight to how Caucasian women are influenced by inundating media images, the impact of weight on the identity of Woman has been of predominant concern, and understandably with the rise of feminism as applied to identity studies. Rice (2007) writes, “Post-structuralist and feminist perspectives emphasize how bodies and identities are shaped and experienced through cultural representations and social relations. Unfinished at birth, bodies are molded and modified over the course of a life through the intermingling of biology with culture and society” (p.159). Not only is the study of the identity of fat people necessary here, but also the study of the mediated identity associated with fat people. As cited by Morrison & Halton (2009), Tiggeman & Slater concur that mass media are “probably the most powerful conveyors

of sociocultural ideals [in terms of appearance]” (p. 58). Because of their power, media representations must be considered in order to begin to understand the ideological and social nature of body image.

With the topic in mind, first, let us consider what Rice (2007) wrote regarding this area of study:

People construct a sense of their bodily self from messages, spoken and unspoken, that they receive from popular images and other people throughout their lives (Jenkins, 1996). This occurs when they grasp how others perceive their bodies and understand the personal and social significance of these perceptions to their sense of self and possibility (p. 159).

From this perspective, fat identity is crucial because the body is a visible, salient characteristic that people have, and it is an easy one to assign value and identity to as a self or an outsider. According to Rice, when one starts to recognize what others expect from one’s body, one’s construction of self identity is influenced. We can posit, then, that as one sees how others view a certain identity, one also learns how to characterize that identity, even if, and maybe particularly if, it is not one’s own. The popular images Rice speaks of are certainly applicable to the mass media, including news, television shows, advertisements, and, of course, film, particularly because of their pervasiveness and steady production.

On the influence of media and their ability to infiltrate the thoughts and minds of the audience, Greenberg, et al. (2003) argue that, “Just as media images of alcohol or tobacco use may glamorize these activities, media images of various body types may shape viewers’ perceptions of overweight and obese individuals” (p. 1342). Media images of fatness in opposition to fitness (Monaghan, 2008) easily perpetuate overly simplistic ideas of not only thin

people being healthy and natural, but fat people being unhealthy and thus, unnatural and abnormal, adding to and creating stigma for the fat body. If the fat body is made to be abnormal, it loses its power because, as Rice (2007) writes, “Many social commentators starting with Foucault have argued that power in modern society operates indirectly through creating desire within people for conforming to a ‘normal’ body” (p. 169). This constructed abnormality of the fat body—constructed in that there is nothing inherent about humans that makes thin ‘normal’ and fat ‘abnormal’—usurps power from this body type and creates it as an Other.

Developing this idea, LeBesco (2004) writes of Rosemarie Garland-Thomson’s concept of “normate” as applied to the fat body. The normate is a representation of “those figures who command power based on a combination of bodily configurations and cultural capital; their power is maintained through the deployment of standards of beauty, fitness, and normalcy which celebrate some bodies at the expense of others” (p. 76). In this case, the Othering of fat people reinforces a thin, lean as shape representing health and attractiveness. It further estranges the fat body from the concept of normal and reinforces the normate—the thin, “healthy” body figure—as the appropriate and natural standard. Rice (2007) further suggests that fatness is a “cultural signifier of body otherness” (p. 171). Garland-Thomson’s normate provides an explanation as to the reinforcement of the “common sensical,” and therefore powerful, ideology that fat is wrong, unnatural, problematic, and unappealing.

And what does that do to those who do not reflect positively the normate, or physical ideal? Monaghan (2008) writes that the “Guilt, shame and misery are socially constructed and personally experienced emotions among people who, sometimes from childhood onwards, are made to feel inferior” (p. 57). As such, the next section addresses issues of fat stigma. Then, she makes an important statement regarding the realness and impact of fat identity: “This is not an

intrinsic property of fat. It is about social degradation/regulation...” (p. 57). These expressions of stigma—guilt, shame, misery, social degradation and regulation—are apparent in some popular pieces of children’s film.

Stigma

LeBesco (2004) writes that fat stigmatization clings to the related stigmas of “poverty and nonwhiteness” and as such, deprives “individuals of their rights as citizens” (p. 63). She conflates these issues by recounting real life cases of fat, ethnic children being taken away from their parents in politically calculated maneuvers to associate fatness, ethnicity, and poverty with poor care and neglect of children. Knowing that this sort of fat oppression and stigmatization happens in reality, it is important to look for how our mediated culture reflects, promotes, or discourages the propagation of fat oppression and stigmatization.

That fat people are treated, viewed, and identified differently than other weighted people brings the question of stigma to the foreground. How apparent and present is this difference of fat people? The negative impact on overweight and obese people is identified in two ways: fat oppression and fat stigmatization. Fat oppression is, generally, a widely and socially acceptable discrimination toward fat people stemming from a fear of fatness (Brown & Rothblum, 1989). Fat stigmatization is “the devaluing of an individual due to excess body weight” (Himes & Thompson, 2007, p. 712). The differences are nuanced, but fat oppression is an active and behavioral move against fat people, whereas fat stigmatization is a more passive (but still degrading) view of overweight and obese people.

The stigma attached to the fat body gains power because the associations, personality characteristics, and ideas attached to it are camouflaged into the social landscape. They are

pervasive and promoted without much opposition. “The more individuals are believed to deviate from our culture’s body ideals, the more likely they are to be perceived (by self and peers) as personal failures, and the lower their physical and *social* attractiveness” (Klaczynski, 2004, p. 308). This constructed deviance creates power for the (th)in-group by vilifying and disempowering the out-group. Brown & Rothblum (1989) propose that fat stigmatization is often ignored or looked past by the commonly held notion that fat is an unhealthy choice and thereby “a target worthy of stigma and intervention” (p. 21). This idea of fat as choice is integral to the justification for stigmatization—if it is something one chooses to be, the consequences of it (such as stigma) are acceptable. Whereas it is not socially acceptable to denigrate one for his or her race or sex—over which one has essentially no control in the view of the greater public—stigmatization based on weight is unnoticed or unpunished because of the accepted view that people can stop eating junk food and invest in a gym membership if they do not want to be fat.

Again and again in the literature, a slew of characteristics associated with fat bodies appears and reappears. Characteristics such as unattractive, ugly, sloppy, unhealthy, lacking self-control, unintelligent, unskilled, unethical, dishonest, unproductive and passive (Rice, 2007; Greenberg, et al., 2003; Klaczynski, et al, 2004) are all used to describe not only what people think of real overweight and obese people, but also the way fat film and television characters are portrayed and consumed. These overarching and value-laden labels are an integral part of the stigma surrounding fatness. An important part of research that is missing is the way this stereotyping plays out in children’s films, as most of the research is based on adult portrayals and perceptions.

A major point to not here is that, as mentioned previously, none of these negative characteristics associated with the stigma of fatness are innate or intrinsic or inextricable parts of

being overweight or obese. These associations and character assignments may be a result of power structure, or created by media, or a result of media consumption, or a combination of these and other sources. But these sorts of ideas do exist and, at this point, it is important to seek to understand them and their impact on society, particularly in and through children's film.

It is particularly important to consider fat stigmatization in relation to children's films. This is critical for three reasons: the presence of the images, the presentation and format of the images, and, crucially, the age of the viewer. Messages inscribed with fat stigmatization are easily accessible to and presented specifically for young children, and their presence is undeniable. The importance of body image portrayal, particularly with children, is due in part to the potential for identity influence and impact. Social interactions, according to Staffieri (1967), can have influence on personality development and understanding one's own self (p. 101). Messages seen, understood, and learned from film are certainly some of the social interactions to which Staffieri refers. Children utilize stereotypes of fatness to understand what it is to be overweight, as seen in Staffieri's 1967 study, which showed that male children assign negative characteristics to overweight body figures (p. 103). Himes & Thompson (2007) further suggest that "Fat stigmatization is often presented in the form of commentary and humor through entertainment media" (p. 712). Humor and entertainment media validate the stigmatization—instead of critical examination of a prejudiced behavior, children see fat people and fatness as something everyone laughs at, something that is funny and to be taken lightly, and something for which most everyone can poke fun. Comedy also redirects the focus from fat as part of a person to fat as a prop or subhuman trait. Fatness, coupled with comedy for a child audience, presents early possibilities for the dehumanization of the people associated with it as it dehumanizes and

subordinates the entire fat population. That fat is accompanied by other identity markers further complicates fat stigmatization.

Gender

Let us begin by scrutinizing gender in the context of fat identity. Most of the fat kid characters in children's films are male, so it is important to take this into consideration before deconstructing race or economic status as it will influence our focus in examining these areas. When we think of memorable fat kids from films, boys flood our minds, but girls are difficult to find. Only if we stretch the boundaries or extend the category of children's films to include "youth films" or "films about children" can we adequately examine representations of fat girls.

Three good examples include *Sisterhood of the Traveling Pants* (2005), *Precious* (2009), or *Little Miss Sunshine* (2006). In each of these films, there is something tragic or spectacular (meaning made into spectacle) about the girl's weight. *Sisterhood* presents a young Columbian-American woman who feels she is failing to fit into her father's new step-family because her Latina thighs are too thick. *Precious* presents a young woman whose obesity is a physical manifestation of her lower-class, abusive life. *Little Miss Sunshine*'s Olive is told by her father that Miss America does not eat fatty ice cream. Though the girls in these films do find redemption for their body size, their fat is never taken as a joke or made to be funny as it is with boys. The tragedy of an overweight female is very different from the comedy we can find in a chubby little boy, as will be detailed.

The majority of research on overweight and obese portrayal and identity construction and consumption is focused on women. Not surprisingly, as unattainable and often unhealthy images of women began to flood the mass media, research examined the effects of advertising on

women's self-esteem and self-perception. This includes the ways women see themselves, see others, internalize these ideals, and are affected socially, psychologically, and physically. Unfortunately, the focus on women—while necessary and timely—left a rather undeniable gap in the literature attending to males and body image. While there is some research, it is limited and leaves much to be desired in comparison to women's research. Hebl & Turchin (2005) recognize this gaping hole in the research and suggest "...men are deserving of some of the attention that is currently, predominantly, focused on the psychological duress that women experience as a result of not meeting societal weight standards" (p. 273). The representation of male bodies as "increasing muscularity and decreasing body fat" that Morrison and Halton (2009) reported suggests that overweight and obese males are marginalized, likely overlooked, and need further research dedicated to the ways in which they are represented and identified.

LeBesco (2004) cites a few standard representations of overweight and obese males in popular media. These include "the wealthy, politically powerful 'fat cat,' the sweetly avuncular Santa Claus type, and the funny guy" (p. 75). This thesis later will expand this to children's roles as well, adding in personalities like the whiny baby (a la Goldberg in 1992's *The Mighty Ducks*) or big-mouthed bully (a la Ham Porter in 1993's *The Sandlot*.) These character types undoubtedly help to perpetuate the fat stigmatization in that they reuse the standard personality traits mentioned earlier, yet associate them specifically with a gender.

In their 2005 study on perceptions of overweight and obese men, Hebl & Turchin found that overall, men are perceived poorly. "In addition to thinking larger men were less attractive than thin men, they thought the larger men were less happy in relationships, less popular, less successful, less intelligent, and less professional than their thinner counterparts" (p. 273). If we consider that most writers and directors in Hollywood are men, and if we assume that this

statistic sheds some light on how men, particularly, stigmatize overweight and obese men, then we can begin to make informed thoughts on why the fat kid characters are shaped the way they are. The fat kid is perfect for an ensemble cast to be the antithesis of the hero (but not villain) or to highlight the hero through his own shortcomings because, by and large, socially, audiences already have built in characteristics and stereotypes for what to expect of the character. Simply put, it is an easy shortcut in character development because society has an understanding of the expectations and formula the character will follow.

Race

Americans see race as the color of one's skin, making it an important identifier that is difficult to hide. Just as it is difficult to hide one's race, it is difficult to hide one's weight, and so race is another site in which the identity of and identities surrounding fatness are shaped. As with many categories, the area is typically split clumsily into white, black, and other racial/ethnic minority. The importance of race in representations of fatness can be seen in a comparison of *Fat Albert* (2004) and *The Monster Squad* (1987). From a full African-American cast to a full Caucasian cast, it is illogical and maybe naïve to believe that fatness would be treated the same way without an influence of race and its perceptions, culture, and stereotypes. So in what ways are fat manifested in identity through race, and how is race played out or communicated through the presence of body fat? How are different races identified differently from each other as related to fat? These questions are merited when we consider LeBesco's suggestion that, compounded with the inadequacies of social class and citizenship suggested by fatness, anti-fat prejudices mirror some qualities of eugenics movements (2004). Here, she means that there is a strange preoccupation to rid the world of fatness, and rid the people of the world from their

fatness in the same way that proponents of eugenics attempt to phase out those of racial and ethnic minorities. While the context is slightly different, the idea of race and weight should not be left unquestioned.

Some may say that the cultural conceptions of attractiveness and weight are different for African Americans (and, inclusively, other minorities) than white Americans. Though there are some cultural contrasts between what is accepted, Lawrence Wallack (as cited by LeBesco, 2004) fully opposes this idea, saying that it creates more unnecessary identity distinctions that may not truly exist: "...To say in their defense that African Americans like fatness or that poor people appreciate a bit of extra weight is a forbiddingly neat way to cut them off from the rest of society, to limit their economic and social range" (p. 61). This reductionism is an often propagated oversimplification for how to easily understand the Other without further critical inquiry. Keeping this in mind, it is important to examine how different races are represented and the ways in which their identities are manipulated by these representations. LeBesco notes that African-American standards, as they become integrated into mainstream (read "white") American standards, usually are co-opted into accepting and acquiring "the embrace of a thinner body ideal" (p. 61). Recognizing that incorporation and cooptation into a manufactured, commodified white thinness ideal is a real occurrence for many races, not just black Americans, let us consider an interesting piece of research regarding media portrayals and reactions to overweight and obese characters through a racial lens.

Hebl & Turchin (2005) explore men's perceptions of overweight and obese males. They found that, in comparison, fat white men were received more negatively than fat black men across the board. This is an important consideration in that it may reflect what Wallack identified earlier as the general public having less hostile perceptions of large black bodies

because of the conception that ‘it’s a cultural thing.’ This understanding is even more plausible (and maybe more influential toward demystifying the identify construction of fat characters) when we also note that the same research found that white and black men alike stigmatize obesity. This sort of finding suggests that either African-American bodies have been interpolated into the white standard, as LeBesco suggests, or that Wallack’s point that cultural preferences are overrated in their acceptance as a viable logic for understand weight identity in the black community, or both.

A major gap in the available research is in examination of the characteristics that are associated with fat characters of different minorities. Future research should consider looking at the ways in which personality and identity are reflected by weight through race. This may, though, reflect the lack of visibility (in popular media) of overweight and obese people of different ethnic and racial minorities. One is hard-pressed to find an overweight Chinese or Korean figure, and Mexican and other Hispanic bodies are so underrepresented that their images are hard to even come across. This lack of images is all the more important for research and scrutiny as the few images may have higher impact on viewers since there lacks an abundance of them to create an overall (and possibly more diffused) picture.

It is important, though, to also keep in mind that race does not only include people of color. With the perspective that raced people are only non-white people, race easily falls into the trap of colored-ness, excluding white people from being ‘burdened’ with race, or keeping them above or beyond race. And while it is undeniable that a white privilege does exist in American society and certainly within the filmmaking business, this does not exclude the race of Caucasians or white Americans from being a factor in the portrayal and construction of their race

and weight. Comparisons are certainly necessary, and whiteness must not be excluded or used to cast as Other or exoticize those of different racial minorities.

Class/family environment

A third dimension to consider is the role of family environment and class, an area closely tied to race. This dynamic proves an interesting area if we think about two different films and the way they deal with class and family. Consider *Willy Wonka & the Chocolate Factory* (1971) and *Little Giants* (1994). Augustus Gloop, the overweight and gluttonous German boy, is clearly spoiled by his indulgent and doting mother. Their rich, upper class economic status creates in Augustus a sense of self-gratification and entitlement, leading to an appetite which ultimately leads to his demise in getting sucked into the fudge river. In contrast, fat kid Rudy Zoltec of *Little Giants* is securely situated in a blue collar status by the other children he plays with, the team from which he is cut, and his parents' occupation—sausage salesmen. These two opposing identities—upper class and working class—may certainly influence on the ways in which the identity of the fat kid is portrayed.

Rice writes that “Despite growing dialogue about body acceptance, overweight and obesity increasingly are interpreted as unattractive, *downwardly mobile*, not physically or emotionally healthy, and lacking in body and self-control” (Rice, p. 158; my italics). This interesting assertion plays out in mass media. Considering the public perception and the media character portrayals, such as Homer Simpson (from *The Simpsons*), Doug Heffernan (from *The King of Queens*) Dan Conner (from *Roseanne*), and Ralph Kramden (from *The Honeymooners*), it is not surprising that we associate overweight with a downwardly mobile class of people. These characters, and others like them, represent lower-middle or working class men, all

overweight. Generally, they are relatively genial characters and relatable if not slightly inferior so that the audience feels sympathetic and occasionally identifies with the character.

Writers Gard and Wright (2005) examine the ideology and morality of obesity in their book, and discuss family context. They reference the interesting perspective of German psychiatrist Hilde Bruch. Bruch blames childhood obesity on inadequate parenting: overbearing mothers and unenergetic fathers. She attributes overfeeding to mothers' fears of inadequacy and overeating to children's lacking parental love (Gard & Wright, 2005, p. 74). In this opinion, food and its manifestation as fat is a physical representation and embodiment of problems with and within the family. We can see this perspective reflected in films like *Willy Wonka/Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* (1975/2005), as noted previously, and *Diary of a Wimpy Kid* (2010), in which overbearing, doting parents represent an idea that fatness is not simply a singular person's attribute, but the overweight child's size is the manifestation of improper parenting and dysfunctional families, whether a result of wealth or poverty.

In a chapter in her book devoted to the economics and class assumptions of overweight and obese people, LeBesco (2004) highlights two major points that are exceptionally applicable to portrayals of fat children in films. First, she determines that merely being fat is a signifier of being a "failure at attaining citizenship in the dominant socioeconomic class" (p. 58). This suggests that not only do fat characters lose the cultural meanings of their economic status, but also their social status, which then devalues their education and occupation. Second, she suggests that the ideology of the Protestant work ethic aids in viewing those characters who do not apply to the social norms (in this case, fat characters) as "willful violators of traditional American values such a moral character, hard work, and self-discipline" (p. 55) and in opposition to the "efficiency and productivity required to succeed in our capitalist economy" (p.

56). This sentiment, compounded with the prior assertion suggests that fat people are lower class by nature and by choice—they are not of dominant socioeconomic status because they consciously refuse to pull themselves up by their bootstraps (or possibly by their belts?) and, as such, cannot contribute to America's economic system. Not only does this entrench overweight and obese characters into a predetermined character type, but it also removes any efficacy child characters have. Child characters in films are too young to have progressed in education, occupation or personal wealth to be judged in these areas, yet if we consider LeBesco's assertions, it seems as though fat kids are assigned these identities due to their size.

Chapter 3

The disgusting body: What it means to be fat in film

Introduction

Before being able to continue examining the fat kid character, it is necessary to establish what makes a character a fat kid. It is not simply the size of the body, but the way the body is constructed. Then, it follows, it is not simply the body, but the way the character as a whole is constructed that makes a fat kid. Fatness goes beyond body shape to encompass an idea of fatness as meaning a corrupted body and disgusting body, resulting in a corrupted and disgusting person. The corrupted person becomes a convenient vehicle for comedy and differentiation from the other kids in the film. This chapter will deconstruct the ways in which fat kid characters perform prescribed elements of fatness.

Though the following starts to distinguish the tendencies appearing with fat kids, it should not be understood as a taxonomy of fatness. The idea of a taxonomy brings many overtones of a positivist perspective this thesis does not embrace. Instead, it should be seen as a system of trends or characteristics that rise out of the films. The films are not created with intentions or directives to fit into these categories, but do have stylistic and narrative tendencies that produce similar characters. With this in mind, the next sections outline what makes the fat kid, 'the fat kid.'

Character names

This thesis will refer to the idea of 'naming' throughout the text. In other instances, naming refers to the ways in which others are able to apply labels to a person by assigning attributes based on the label. In this instance, the idea of naming is similar with characteristics

being assigned to the individual, but now the label is literally in the name of the character. The names for many of the fat kids in the sample make undeniable suggestions about their characters.

We begin by looking at the given names and nicknames of the fat kids. Spanky from *Little Rascals*, Augustus Gloop from *Willy Wonka/Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*, Engelberg from *The Bad News Bears*, Rowley from *Diary of a Wimpy Kid*, and Pugsley from *The Addams Family* all have names that not only sound silly, but suggest something is different about them. They all connote in their sound someone goofy and oafish, but certainly atypical and different from the other children. Spanky is a comedic name; Augustus Gloop sounds pretentious and sloppy; Engelberg is unusual and maybe even a bit diminutive; Rowley's name reflects his "roly-poly" body; and Pugsley suggests a likeness with a pug dog, known for their funny face, wrinkles, and stocky body. Many, if not all, of the names color the character through their connotations.

Some names provide an even more direct way of labeling the overweight and obese characters. Ham from *The Sandlot*, Porky from *Little Rascals*, Chunk of *The Goonies*, Fat Albert from *Fat Albert*, and Thud Butt from *Hook* are more explicit. Their names have direct implications to who and what the character is. Ham and Porky both relate to pigs, not only the food products that come from the animals but also Warner Brothers's stuttering Porky Pig. Chunk refers to a large piece of something as well "chunky," a sometimes kinder adjective used in place of "fat." In his name, Thud Butt is essentialized and reduced to reflect the size of not even his entire body, but simply his posterior. And Fat Albert, perhaps the most explicit name of all, is unable to escape the stigma of his size due to his unambiguous moniker.

In nearly all of the films, the names, in the very least, sound funny. This alerts the audience that it is acceptable and expected to laugh at the characters. This license to laugh at the

characters is directed by their names and can then combine with the size of the characters' bodies. The laugher is able to transform from laughing at the fat character because he is funny to laughing at the funny character because he is fat. The names of the characters are able to provide valuable insight as to how they are to be projected and consumed.

Food infatuation

Nearly inseparable from fatness is food. The fondness of food is an easy and visible way to Other the fat kid. While the rest of the children are able engage without distraction during the goings on, the fat kid is incomplete without food in his hand. The examples of food presence are overwhelming. *Little Giants'* Zoltec first appears with a jelly sandwich in his helmet. *The Sandlot's* Ham can't resist grabbing some food at the town's celebration as the gang races through the streets. Augustus Gloop's demise in *Willy Wonka/Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* films is his obsession with eating which causes him to fall into the chocolate river. These examples represent an incredibly common theme of food dependency.

But even when the food is not in his hand, one can be certain that food is on the fat kid's mind. Chunk of *The Goonies* exemplifies this. His hesitance to engage in the hunt for treasure is due, in part, to his fear of missing dinner. He frequently references the food he wants or the food he's left behind. The same is true of Engelberg—he is hungry all the time and food becomes a motivator for his aggression. In this way, food—even when it is not present—becomes an extension of the fat kid and the fat kid identity.

This constant and prevalent association with food raises many associations. The idea of continual eating suggests a lack of discipline and self-indulgence. It also conjures ideas of gluttony and even greed, two of the Seven Deadly Sins. This early Christian classification has

enough historical and cultural clout to at least to influence the way American society views overeating and its manifestation in overweight and obese people. The presence of food saddles the fat kid character with a host of negative associations even before the character has a chance to develop. When food is not exhibiting or enhancing character flaws such, its presence can become an extension of the character as extra baggage by which other characters are not encumbered. And of course, food consumption leads to food expulsion which will be addressed in the next section.

Gross body functions: Vomiting and passing gas

Gross-out antics are popular among children. The repulsion adults express toward body functions like vomiting, burping, and farting take the attention and adoration of children. These displays illicit laughter, groans, and reenactments from the child audience. But there is more than just comedy associated with the overweight children who perform or incite these memorable and disgusting body functions. Here, we will consider the two most common body functions among the fat kids: vomiting and passing gas.

In *The Sandlot*, Ham's pompous nature and obsession with The Great Bambino leads him to try chewing tobacco and share it with the other boys while on a carnival ride. The strength of the tobacco overwhelms them, and, lead by Ham, they all begin vomiting over the sides of their ride carts. Ham's swagger inspires the vomit-fest the boys experience, and thereby his corrupted body corrupts the rest of them. Vomiting in *Stand By Me* appears with a fictional fat character dreamed up by the storyteller protagonist. He tells the story of an overweight boy named Lardass Hogan who takes revenge on all those who taunt him for his weight by entering a blueberry pie eating contest. He eats, and eats, and eats and then proceeds to violently vomit all

over the contest's audience. The scene is graphic and vulgar and, even though it does not include the film's main fat kid Vern, it almost flawlessly cements together the idea of the grotesque body with the grotesque action and the grotesque person.

Passing gas is another key component of the gross body functions. Two fat kids are exemplars of this area: Zoltec from *Little Giants* and Goldberg from *The Mighty Ducks*. Zoltec is a bit dopey, but is known for his intense and continual farting. The other kids nickname him "Zolfart" and "The Gas Man" to reflect his penchant for passing gas. The only talent or skill he has is related to his gross bodily functions. When it comes to the big game at the end of the film, Zoltec's main tactic is to fart into the faces of the other team's defense, stunning them and buying time for his own team to make a play. Goldberg from *The Mighty Ducks* is also noted for his body functions. One of the notable scenes is when the team is in the Coach Bombay's limousine and Goldberg farts. Everyone blames him, but Goldberg denies his guilt. Whether or not he 'dealt it,' those who 'smelt it' assign him as the culprit because of the associations with the corrupted body and disgusting actions.

Excessive size

Another mechanism for classifying an overweight or obese character as a fat kid is obvious but important: size. Some characters can be large but not fat kids—the way the body is projected is integral to this. When the body is large, the character is simply a larger person. When the body is large beyond what is acceptable, achieving corrupted and possibly disgusting proportions, then the character becomes the fat kid, as is illustrated in the next few examples.

We begin with what could be the most memorable fat kid scene in cinema: Chunk's Truffle Shuffle from *The Goonies*. Fat kid Chunk is made to do the truffle shuffle to enter his

friends' yard with the rest of the boys. He tries to shirk the demand, but is forced into lifting his shirt and shaking his jiggling belly while the others laugh. He is finally granted admission.

Chunk is ashamed of shaking his stomach, but is forced into a submissive role in the group—the monkey that must dance for the delight of the others because of his physical and very visible difference. Chunk's excess size is an area of mockery and amusement for the other boys.

In a similar manner, Rowley from *Diary of a Wimpy Kid* is forced to exhibit his corrupted, overweight body during gym class. The unathletic children are all put on the same team for class, including Rowley and Greg the protagonist. The team is then selected to play as the 'skins' for a shirts-versus-skins game of capture the flag. Juxtaposed with Greg's lightweight frame, Rowley's body is large and made strange. We laugh at it when he begins to use the folds in his stomach to pretend it is talking. "My name is Bell E. Button," he says as he plays with and massages his rotund stomach. He then proceeds to run around during capture the flag, his stomach jiggling without a shirt to cover up what is socially repulsive or, at the least, weird and funny.

Goldberg from *The Mighty Ducks* and Zachary Beaver of *When Zachary Beaver Came to Town* are similar in that their weight truly defines their character's role. Goldberg is a large kid who is selected to play goalie because he can literally block almost the entire net by simply standing in front of it. In the same way, Zachary Beaver only enters the story because he is the star of a one man freak show. Zachary travels around as the "World's Fattest Boy," weighing in at 443 pounds. His purpose is to be stared at, considered strange and grotesque. The children of the town come to stare at him, as does the audience. His size defines his purpose in the movie: to be a disgusting spectacle.

Disgusting, corrupted body

In all of the aforementioned ways, the overweight and obese characters are coded as more than simply large children—they become fat kids. And with the idea of fat kids comes a host of notions, implications, and connotations about what can be expected of those who fit this category. Without much time with the character or character development, the stereotypes of the fat kid help the audience to interpret what can and cannot be expected of the character. Many of the clues come directly from the disgusting and corrupted body that makes the overweight child ‘the fat kid.’

From their name, to their food, to their bodily functions, to their size, to their skills, the traits of these characters make them outliers from the rest of the ensemble cast. Their differences make them corrupted and strange, spectacles for the audience to laugh at, though still similar enough to the rest of the group to seem as though they belong. The role of the fat kid is a balancing act between belonging and being cast out. As will be addressed in the following chapters, all of these physical characteristics of the fat kid are impacted by the social characteristics gender, race, and class. While the basis of these characters may be similar, the impact of the social constructs easily and differently affects the fat kid.

Chapter 4

Meanies and cream puffs: Fat boys in the movies

Introduction

Gender is a huge influence as to how we see others. It is an integral part of our schemata for understanding people: their appearance, jobs, actions, likes and dislikes, sexual expectations, and so much more. With that in mind, we will explore the ways in which the gender of fat kids is constructed, portrayed, and projected in children's films.

As noted earlier, fat kids in these films tend to be boys, and few fat girls in films are represented. We can assume some social implications of this. Hollywood—and society in general—has an undeniable aversion to overweight women, as though they are unnatural, disgusting, or wrong. As mentioned previously, films such as *Sisterhood of the Traveling Pants* (2005), *Little Miss Sunshine* (2006), *Precious* (2009), present images of young females who, though their stories are not based on their body size, are plagued by internally and externally imposed concepts of weight. Because of the influence of the body ideals impressed on females, those not conforming to the standards present a tragic character, or at least a character more tragic than an overweight boy who, traditionally, has less pressure to conform to weight standards.

Because of the reality that there are more boys as fat characters than girls, we focus here on how fat boy characters are gendered in these films. There seem to be two major trends in the ways that fat boys are painted: either as overtly masculine or emasculated. This chapter will look at a few case studies for each of these trends (and the gray space in between) in an effort to deconstruct and better understand how fatness affects gender, and inversely, how gender influences fatness.

Meanies: Overt masculinity

Overt masculinity is one significant way in which gender is paired with fatness. Through aggressive and exaggerated language and behaviors, the boys' characters are able to maintain a level of masculinity which otherwise might be compromised as a result of their appearance and the associations made relating to it. In order to work with their rotund shapes which would otherwise make them outcasts and targets for exclusion from group membership, the characters are constructed in ways that provide outlets to assert their masculine personalities. In these cases, their soft bodies do not translate to soft characteristics.

This overt masculinity does not reflect so much of a domineering sexuality as one might assume would be included in asserting masculinity. There are no clear womanizers, and generally girls do not tend to lend a dominant role in the displays of masculinity. In some instances, the boys attempt to draw the attention of girls, though love or sex is never a necessity for plot development. This can be accounted for by the fact that, as children, these characters are not yet sexually mature, with many of them being in the age range of 8 to 13 years old. While the fat boys may try to imitate devices used by adult men to attract girls' attention, sexual dominance or physicality is not a factor in these displays of overt masculinity.

An interesting, characteristic example of fat as macho is Hamilton "Ham" Porter, the loud-mouthed, red-headed catcher from *The Sandlot* (1993). Playing catcher reinforces the idea that his size reduces his athleticism on the field, but he still belongs out playing with the other boys. Ham is one of the more memorable kids on the neighborhood baseball team because of his colorful character and big mouth. He spends most of his time engaging in biting banter with not only the children on the neighborhood team, but also the kids from the rival team. In a classic scene from *The Sandlot*, Ham engages in a verbal battle with one of the rivals, hurling insults

such as, “Butt sniffer,” “Pee-drinking crap face,” and the ultimate insult, “You play ball like a girl!” As boys from both teams are stunned by the audacity of Ham to say such words, we can see that the character’s gendered comment separates him from association with lacking masculinity by his degrading use of the phrase while simultaneously reinforcing his masculinity by identifying who is like a girl, that being the rival team.

Ham’s character is rich with other displays of overt masculinity. His impersonation of his idol, The Great Bambino, is one example. He lowers his voice, puts on a questionable accent, and uses a candy cigar to complete his transformation to Babe Ruth. Ham is astonished and quite upset when newcomer Smalls admits he is unfamiliar with The Great Bambino. His disbelief continues throughout the film when Smalls admits to his lack of familiarity with things that, to Ham, are simple and staple ‘boy’ activities, such as catching a ball and using ‘chaw.’ During a scene at the local fair, Ham shows all the boys how to chew tobacco. After giving them all a plug, Ham sits in his Ferris wheel car, looking smug, self-satisfied, and like a big shot with the tobacco in his mouth. As the effects of the strong tobacco kick in, all of the boys begin getting sick, with Ham, in one of the film’s most graphic displays of vomiting, leaning over the edge of his ride car and throwing up on the people below. In another scene with less bodily fluids, Ham walks along the side of the public pool where the neighborhood girls are sunning themselves, flexes his muscles, blows kisses, and then yells, “Cannonball!” and upon flopping into the water, soaks all of the girls he just attempted to impress. These overt displays are comical because of their strange juxtaposition with very masculine behaviors, a kid who looks less-than-masculine, and the extent to which the performance is exaggerated.

Another good example is Engelberg from *The Bad News Bears* (1976) and *Bad News Bears* (2005). (He is essentially the same character playing the same dynamic within the

ensemble, with only slight differences between the original film starring Walter Matthau and the remade version starring Billy Bob Thornton.) Engelberg, the film's fat kid, is one of the loudest, rudest players on the team. Similarly to Ham, Engelberg's lack of athleticism lands him in the catcher's position, and we see him running slowly and wheezing because of the extra exercise. He is feisty and aggressive with a short temper.

Of the film sample, Engelberg's character seems to be the most defensive of his size, both in justifying his weight and condemning those who mention it. For example, when Coach Buttermaker comments on his food habits during the first practice (in the original, eating a chocolate bar at batting practice, and in the remake, dropping a bag of bacon from his pocket), Engelberg quickly bites back with, "Quit bugging me about my food. People are always bugging me about it. My shrink says that's why I'm so fat. So you're not doing me any good, so just quit it!" (1976) and "I'm on Atkins [diet]. I have to eat all the time, keep my metabolism up, so my body becomes a fat-burning machine so assholes like you don't give me shit all the time" (2005). Both of these instances put Engelberg on the defensive against those who would dare to critique his size and decisions. A bit later in the 2005 film, Buttermaker tells Engelberg to field a bunt which incites a colorful rant: "Here we go again, picking on the fat kid. There's laws against this, you know. Harassment. You better shut up before I tell someone you touched my pecker" (2005). The aggressive degrading of other characters continues throughout the entire film. Interestingly, by the end when the team makes it to the championship game, Engelberg's presence is limited in comparison to the role he plays through the beginning of the story and we hear less of his remarks.

These sorts of attacks and retorts are the ways in which Engelberg displays his masculinity. He defends himself against anyone who suggests that something is unusual about

him—particularly his size—or that he is not a typical boy as compared to the others on the field. By calling names, mocking, and degrading the others, Engelberg’s character is mean, but remains macho. He is a dominant figure within the group through his bullying of the others. By suggesting to Coach Buttermaker that he knows the system and laws, his threats of harassment, sexual and otherwise, give him some leverage among the group in showing that his is not helpless and will not be abused (or, more likely, treated in any way other than he’d like) without taking action. Even as such, he still is the recipient of many comments from Coach Buttermaker referring to his size. One example is when he wants to dive into the pool the children are helping to clean, the coach says, “No, don’t jump, Engelberg. You’ll flood the valley” (1976). Another example is the off-handed response from the coach, “Okay, tubby” (2005).

Another example is Zachary Beaver from *When Zachary Beaver Came to Town* (2003). Zachary is the headlining act in a one-man freak show. He travels into a sleepy, little Texas town in a trailer, and changes the lives and perspectives of Cal and Toby, two little boys going through a difficult summer in which one’s brother dies in war and the other’s mother decides to leave home in pursuit of a singing career. Zachary is advertised to the people of the town as “World’s Fattest Boy,” weighing in at 445 pounds. With his thick Brooklyn accent and perpetual scowl, it is clear that Zachary is not one with whom to toy. He is consistently rude and short with Cal and Toby, making sure they know that he is grown up despite his appearance and age.

Once Paulie (his manger and partner in the show) leaves town in pursuit of new acts to add to their show, Zachary adamantly protests against adult care and is insistent that he is able to take care of himself. When they ask where he is from, Zachary retorts snidely, “New York. New York City, ever heard of it?” His heavy accent suggests that he came from the wrong side

of town and is unimpressed with small towns and country life. He refers condescendingly to the sheriff as “cowboy” and the other residents as “cowpokes” and continues to do so throughout the entire film. Similarly to Engelberg, Zachary uses insults to establish and maintain a defensive position in the hierarchy of the children in the town who simply stare at him. Zachary’s frustration and anger are understood as resulting from being made into a spectacle as well as the loss of his mother when he was young, but it is also an effective tool to keep him masculine and to be taken seriously.

Engelberg, Ham, and Zachary are all supporting characters, and it seems clear that their weight is related to this, both in that they are constructed as overweight and are relegated to secondary status, as well as the fact that they are secondary characters and are able to fit the story and the ensemble as overweight characters. As compared to those who can be considered the protagonists of the story (Amanda or Coach Buttermaker in *Bad News Bears*, Smalls in *The Sandlot*, and Toby in *When Zachary Beaver Came to Town*,) their appearances clearly define them as not the hero. They are not villains and are certainly likeable characters in the film, but the overweight or obese character—the fat kid—does not usually find his way onto the silver screen as the hero. The main characters tend to be slim and, while possibly flawed in other ways, possess a body type which carries more positive connotations than that of a fat kid. The aggressiveness of their behavior can be read as a power struggle to preserve their masculinity and to avoid being labeled a cream puff or the like. But the ways in which this is carried out—particularly through aggressive and overt masculinity resulting in insulting and degrading others—may only reinforce social stigmas associated with the unhappiness of overweight and obese people.

Cream puffs: Emasculation

Another type of gendering that plays out in the form of a fat kid is what we will refer to here as emasculation. The use of this term is not referring to the traditional definition of physical castration, but more to the metaphorical interpretation referring to the stripping or deprivation of power. These boys are not the typical John Wayne, but more of a Woody Allen. In many accounts, their appearances and actions are deviant from the traditional masculinities of leading men. Compared to the heroes in these films, their levels of power as associated with their gender is reduced and limited. Even though the term chose here is ‘emasculation,’ it should also be noted that the intent is not to suggest that the boys in these films are feminized. The characters still remain clearly within a traditional understanding of what it means to be gendered as ‘boy’—there is no gender ambiguity or queering—but their personalities divorce them from the rugged, individualist, overtly masculine man we encounter in film and all too often attribute to ‘true’ manhood. And though they are only boys, the level of dominant masculinity referred to in the previous section is constructed to be compromised by their size and accompanying characteristics and personality traits.

The first example of these characters demonstrating emasculated tendencies is Goldberg from *The Mighty Ducks* (1992). Goldberg is a member of the Mighty Ducks, an ice hockey team made up of ragamuffin kids from a disadvantaged, city neighborhood. His New York accent coupled with references to his forthcoming Bar Mitzvah certainly brings up various stereotypes about the masculinity of New York Jews, suggesting that he might be less active or happier staying indoors. He is both taller and heavier than the rest of the boys, and is an interesting example of the emasculated fat kid.

Goldberg's lack of athleticism lands him as the goalie. Similarly to the catchers mentioned previously, the size of his body means that Goldberg's character is constructed to fill in a position with the least amount of movement, even though it could be argued that the goaltender in ice hockey needs to be one of the most fit and engaged players in the game. Regardless, he spends his time between the pipes for the duration of the film as an unenthused player, unable to remain upright on the ice for the first half of the film. It should also be noted that Goldberg, though playing a position vital to winning the game, is all but invisible when the Ducks play their championship game. While he may be protecting the goal, it is the other boys—thinner, quieter, and more like traditional heroes—who get an overwhelming amount of screen time.

Throughout the film, Goldberg frequently whines and often brings up his mother in conversation. At one point, in order to help him learn to defend the goal, Coach Bombay ties Goldberg into the goal, spread eagle, and allows the rest of the team to take repeated penalty shots at him. Goldberg protests adamantly, saying, "My mother would not approve of this!" (He quickly realizes he enjoys goaltending, only to be left tied to the posts as the rest of his team leaves the ice.) His mother dependency is much more apparent than with any of the other boys, and presents itself as a weakness in conjunction with his tendency to whine about any and everything.

Goldberg does have quite a few moments during which he could be identified as a traditional boy, such as passing gas when the entire team is packed into Coach Bombay's limo. Flatulence is a common occurrence among the fat kids in many of the films, but it is not as unique or defining a characteristic for Goldberg in the way that the excessive whining is. If anything, the fart jokes help to solidify his group membership on the team, differentiate him

from the few girls on the team, and paint him as an oversized, pudgy, teddy bear of a boy, contrasted with the other boys who, while misfits, are still more traditional representations of boys.

Another in this category of emasculated fat kids is Horace, resident scaredy-cat from *The Monster Squad* (1987). Horace is an overweight boy referred to frequently through the film as “fat kid” by both his friends and enemies. In our first encounter with Horace, he is being bullied outside of school, the bullies asking him “What makes fat kid fat?” Horace replies with a desperate whimper that he has a “glandular problem.” While this may be a likely and reasonable cause for his weight, in American culture, this sort of reasoning is akin to being ‘big-boned’—as a simple excuse for sloth and gluttony. Thus begins Horace’s emasculation—his rationale for being overweight is similar to Engelberg’s, yet instead of being a biting attack that puts the blame on others or a dare to question his size, this is a timid explanation that provides an internal defect as the culprit for his fatness.

Horace does finally speak up for himself in two manners, though both result in little more than reinforcing his emasculated characteristics. In the situation above, Horace tells the bullies he has a glandular problem, not “a stupidity problem” and calls them “assholes.” This, not surprisingly, infuriates the bullies who subsequently beat him up. At this point, Horace is helpless against the two ruffians and is only helped by Rudy, a rough, older boy who rides up on his bike, breaks up the assault, and humiliates the bullies. While Horace is not beaten up, he only escapes the bullies because someone bigger, stronger, bolder, and more masculine has intervened. At the end of the film, after defeating the monsters, the bullies again see Horace and say, “Hey fat kid, good job.” Horace, holding a pump-action rifle, looks over his shoulder toward them, says very dramatically, “My name... is Horace!” and pumps the action. The over-

the-top recreation of this classic action film move only further exaggerates the irony in a hyper-masculine representation of Horace because so much of his character development is constructed around the lack of traditional, masculine qualities that we see instead associated with thin characters, like courage and coolness under pressure.

Another part of Horace's character construction is his blissful ignorance of his friends' annoyances with him. Throughout the film, the other boys in the Monster Squad display short tempers, eye-rolling, and aggravation with his nervousness and obliviousness. For example, Horace defines the word *indestructible* for the other members of the Monster Squad. He is quite satisfied with and proud of his knowledge, but the others look at each other and roll their eyes, clearly exasperated with Horace. In addition to this, Horace, nervous and scared by the unknown element of fighting monsters, tries to convince the boys to be something other than the Monster Squad, suggesting "math squad" or "nature squad" so they can stay home and "not be dead. See, it's this whole death thing I'm not crazy about." The boys ignore Horace and his only option is to follow them with trepidation. Horace is clearly a follower, not a leader in this group, helping to further associate his physical appearance with a timid or less adventurous personality.

A final word on Horace is one that may bring a raised eyebrow, but for all intents and purposes, Horace's character could easily be replaced by the stereotypical sister-annoyed-with-her-brother's-shenanigans character type. (Though there already is a younger sister, she is a sympathetic, endearing girl who is smarter and bolder than one would expect given her young age.) His nervous, whiny, faltering, and oblivious nature can be read as closer to the construction of a typical female character, though aside from his tentativeness, nothing Horace does is specifically gendered as typically female. In this case, it is important to remember that as an example of emasculated masculinity, it is not suggested that the character is feminine, just

that he is displaying less of the traditional gender identities associated with masculinity on screen.

Diary of a Wimpy Kid (2010) provides another example of emasculation. Rowley, protagonist Greg's best friend, is about as cream puff as the fat kids come. Rowley is far from the traditional male persona seen in film and marches to his own drummer throughout the film. The main character trait that aligns Rowley with this category of emasculation is a very apparent naiveté. The first image we see of him is an overweight boy with bowl cut hair, wearing mismatched plaid shirt, shorts and a sweater vest, yelling "Geronimo!" and jumping into a children's ball pit. It is clear that he is an untraditional boy character and that his interpretation of reality is very different from that of everyone else around him. Again, the child is depicted as essentially Other by virtue of his weight.

The premise of this story is the transition from elementary school to middle school and the challenge not only to survive, but also to fit in and be remembered in the yearbook. Rowley becomes an obstacle in this pursuit for Greg because of his many untraditional qualities and obliviousness to yield to the norm. For example, his character is, like Goldberg of *The Mighty Ducks*, very connected to his mother. He often refers to her and her advice as the guide for his behavior. He also shows no wavering at the mother-son Valentines Day dance, wearing a red, silk shirt and performing an elaborate dance with his mother. This clearly embarrasses Greg, who feels that Rowley is not behaving in age-appropriate or gender-appropriate ways. This is reinforced when, later in the film, Rowley asks, "Hey Greg, you wanna come over and *play*?" Playing is for children—and Greg makes sure to inform Rowley that the proper phrase for guys in middle school is "hang out."

Rowley's body is also the culprit for him being a coolness liability for Greg. Though it is never explicitly stated that Rowley's round body is problematic, some of the ways in which he uses his body are. At school, when Rowley is put on the skins team for gym class, he takes off his shirt and begins making the excess skin from his stomach talk to Greg: "Hello, my name is Bell E. Button." Greg is embarrassed by not only this, but other physical characteristics of Rowley's, including his walk and the types of clothes he uses (to cover up his large body) which, later in the film, he tries to help Rowley improve to a more elevated level of coolness. Another brief but telling example of the problematic of Rowley's weight is in that Rodrick, the protagonist's older brother, refers to Rowley as "chubby buttons" and "baby hippo" during the film.

While Rowley seems to end up as the physical embodiment of the film's message—be happy with whom you are—there are continual critiques of his body and the ways in which it is unlike the other children, even though he is happy with himself. Rowley's body is a source of amusement for the film, not his wit or humor or cleverness, but his belly.

It would be remiss to omit Vern from Stephen King's 1986 *Stand by Me*. Though not a film traditionally thought of as a movie for children (rated R), the film is about children and includes maybe one of the most iconic examples of cinematic fat kids: Vern. Vern fits clearly into the category of emasculation. He is nervous, cautious, more than ready to abandon their mission, and a bit slower (physically and mentally) than the other boys. In one crucial scene, Vern's physicality is combined with his personality in a way that clearly exemplifies the idea of emasculation. As the boys are walking across the train bridge, they make it to the middle and hear the train rolling around the bend behind them. Frightened, they begin running, but Vern, who was already crawling across the wooden bridge, falls down and momentarily refuses to get up. Meanwhile, the train is bearing down on them. It takes Gordie, the film's lean protagonist,

to convince a hysterical Vern to get up and keep running off the bridge. They do make it off just in the nick of time, but this display of irrational emotion in a time of pressure (the fear of the inability to outrun the train due to his unathletic body paralyzes him briefly) is not something we saw in the protagonist who had little to worry about his weight keeping him from safety. While more could be deconstructed about Vern, this strays slightly from the idea of children's films, so for now it will be left alone, but will be revisited in the section on class and family.

Conclusions

In the case studies of Ham, Engelberg, and Zachary Beaver, overt masculinity is employed. These boys perform gender through aggressive language and behavior to maintain levels of masculinity that might otherwise be compromised by their physical appearance. The result of overt masculinity is that it does not reinforce masculinity at a level similar to the svelte heroes. Instead, it makes the boys into caricatures. Due to the nature of children's films, the likelihood of the characters being fully developed and three-dimensional is minimal, but the other characters in many of these films are not caricaturized in the same way that the fat kids are, as if a spectacle. These overweight boys who look like they would never be so aggressive—almost as though they have a chip on their chubby shoulders—become amusing because of how exaggerated their actions are. This gendering is used as a comedic mechanism.

In a similar way, the emasculation of the fat kids like Goldberg, Horace, Rowley, and Vern works as a comedic mechanism. Because the fat characters seem to lack a traditional masculinity we see from the average boy characters, the whining, hesitancy, and mother dependencies become over-exaggerated and a source of amusement. In these films, the masculinity is important not only literally ("I'm a boy even though I'm fat") but also important if

we consider a Freudian perspective incorporating power dynamics instead of biological sex. The boys with these emasculated characters not only appear less traditionally masculine in comparison to the other boys, but they also lose the power traditionally associated with being masculine.

The role of gender is important to character development in that it plays a major role in helping the viewer to know how to understand a character. Understanding how weight influences the nuances of gender portrayal—and alternately how gender influences the portrayal of fat characters—is important and relatively neglected, especially when it comes to looking at young boys on film. From our sample of films, two patterns emerge: overt masculinity and emasculation. In both cases, the fat boys are not portrayed like their thin co-stars or the heroes. Special treatment of gender is present with fat kids.

Chapter 5

Black and white and fat all over: Race

Introduction

Racial portrayal is a large and complex field of study. The purpose of this chapter is to examine the ways in which race influences portrayals of fat kids in film, as well as the way in which fatness influences representations of race. With many films using race in specific and different ways, perhaps to increase diversity or to suggest the presence of socio-economic status among the characters, the uses of fatness incorporated with race communicates certain ideas and meanings. Important films to consider in examining these racialized messages of fat kids include *Heavy Weights* (1995), *Fat Albert* (2004), *Hook* (1991), *The Goonies* (1985), and *The Mighty Ducks* (1992).

To consider fatness and race together, it is important not to reduce race to simply black and white. This chapter will take into consideration that while whiteness is often exempt from racial scrutiny because of the economic and power structures that privilege whiteness in the Western world, it, too, deserves critical consideration. In addition, Caucasian and African American are not the only two races. Other races and ethnicities require consideration of not only how they are represented, but if they are represented at all and what this means about fatness as well as what it means for the races or ethnicities.

It is important to heed Wallack's notion that fatness cannot simply be reduced to a cultural preference or aversion (LeBesco, 2004, p. 61). As addressed earlier, it is limiting and dismissive to cite an affinity to weight for those of African descent as a reason for the presence of large, black bodies in media, and it cannot be exempted from critical consideration. This reductionism takes away any power within the structuring and portrayal of black characters,

dismissing the presence of their weight as trivial and natural instead of looking at how and why these characters are constructed, as well as what messages they send. With this in mind, we will begin by briefly looking at Caucasians, then African-American characters, and finish with other various racial and ethnic minorities that appear as fat kids.

White

Most of the films used as texts in this research have fat kids who appear to be Caucasian. With the exception of a few, the fat kids tend to be white. This may be a manifestation of many factors. It could speak to the marginalization of other races in the media. It could reflect a cultural preference or tendency for whiteness in media production. It might even suggest a preference to avoid showing non-white races in stigmatized roles. All of these may play into the reasons for the overwhelming presence of whiteness. Even more fascinating than the reason why this happened and continues to happen, may be the question of what is said about fatness and whiteness through these images.

The images of whiteness are the most prevalent concerning race when it comes to fat kids. Aside from the few films addressed in this chapter following this section, the overwhelming presence of fat kids displays whiteness. This whiteness tends to look very similar in these films, as well. The white kids are mostly working or lower class, and aid in establishing a group of underdogs or out-group that is not *too* far out. Fat white kids without other conflicting ethnicities (such as Chunk, who will be addressed later) tend to display overt masculinity tendencies, though both sides and shades of the gender dichotomy are present within whiteness.

This thesis intentionally did not spend an overwhelming amount of time examining the portrayals of whiteness for a few reasons. As the dominant race in mainstream American cinema, whiteness is considered standard and clearly in the majority concerning racial representations and identity formations. Though maybe not always what we consider characteristics of it are normative in the narrative. The identity that is constructed for whiteness in regards to fat kids in film paints a picture of mostly boys, mostly lower-class, mostly definitively masculine, and mostly part of an ensemble of friends who also tend to have similar characteristics sans fatness. Though outliers do exist, these portrayals of fat, white kids seem to reify some versions of the myth of American-ness: fat, white, friendly, funny, and dominant working men.

Blackness as fatness

After considering briefly the context of fatness and whiteness, this section will look at how fatness and blackness are portrayed. Three films showcase fat, black characters. These include *Fat Albert* (2004), *Hook* (1991), and *Heavy Weights* (1995).

We begin with *Fat Albert*, the 2004 film written and produced by Bill Cosby, and based on his comedy and the hit television cartoon series of the same name from the 1970s. The story takes Fat Albert and the other Cosby Kids (literally) out of the television and into the real world to help a young girl named Doris regain some self-esteem. Along the way, Fat Albert and the gang fall in and out of trouble with the people in the real world, including becoming romantically interested in and catching the attention of the prettiest girl in school. Fat Albert, the title character, is clearly the character up for consideration.

It should be noted here that Fat Albert is the only character to wear a fat suit. The selections of the other films for this sample were made in order to represent characters with overweight and obese child actors; however, Kenan Thompson not only plays the role of Fat Albert, but also Roy in *Heavy Weights*. Because the actor is acknowledged as a fat kid in another, earlier film, and because the use of a fat suit is implemented only to exaggerate and represent his cartoonish characteristics, *Fat Albert* is included in the sample of films.

Fat Albert's personality is cool, even-tempered, kind, and jovial. He is the leader of the Cosby Kids, relaxed, and happy with himself and his friends. His signature greeting, "Hey, hey, heeeeeey!" exemplifies his outgoing personality. He is content with his body, even introducing himself as "Fat Albert" to the kids at school. He meets Doris' sister, the beautiful and much-pursued Lori, and falls for her, leading him to consider not returning to the cartoon world in order to stay with her. Lori is attracted to Fat Albert and shows almost no concern for his weight. Here, some cultural forces seem to be at work on the characters. First, we consider the notion that heavy weighted bodies are culturally acceptable for African Americans. Second, there is a precedent of overweight, male, sit-com characters romantically involved with thin, attractive women. (While this crosses the race barrier, an example of such a couple is Carl and Harriette Winslow from the television show, *Family Matters*.) Third, we can also consider the studies addressed previously suggesting that overweight and obese people are considered to be less sexual, less romantic, and less happy people. Fat Albert reinforces the cultural stereotype as well as the sit-com relationship model which ultimately oppose the usual audience reading of fatness. Unsurprisingly, though Albert and Lori do find themselves becoming enamored with each other, Fat Albert is denied a romantic relationship when he realizes his true place is not in the real world but the cartoon world and, and ultimately leaves Lori and romance behind. In this

way, the film is able to dodge the possibly uncomfortable (though common) idea of a fat person finding romance and love.

In a way that escaped Fat Albert and Lori, the excess weight of the title character is a blatant problem for Reggie, another boy at school who is interested in Lori. Reggie, thin and athletic, appears to have been pursuing Lori for quite some time, never catching her fancy. When threatened by the presence (physical and social) of Albert, he consistently degrades him in ways that refer explicitly to Fat Albert's weight, with names like "beefy boy," "fat man," and "blubber." Reggie is infuriated and becomes more vengeful towards the fat kid when Albert beats Reggie in a running race. It is clear that Reggie is unable to handle his loss and newly established inferiority to an overweight person such as Fat Albert when, after the race, he yells, "You haven't seen the last of me, fat man! Fat, fat, fat, fat!" In the film, Fat Albert becomes aware of his weight after it is pointed out to him by an outsider.

Fat Albert's happiness is a key to his personality. While his character seems to have some dimensionality, there are instances in which he shows a glint of the Sambo archetype (Leab, 1972, p. 1) from the minstrel shows and early days of film. His perpetual chuckle, jolly nature, and laughing belly lend to this, as well as his propensity to dance and sing little ditties when he is excited, happy, or with the rest of the Cosby Kids. His simplicity and honesty (for example, after trying on lots of expensive suits at a store for large men, Fat Albert tells the salesman he never said he had no money because the salesman never asked) may account for his transition from cartoon world to reality, but can easily be read as an expression of the simpler, carefree, pleasure-loving folk African-American children were reduced to in the past.

These characteristics reinforce Daniel Leab's concepts of the old stereotypes of African Americans in film: "subhuman, simpleminded, superstitious, and submissive. As portrayed in

screen they exhibited qualities of foolish exaggeration and an apparently hereditary clumsiness and ignorance as well as an addictive craving for fried chicken and watermelon” (1972, p. 1). Traits like simpleminded and submissive as well as exaggeration and clumsiness continue to be present in these characters. And though the specific penchant for fried chicken and watermelon may have dissipated, the affinity for food shines through in these fat kids. (Although Leab argues that by 1972 the Sambo character is essentially erased from American films, shades of the gross caricature remain present in small ways.)

Hook (1991) provides another character of African descent. Thud Butt, as a Lost Boy, is from Neverland, not America, so we will refrain from referring to this character as African American and instead will refer to as of African descent or, if necessary, African-Neverlandian. Yet, as the film was made in the United States by American director Steven Spielberg for an American audience, and as the character has an American accent, we will consider Thud Butt with the cultural ramifications associated with African Americans in film.

Thud Butt is our fat kid in this film. Dressed in a plaid Scottish tam, a square-collared shirt, and plaid scarf around his waist as a belt, Thud is one of the better dressed but more ridiculous looking Boys. (While the other boys are wearing tattered clothes, their costumes do not draw attention comically to their bodies or character the way Thud’s do.) Happy, trusting, and good-natured are some of his characteristics that, unfortunately, may be quieted by some of his larger, more salient characteristics such as roly-poly and comedic and negatively interpreted by his race.

Arguably the character’s most memorable scene is during the final fight between the pirates and the Lost Boys. The battle takes place on the pirates’ ship which the Lost Boys quickly invade. Thud notices that some of the pirates are gaining ground and coming up the

stairs. He takes off his eclectic assortment of armor and yells, “Thudball!” A (very clearly fake) pair of legs appears in front of his body, making it look as though he has pulled his own feet up to his ears. The shots cuts away and Thud rolls down the stairs, bowling over pirates in his path. When he makes it to the bottom, he soon sees more pirates coming up the gangplank. Another Thudball takes out more pirates as they try to board the ship as backups. The next course of action continues to involve Thud; as he sees a pirate standing on the far end of a loose floorboard, he stops on it and hits the pirate in the groin, resulting in the pirate falling over. As with the Thudball, the scene repeats immediately with another pirate taking a plank to the crotch.

But essentialized traits are not the only things attributed to Thud. He is one of the first and only Lost Boys to have his name stated clearly and memorably. The other Lost Boys, all much thinner and of varied races, tend to blend together. Whether because of his size, race, personality, or a mix of all three, Thud Butt becomes a very important Lost Boy. He also seems to speak for the rest of the Boys, saying aloud what the rest of their faces are expressing. This also helps to confirm what the audience should be thinking, making him a connection for the viewer. Though he appears a silly butterball, Peter gives Thud Pan’s sword before leaving Neverland, signifying him as the Boys’ new leader. This is a level of respect and leadership not seen in any of the other fat kids.

While his leadership may be noticed by Peter Pan, it is also important to consider what is noticeable about race in this character. Aside from the antics similar to what is seen in the other fat kids, one telling moment highlights Thud’s race. Thud quietly asks to speak with Peter Pan, presenting Peter with a bag of marbles to return to Toodles, an older friend of Peter’s who was once a Lost Boy but left Neverland years ago. Peter remarks that Toodles really did lose his marbles, and in a very stereotypical ‘black’ manner of speech, Thud laughs and responds, “Yeah,

he lost ‘em good!” Whether this was written into the script or the actor improvised, this speech pattern allows a view of an ethnic part (easily associated with lacking education) of the character not previously visible.

An unfortunate effect of Thud’s jovial personality is that it may invoke images of stereotypes past. In the same vein as Fat Albert, the round boy, happy to dance, blissfully unaware of troubles in the world bring to mind the outline of the Sambo character. This is not to say that the qualities of his character—trusting, loyal, leaderly, friendly, and jolly—are invalid because of his race. It is simply a suggestion that when paired with the idea of the Lost Boys, a group of children who have no troubles or worries, they easily compare to the essence of the Sambo archetype with updated images and more political correctness. In comparison to the other Boys, recognizing that his part overall was larger than many others, the importance of Thud’s physicality is important. Begin with the simple fact that his name is Thud Butt and the overt suggestions about his size and body. Then consider that most of the laughs he garners are not for quick-wittedness or intelligence, but instead for physical comedy. And finally add in the silly costume and Thud Butt easily becomes a character which, also too easily, can slide into racial stereotype that can overshadow and dwarf the good and progressive qualities of his character.

The next African-American fat kid, played by Kenan Thompson before he became Fat Albert, is Roy from *Heavy Weights* (1995). *Heavy Weights* is not only a film with fat kids, but a movie explicitly focused on fat kids. (The film is also able to incorporate three notable fat kids from other films: Aaron Schwartz (Gerry in this film and Karp in *The Mighty Ducks*), Shaun Weiss (Josh in this film and Goldberg in *The Mighty Ducks*), and Kenan Thompson (Roy in this film and Fat Albert in *Fat Albert*.) The plot revolves around one boy, Gerry, who is sent to

Camp Hope, a fat camp, for the first time. He meets up with many longtime campers who tell him about how fun Camp Hope is—from the great owners to friendly counselors and varied activities they all love. Unfortunately, this year, Camp Hope has been purchased by a new owner, Tony Perkis, with intentions of turning the boys' summers into a profitable weight-loss program and infomercial. As one can only expect from a film starring kids, the campers revolt and shenanigans ensue. The kids successfully chase out the owner and win back Camp Hope. And while the story is fascinating—the idea that fat camp should be fun camp, the children are proud of being overweight and using their weight to overcome the thin villain—the purpose here is to examine race in the film.

One character whose race visibly differs as compared to an otherwise entirely white cast of campers is Roy. Roy is African American and is also, as Thud is in *Hook*, the narrative link for the audience. He befriends Gerry early in film, singling him out on the plane as a kid headed for fat camp. As Gerry (and subsequently the audience) has questions about what happens at camp, Roy intercedes and explains the ins and outs for everyone. He is one of the leaders of the main group of fat kids; his personality is cool, smooth, relaxed, and a bit urban, especially in comparison to the rest of the campers.

Notably, Roy is the only African American at camp and, even though racially marginalized, Roy's character does not seem to possess any of the stereotypical characteristics historically associated with African Americans. This may raise concerns that the character is stripped of his racial or ethnic identifiers and, essentially, portrayed as a white student. While there is no behavior that is inherent in race, it seems as though the film allowed Roy's character to be African American without dragging in the usual stereotypes. His character is not terribly developed or three dimensional, but what the audience sees of the character is a kind, respected,

spirited, fat kid. He wears sunglasses and a fedora to the Saturday night dance. He defends Gerry and nonchalantly thumps one of the mean kids from a rival camp with the butt of a baseball bat. He helps out in the end-of-the-summer relay race competition by throwing a football through a tire. He is an average kid, left undefined by stereotypes.

Heavy Weights is not without faults. The film still ultimately provides a similar message as many of the other films do: self-control is the essence of the weight problem. The film is built around comedy, a good deal coming from the limited athleticism of the campers through physical humor as well as scatological humor. Many of the general stereotypes identified with fat kids are present, yet racially, in the instance of Roy's character, the stereotypes seem to be minimized.

Other coloredness: The rest of the races and ethnicities

With Caucasians and African Americans accounted for, the final question to ask about race is where are all the others? Some may posit that in the world of media and economic power, the race is dichotomous: white and non-white. Yet this is an oversimplification, as we often hear talk of black, Latino, Asians, and others. So where does fatness fall in film as 'other' raced people? While it may seem culturally and racially insensitive to combine these races which are constructed and consumed as very different, the blunt reality is that their presences are so limited that it is necessary to combine them to create a substantial group for study.

To begin, the presence of Asians (including all nationalities and ethnicities with origin and heritage on the continent of Asia) is miniscule. Only one film in this sample, *Little Giants* (1994), featured a fat, Asian kid, and his presence is negligible. His name, Marcus, is glossed over and left unused in most of the film, and he plays no specific role aside from a few physical

gags (falling off the monkey bars and using eye black to draw himself a mustache in the mirror) and kicking an unexpected field goal only to faint. Unmemorable and marginalized, Marcus is the only example of Asian fatness in the film, and an unflattering one at that.

Latino identity is just as difficult to consider as Asians. Since it is not generally considered a race but instead an ethnicity, it was questionable whether to include an analysis of this group at all in this chapter. But because the Latino ethnicity is more difficult to identify due to strong implications of race and nationality interwoven in the term, as well as the reach of the group of people who identify with it, it was included. Despite this group's large presence and intricacies, the only film with a child appearing to be of Latino heredity is *Little Giants* (1994). While looking for children to fill out their roster, the misfit team comes across Marcus, the Asian boy referenced above, and a nameless fat boy who appears as though he might be Latino. His race or ethnicity is never defined, his role in the film is negligible, and it is questionable why the character even appears in the film other than to provide another linebacker and possibly some diversity (as though adding in a few token races would truly diversify the cast of characters.) The question then becomes what it means to lack representation of an entire group of people in a type of identity which is often interpreted as problematic.

Similarly to the complexities of the Latino ethnicity, we now approach the Jewish ethnicity, nationality, and religion. Again, it was questionable whether not to include this, but the ways in which two characters were identified as Jewish made it pertinent. Chunk from *The Goonies* (1986) and Goldberg from *The Mighty Ducks* (1992) both self-identify as Jewish boys. Interestingly, they refer to their religion and ethnicities at times when they are in compromising situations they want to avoid. For example, Goldberg tells Coach Bombay that his mother wants to see him be bar mitzvah'ed when he does not want to defend the goal. When Chunk is

exploring the attic with the other Goonies, he is nervous and mentions that in his family's attic, "we only have old Hanukah decorations." In both of these films, the religious and ethnic backgrounds are left unlabeled for everyone except Chunk and Goldberg. The Jewish boys both demonstrate the cream puff gender outlined previously which gets paired with their ethnicities and religious affiliation because of the plot and dialogue.

The world is defined by more colors than black and white. While there seem to be fat kids of both those hues, representations of fat as Asians and Latinos are practically nonexistent. The portrayals of the fat, Jewish boys make the ethnicity and religion seem weak as well as comical, using the ideas of Hanukah and bar mitzvahs as punch lines. From the way these groups are portrayed, it would seem as though Asian and Latino groups have no fatness and do not struggle with obesity issues. Though it is difficult to say whether it is unfair that these 'other' groups do not receive fair representation as overweight and obese characters, or that it is important to show these groups at healthy weights and is a stride to avoid showing them as fat, the fact remains clear that these groups appear less frequently as fat characters with importance to the film.

Conclusions

Fatness and race are connected in some very clear ways. First, fatness is displayed in this film sample as mostly a characteristic predominant with white children. This may reflect the reality that in film, more characters overall are white, and many more of the fat kids are, in fact, white. It also tends to preserve the rhetoric of the fat, blue-collar, white male.

African-American characters are the next most predominant race appearing as fat kids. The difficulty of adding blackness into overweight or obese characters comes from the ways in

which comedy is executed with fat characters. Some of the jolliness and physicality—the dancing, the laughing, the silliness—can easily slip into similarities and tendencies of longtime stereotypes of African Americans. In two of the examples, the fat character has tendencies of the Sambo archetype, including the stereotypical love of dancing and gaiety. (Some will undoubtedly chalk this up to the white guilt of the author finding racist faults where none exist.) Yet both of these characters display stronger positive, raceless traits, including leadership and trust. The other film was able to construct a character without stereotypes or raced characteristics. Representations of African Americans were actually far less racially charged and insensitive than might be expected, though hints of old stereotypes did surface.

Asian Americans and Latino Americans are—for all intents—invisible, with only one character of each, both appearing in *Little Giants*. Jewish Americans, also an under-represented group, are unable to escape the stereotypes like the Asian- and Latino-American characters are able to do. Asian Americans and Latino Americans have such limited exposure as fat kids, that their roles are easily overlooked and, if noticed, quickly forgotten. The impact is minimal and able to avoid stigma and stereotype. Unfortunately, the Jewish-American representations are of loud, noticeable, and very clearly defined as Jewish—there is no denying the association and the traits are unflattering.

Overall, the racial identity and portrayals are surprising. Caucasian-American fat kids are portrayed similarly to their adult counterparts—we can see who they were by watching children's films and who they will become by watching sitcom television shows. Expecting more visible and definite stereotypes of African Americans, it was refreshing to see respectable qualities in the characters to overshadow glints of leftover stereotypes. Seeing the limited Asian-American and Latino-American images was not surprising, but the surprise was in how

undefined their characters were. The appearance of a very defined Jewish-American was unexpected, yet the negative traits were not surprising. It may be easy to question which race is portrayed better or which race or ethnicity is more stereotyped. Unfortunately, while the questions may be interesting or good for debate, they miss the point that is important to consider: how are the identities constructed and the way fatness impacts race. It is clear that race is an indicator of how fatness will be expressed, and that fatness is an indicator of how race is played out and portrayed.

Chapter 6

Blue (Hawaiian print) and white collars: Class

Introduction

The connection with overweight and obese people as downwardly mobile is the final area this thesis will consider regarding the identity construction and portrayals of overweight and obese boys. In this chapter, the ways in which class is communicated and influenced through and by the fatness of the characters will be scrutinized. Fatness is dichotomized in its meaning between the upper class and the lower class.

The association of fat with the lower class is not surprising. The rhetoric surrounding the overweight poor, lack of nutrition education, and rising costs of healthy food seems to be the dominant explanation for the fat lower-class, as well as the host of health problems associated with this class. But aside from health factors comes very clear associations with lower intelligence and reduced productivity (as addressed earlier in the literature review.) The presence of overweight and obese men over the history of film and television only adds to these associations paired with comedy, as many of them are blue collar, working-class characters. These notable characters include (but certainly are not limited to) Lou Costello, Oliver Hardy, Carl Winslow (*Family Matters*), Fred Sanford (*Sanford and Son*), Drew Carey (*The Drew Carey Show*), Norm Peterson (*Cheers*), as well as animated characters Homer Simpson (*The Simpsons*) and Peter Griffin (*The Family Guy*).

But fat characters are also presented as upper-class, though in these instances, it is not their association with football-watchin' and beer-drinkin' that lends to their fatness. Instead, it seems their wealth and abundance of material goods manifests itself onto the characters' bodies as excess weight. Their opulence becomes a negative factor in their character development,

whether rendering them as useless characters or as a site of more lesson learning. This chapter will explore fatness as it is defined by and helps to define both working class and upper class representations and identities, as well as the messages that are translated about not only the fat kids, but their families, too.

Blue (Hawaiian print) collars: Working-class and middle-class portrayals

In the survey of films used in this research, most of the fat kids are situated in a lower economic class. While there are certainly examples of upper class fat kids (and they will be addressed later), the most prevalent images are ones in which children exhibit traits commonly associated with being working class or lower. These markers of class include the way they dress, their families, the way they talk, the places they live, the friends they have, and the foods they eat. Fast food, mismatched or unfashionable clothing, and fat parents help to signify the child character as belonging to a working class lifestyle and family. The following few films will help to demonstrate the ways in which these signifiers play out in the characters' identities.

First, let us consider (in one, brief go of it) all of the kids from misfit sports movies. *The Bad News Bears*, *The Mighty Ducks*, *The Little Giants*, and *The Sandlot* all rely on all of their characters being underdogs—and what makes them underdogs more than having to play with a fat kid on the team *and* being economically disadvantaged in comparison to the teams they have to play? In *The Mighty Ducks*, the kids play on a neighborhood team that cannot afford uniforms and originally has to play outside in an abandoned yard without a coach. *The Bad News Bears* are a rag-tag bunch of kids, with the high number of ethnicities suggesting a working-class population that comes with living in Southern California. *The Sandlot*'s heroes are clearly less privileged when compared to their rival team. It should also be noted that the lack of parental

presence in many of these films suggests children of a working class family. Though all of the children can be identified with the working class, our interest is specifically in the fat kids.

The 1985 Steven Spielberg film, *The Goonies*, is about a group of miscreant youths and their search for buried treasure. The plot of the film and the portrayals of the characters help to situate the film as a story about the blue-collared lower class. The main characters' father receives foreclosure papers because of the impending doom of a new golf course being built on the site of their home. This prompts the kids, who refer to themselves as The Goonies, to search for a fabled buried treasure that will provide them enough money to save the house. Aside from the physical appearance of the area they live in—a small town by the sea, a bit run down, and lacking industry or vitality—the use of a golf course helps to position the characters (by proxy of the setting) as average, middle Americans. A new country club, threatening to take away the family home, is clearly presented as a villain (as well as impetus for the plot progression) because it is so opposed to the quiet, sleepy, lower-middle class town in which they live. As a member—especially a fat member—of this town, fat kid Chunk (later noted that his first name is Lawrence) is immediately associated with a working class identity.

Chunk's character is saddled with many of (what seem to be) the standard representations of fat kids. When he hears mention of the foreclosure papers, he responds, "I think they made me lose my appetite..." Then later, he exclaims, "Oh god, am I depressed!" only to fill his mouth with canned whipped cream. As noted earlier, he is the least respected of the Goonies; in order for him to get into the yard of the house where all of his friends are, he is forced to do 'the Truffle Shuffle.' Perhaps the most memorable and imitated part of the film, Chunk has to lift his shirt, expose his comparatively large belly, and then shake it and make strange noises. The others laugh at his expense and he is then allowed inside. Chunk also gets left out of the action.

While the other Goonies continue looking for the gold, Chunk gets stuck in a freezer and then trapped with Sloth, the deformed and neglected third son of the Fratelli mob. Though his relationship with Sloth does help to defeat the mobsters, it also keeps him inactive, removed from the other characters, and secondary in the plotline.

But aside from these expressions of fat in his character, the influence of his working class identity shines through in the foods he eats. Food is both a prop and motivator for Chunk's action—none of it being healthy. The first encounter with Chunk shows him eating a chili dog and drinking a milkshake as he sees an unusual police chase. Later, he mentions the time he lied about eating his weight in Godfathers Pizza. He is eating chips when he breaks the penis from the fake David statue. As mentioned earlier, he eats the canned whipped cream to calm his nerves. The other Goonies bribe him to come along on their search for treasure by offering him a Twinkie as a reward and, when he realizes he will not be home in time for dinner, he begins to complain and scrounge for a candy bar. When the kids reach the old, broken-down restaurant they were searching for, Chunk gets sidetracked on the porch by an old soda machine. He finds himself locked in a freezer with a dead body as a result of sniffing out ice cream in the basement of the old restaurant. In the final scene, when the Goonies are reunited on the beach with their worried parents, Chunk's overweight mother and father appear, donning unfashionable clothing with loud prints (similar to what Chunk wears) and bearing celebratory pizzas.

In these cases, it is not merely that he is distracted by food that aligns him with the associations of lower classed people, but the type of food. Many of the food items that Chunk pursues or is given is the stereotypical 'junk food' that is so often pronounced a cheap alternative to 'real food' that poor people buy because of its cost and availability. While it could be argued that these are simply the kinds of foods that kids like to eat, when paired with his appearance,

location, acquaintances, and family, these particular choices of food help to situate Chunk's identity and fatness firmly within an uneducated, corpulent, lower class.

Stand By Me (1986) may not be recognized as a film for children, but the character Vern is defined primarily as a fat kid character. First, the film takes place in the quiet, little town of Castle Rock. It is not metropolitan and seems to be a town focused around small shops and the railroad. The town also has a gang that not only threatens the boys, but also represents the underside of society. Adult Gordie, the main character, narrates the futures of each of the boys at the end of the film. He and his closest friend, Chris, do well in school and rise to esteemed occupations as a writer and lawyer, respectively. Vern, in contrast, drifts out of the picture and into the classes for the lower-level students. The narration informs the viewer that Vern got married right out of high school, eventually had four children, and became a forklift operator. In this film, too, the fat kid does not move above or beyond his social class, but maintains the blue collar life he demonstrates as a fat child.

Little Rascals (1994) pulls two fat characters into the picture: Porky and Spanky. Let the title alone speak for the class of these characters. The term 'rascals' suggests that the characters are mischievous little critters, not refined or cultured individuals. Porky and Spanky's names also suggest a younger, immature, lower-class nature—there are very few distinguished, powerful, or upper class figures (Scooter Libby aside) who sport nicknames like these. The name of the film and their character names tie them to hits of lower class lives. Porky's name also inextricably ties him to the idea of fatness. His role in the film is to provide lots of physical humor, such as falling into water and picking his nose. He is little more than a silly, country bumpkin.

Spanky also brings more stereotypes of common traits associated with the lower or working classes. For example, he is the president of the boys' He-Man Woman Hater's Club, with not-so-subtle shades of misogyny. Spanky also speaks with a Southern accent, a speech pattern undeniably associated with blue collars and rednecks, lacking education and destined for downward mobility. He is positioned as the scorned character out to ruin Alfalfa, previously his best friend. This reflects the stereotypes of fat people as perpetrators of moral misjudgments. Though he eventually reestablishes his friendship with Alfalfa and welcomes women to the club, many of Spanky's traits are less-than-subtle reflections—whether negative or positive—of the stereotypes aligning fatness and lower classes.

White collar: Upper-class portrayals

Fat kids as wealthy, upper class characters are much less prevalent or apparent than the middle- or lower-class fat kids. For these characters, fatness as a quality comes to take on different meanings than it does for the poorer fat kids. Here, their fatness becomes part of their identity in order to signal an overabundance of wealth or material goods, as well as overindulgence. The fatness also signals traits such as laziness or the reprehensible character of 'the fat cat.' The fat kids tend to be spoiled and defective humans as a result. The following section will examine three representations of overweight and obese boys: Augustus Gloop from *Willy Wonka and the Chocolate Factory* (1971) and *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* (2005), and Pugsley Addams from *The Addams Family* (1991).

It is important to state that *Willy Wonka* makes clear statements about behavior and morality. On the top of this list—noting that it is the first 'defect' to be terminated—is gluttony, tied closely with fatness. This is expressed in the character of Augustus Gloop, an oafish

German boy. His appearance suggests a rich upbringing, filled with anything he wants, namely rich, Bavarian foods. His first appearance on screen is an interview of him and his family after the announcement that he found the golden ticket. In both films, Augustus is dressed in stereotypical German garb (a button-up shirt, coat, and shorts) with blond hair and a plump face. Sitting with him, his mother and father look the same—plump and hungry. Augustus responds to the reporter’s questions with answers like, “Hungry!” Mrs. Gloop, his mother, primps for the camera and tells the reporter, “I just knew Augustus would find the golden ticket. Eating is his hobby, you know. We encourage it. He wouldn’t do it unless he needed the nourishment, would he?” Mr. Gloop eats the top of the microphone at the end of the interview. This scene focuses on the family as indiscriminate eating machines, able to afford to eat whenever they want which becomes slovenly and indulgent when compared to Charlie Bucket, the poor and slender hero. Also, Augustus’ parents become responsible for ruining their child with food; they are enablers also caught within the trap of eating and fatness. Throughout his time on screen, Augustus is seen eating almost constantly until his arrival for the Wonka factory tour. It is no surprise that the fat kid is the first one to receive a reprimand for his morals, sucked up a tube and shot into the fudge room after falling into the chocolate river and being unable to swim.

Taking into consideration that *Willy Wonka* is, in fact, a morality tale in which the poor, Puritanical, young man who is the quiet and mild-mannered (and thin) hero and winner of the ultimate prize of the Wonka factory, the message sent through the Oompa-loompa’s exit song for Augustus are extremely important into understanding the construction of the character.

“What do you get when you guzzle down sweets,

Eating as much as an elephant eats?

What are you at getting terribly fat?

What do you think will come of that?

I don't like the look of it!

Oompa-loompa doopity da!

If you're not greedy

You will go far!

You will live in happiness, too,

Like the Oompa-loompa doopity do!"

Reading over the first few lines, it is apparent that the idea is that fatness is an intentional choice, and one that is a result of simply eating oneself into oblivion. The next suggestions, with “I don't like the look of it,” are that fat is not only ugly, but that those who set the moral standards find this physical appearance to be offensive and unacceptable. We continue on with the idea that fat is a result of greed and something which will certainly hinder one, whether physically or socially or emotionally or otherwise; not being greedy, and thereby thin, is the ticket to personal advancement and achievement. And finally, fatness is a state of unhappiness only curable by seeing fatness as a problem in the same way that the moral compass of the Oompa-loompa does: as a problem that must be treated. At this point, it is hard to take anything away other than the idea that fat kids have a rather limited chance at any sort of success to be much more than a disastrous, amoral, human blob. The lesson to learn in this film is that an abundance of food results in fatness, and fatness is an expression of gluttony, sloth, and lack of will power or self-control. There is no account for physical biology of fatness—weight is simply a result of too much indulgence.

Next, we look at *The Addams Family*. Though at first it seems an unusual choice simply because the story (and family) is so strange itself, the Addams are quite rich and much of the plot

revolves around the way for a con man to find a way into their treasure-filled vault. Pugsley Addams is the fat kid in this film. Pugsley, the family's only son, is rotund and, when held next to his sister Wednesday, rather stupid. Pugsley is dim-witted and often the receiver of abuse from Wednesday, deluded praise from his father Gomez, and strange emotional responses from his mother, Morticia.

His sister attempts to encourage him to stop playing with a guillotine and come sit in her (electric) chair. The dim-witted Pugsley climbs into the device and Wednesday is momentarily stopped by Morticia, but then receives the go-ahead to electrocute her brother. In another instance, Wednesday has Pugsley tied up with an apple in his mouth, readying to shoot an arrow at him. He is clearly uncomfortable, squirming and trying to protest, but Wednesday ignores this and tells him, "Don't be a baby." Pugsley is congratulated by Gomez upon removing a road sign and causing a car accident outside their mansion. Upon finding Pugsley asleep on a silver platter after a large dinner, Morticia says he is, "curled up like a little entrée." The associations here are rather clear: Pugsley is treated like and portrayed as a little animal. With an apple in his mouth and later curling up on a silver platter, Pugsley appears pig-like. Gomez's reaction seems as though Pugsley is a puppy playing fetch with a street sign. As can be expected with most pets, Pugsley is not terribly influential throughout the film and has little impact on the outcome of the story.

What is notable here is that while the family is so disconnected from reality, it is their extreme wealth that allows them to be so eccentric. (That, and a bit of dabbling in the undead and strangeness that is easily overlooked by suspending our disbelief.) The family's wealth allows Pugsley to be porky and vapid. When the family loses their fortune, they become

completely affected by it, unable to function without the wealth that allows them the comforts of their strange life.

Conclusions

Class divisions communicate children's fatness in two ways: as a result of the undisciplined opulence of the upper class and the neglect of the working and lower classes. These two themes tend to play out in various ways, though the divisions remain similar. Undeniably and unsurprisingly, class is closely associated with race and, as such, characters of different races and ethnicities around the fat characters are used to situate them into identities of the working and lower class. The ways in which the characters dress and are physically presented to the audience (e.g., Chunk's outlandish clothing) help to express a lack of couch and culture, again identifying the characters as lower class. In the same way, the well-dressed appearance of Augustus Gloop helps his identity to become one of a more international, elevated class.

Comparing the portrayals of the fat kids in both the upper class and lower class categories, it seems as though fatness is not only more acceptable in the lower class (possibly because it is more widely expected) but also less of a moral issue. In both examples of upper class fatness, the messages about weight are intertwined with the morality of gluttony and the strangeness of otherworldliness. As lower class characters, the fat kids are just one of the gang and, though picked on or a bit frumpy, the characters are relatively relatable. This is less so in the films where their economic status is higher—they are disconnected and distant from the audience. Some of this is due in part to the depictions of the lower class failing to portray the

difficulties of life that come with being of a lower economic status, such as stressful finances, lack of material necessities, temporary or transient housing, or unemployed parents.

Parents are another important part of the class equation. In both cases of upper and lower class projections of fatness, parenthood is called into question and determined inadequate. On one hand, working and lower class parents are unable to provide children with proper nutrition, providing them with cheap junk foods and no economic access to better options. On the other hand, parents from the upper echelon of the class spectrum provide their children with too much, pandering to the every whim of a child who, already overweight, just wants more and more sweet and fatty foods. Though none of these movies ever explicitly state the influence of parents directly on making their children into overweight and obese individuals, the mere presence of many of them physically entering the scenes as overweight and obese individuals themselves coupled with their economic statuses as projected through their children is enough to incriminate them in the children's fatness. From either end, the parents of the fat kid are responsible for making the kid fat, in most cases, just like they are.

The economic class of overweight and obese children may not seem like an obvious message communicated in these films. But the messages based around the fatness are certainly intertwined with the suggestions of class, just as classed messages are incorporated into fatness. Though the films may project fatness as a lower class kid to be less insidious or morally offensive than the fatness of an upper class kid, the fat that the fatness is still viewed as a transgression of social mores and norms is one that transcends economics.

Chapter 7

'Til the fat lady sings: Conclusions

Through this brief overview of gender, race, and class, it becomes more apparent that much is left to be considered regarding identity formation and the fat character. In the book *Fat Oppression and Psychotherapy: A Feminist Perspective* (1989), Laura Brown writes, “A first step toward an anti-fat-oppressive stance is the acknowledgement of one’s own fat-oppressive attitudes. ... A second step is self-awareness and self-exploration to determine how fat oppression expresses itself in our own lives” (Brown & Rothblum, p. 27). This thesis has attempted to do both: first, acknowledging that we live in a society in which overweight and obese people exist and are oppressed and stigmatized for their shape and size; and second, looking at the ways in which these stigmatizations play out via race, gender, and class portrayals in the media, particularly in children’s film.

Concerning gender, we can make the sweeping statement that men generally have greater social acceptance in bearing more weight than women. But on screen—and maybe in the changing public—we see a different story. Juxtaposed with a thin hero, an overweight male is less likely to be romantically involved, to be successful, or avoid judgment from the audience. He is forced to compensate for his masculinity in other ways to cover a soft body that associates him with femininity. At both child and adult levels, these types of representations shape the ways in which fatness contributes to identity ideals, as well as our concept of masculinity and what it means to be a man.

In terms of race, it is important to refrain from the reductionism that assigns weight only as a cultural value to minority races or ethnicities. This not only oversimplifies the nuances of whatever may be considered to actually be cultural values of a group, but it also excludes the

implications of the influences of the greater society on the ways in which differently weighted people of different races are portrayed and consumed. As white men are judged more harshly for their excess weight than black men, it is important to consider why this occurs and the ways in which these social ideas are perpetuated. It is also necessary and important to avoid reducing the world to (literally) black and white, but incorporate overweight and obese characters of various races and ethnicities into identity studies associated with weight.

Lower class and downward mobility is clearly associated with overweight and obese people. It is important here not only to consider the ways in which fatness is translated through class and class through fatness, but also the ways in which the Horatio Alger myth is used to include or exclude fatness. How are people divided as economically successful by weight? How is weight inhibitive for attaining a higher class? How does the fact that American mass media attempt to avoid recognizing the United States as a classed system affect portrayals and fat identity? Class leaves many options open for future study concerning the ways in which fatness is identified with personal economics.

These three areas are interconnected, and we see that the identities of the overweight and obese characters are intertwined around all of these attributes, and it is difficult to separate one from another. Race, social class, and gender all influence the ways in which one is perceived, and certainly the way in which characters are constructed in narrative films. Add overweight and obesity into the mix, and there is another dimension that influences not only the ways in which fatness as an identity is understood, but affects the ways in which gender, race, and class are shaped. If we consider all the small ways in which fat people are negatively stereotyped, or marginalized, or made to be spectacles, or forgotten, or left unacknowledged, or ignored, or mocked, there is more than enough evidence that those with the attribute of fatness are

stigmatized and oppressed. Moving forward academically, it is important to read critically the social messages being communicated and reinforced through popular media, like film, television shows, Internet fads, and magazines. It is particularly necessary to consider these messages and the ways in which they are marketed to and packaged for child audiences.

The films in this sample all utilize overweight and obese characters. This thesis examines the ways in which gender, race, and class are affected by and affect portrayals and identity formation of fatness. With many findings in each area, the fat kid character appears to have multiple influences on how the character's identity is constructed and portrayed. To recap, we will again look at the conclusions from each, individual section (gender, race, and class) and then draw overall conclusions. The last section will include suggestions for future research in the area of fat kids in children's films.

Gender, race, and class

In the section on gender, it appears that fat characters are predominantly boys, which may be influenced by the cultural and social tragedy associated with fat girls. Boys are less associated with this stigma, and more easily associated with comedy. The fat boys in this sample tend to be constructed with genders in two ways, notably as meanies and cream puffs. The meanies exhibit an overt masculinity with aggressive and domineering behaviors in order to establish the masculinity that their bodies may not reflect. In contrast, the cream puff tend to be more reserved, easily picked on, more nervous, and more clearly aligned with the lacking masculinity that is stereotyped with overweight males. The characters are able to deviate from these categories, but after their momentary lapses, they generally return to the same molds.

Race proves to be a curious category. Though American cultural conceptions might presume that most of the fat kids would be African American, the majority of the films showcased overweight and obese children raced as white. Only a few films had fat black characters, and even less were of other races or ethnicities. The representations of African Americans, though not overtly racist in their portrayals, seem to glint with bits of stereotypes from the past age of minstrel shows. Touches of happy, laughing, worry-free Sambo characteristics are apparent in Fat Albert. The sassy, cocky, urban Zip Coon shows up in Roy from *Heavy Weights*. (This may be argued as over-analysis of the past in the present and a result from the author's own liberal, white guilt, but when considering race, particularly that of an oppressed people, should the past ever be left unconsidered?) The other ethnicity acknowledged in the films is seen with the Jewish characters. Both boys, Goldberg in *The Mighty Ducks* and Horace in *The Monster Squad*, are undoubtedly identified as less masculine, both invoking their religion and associated ethnicities when displaying these compromising identities. Race, though subtle, certainly influences and is influenced by fatness.

Regarding class, a dichotomy appears. The two categories into which the characters fit are, unsurprisingly, the upper class and the lower or working class. Some of these divisions are less distinct, but as with gender portrayals, the kids tend to fall into one of the two categories. The rich, fat kids in this sample are used as moral lessons, showcasing a lack of self-restraint and values. Through the ways fat kids of lower classes are projected, it seems that these classes are more acceptable to fatness. This may be due in part to both the social expectations for fat people to be downwardly mobile, as well as the increased fun and sociability of the fat kids in the films. Incorporated with class is also the family situation. Parents seem to be at fault for the fatness of their kids in that the fat kids seem to be from the same mold as their parents in their fatness. In

some ways this may suggest that fatness is hereditary or biological, but there are so many examples of lifestyle choices that parents make to entrap their children in a life of fatness. The two classes are able to make distinct statements about fatness and vice versa.

Further conclusions

Taking into account the conclusions drawn in the individual areas in the previous chapters, the next step is to synthesize the messages and meanings in order to understand how these different attributes and identity constructions influence each other. In order to do this, we will now look at how each of these areas affects the others and influences the ways in which fatness is portrayed and projected onto fat child characters in children's films.

In the realm of fatness, there is a trend of white, working class males portrayed by these characters. While not all of them fall into these characters, the overall picture this sample of films paints is one that is overwhelmingly male, predominantly working class, and mostly white. Many of the other children in the films are also white, working class, and male so this should not be misconstrued that fat characters are the only ones to possess these characteristics. It does seem that fat characters are more than likely to carry these qualities, particularly as males and working class.

A further consideration of this character type is specifically racial. The question is: If it is a commonly held notion that many people quickly and easily attribute weight to be a cultural preference or liking of African Americans, then why are the majority of the overweight and obese boys in these films Caucasian instead of black? This may be an executive decision of the directors and producers in attempts to correct this shortsighted and uneducated idea. It may also be a reflection of white, liberal guilt or fear of showing black people in white is a stigmatized

role. Or, it may be representative of the longstanding and deep-seated (and documented) trend to exclude African Americans in film and television.

When it comes to children watching children's or family films, the ensemble casts may overwhelm children. Though all the characters are part protagonists as members of the groups, fatness helps to differentiate the major characters and leaders within the group. With this consideration, in the same way as one might find with the nerd, the girl, or the ethnic or racial minority characters, fat kids help to differentiate and define who is the hero of the film by negation and establishment of who is *not* the hero. Fat kids do not look or act like the star, with many of their characteristics and traits being less than desirable. Their size and shape coupled with their personalities helps to create a contrast with the thinner, better-looking kid or kids in the group and denote them as the heroes. In this way, fat kids are a visual clue as to who is more likely to be successful and, in essence, important.

Direction and suggestions for future research

Future research is important in this area. It cannot be stressed enough how limited the attention to fat kids in films has been. In order to continue the scholarship, many cues can be taken from the findings uncovered in this research. We can also enrich and develop the field by examining the spaces which this thesis was unable to cover. Because of the lack of prior scholarship in this area, this piece attempts to draw together the existing writing as well as draw new conclusions. Because of the general approach, this allows plenty of opportunities and spaces for new and more specific research.

First of all, it is important to not only look at this area further, but to look into this more deeply. In the developing field of fat studies, incorporating race, gender, and class into the

research can only increase the depth and worth of the research. Acknowledging that more than simply fatness impacts the ways in which characters are crafted, constructed, and portrayed, utilizing these factors will help to explain how and why fatness is communicated as it is.

Regarding communication, there are more components of mediated communication beyond children's film. While there has already been some research on fat adults in film and television, it is necessary to keep the focus on fat kids. And then, once the focus is well-affixed to children, the next move is to expand the study to incorporate not only film and television, but also advertisements, newspapers, Internet, and new media. This allows for so many more questions to be asked, such as frequency of presence, characteristics, roles in the narratives, and certainly comparative study.

Comparative study also allows for examination not only between media, but also between countries. International comparisons and perspectives on overweight and obese characters is an important area that could certainly utilize other research. This may be especially interesting when comparing the very present stigma associated with overweight and obese people in America's social scene and other major film producing countries, such as Nigeria or India. Taking a look at overweight and obesity portrayal in relation to gender through an international lens may provide further insight for more study.

Finally, though much of this research can be done in a qualitative study, it invites quantitative research as well. For example, there could be significant benefits from content analyses to determine the amount of time fat characters have on screen, or the number of times they are placed in humiliating or compromising situations, receive negative or demeaning comments, or are praised and positively reinforced.

The merging of fat studies with media studies is an exciting area with much opportunity for discovery. Beyond the contributors we examined in this paper, there are many other social phenomena that may influence the way that fat people are portrayed, viewed, consumed, and treated. The opportunities are great, not only for increasing the body of scholarship, but also for expanding the way that overweight and obese people are considered by the rest of the population. From children's films to popular reality television shows like *The Biggest Loser*, images of fat people are everywhere and in the same way that African Americans, gays and lesbians, and women have had increased attention paid to their characters, overweight and obese bodies require and deserve the same recognition and scholarship. This thesis is a first step in that direction.

Appendix

Character Chart

Character	Title (Year)	Identifying Characteristics
Augustus Gloop	Willy Wonka and the Chocolate Factory (1971)	White, upper class, perpetually hungry, oafish, first to fall into one of Wonka's traps
Augustus Gloop	Charlie and the Chocolate Factory (2005)	White, upper class, perpetually hungry, oafish, first to fall into one of Wonka's traps
Lawrence 'Chunk' Cohen	The Goonies (1985)	Jewish, lower class, whiner, left behind during action, preoccupied with food
Hamilton "Ham" Porter	The Sandlot (1993)	White, lower class, loud-mouthed, catcher, Babe Ruth fan, macho
Rowley Jefferson	Diary of a Wimpy Kid (2010)	White, middle class, oblivious to what's 'cool,' forgiving, friendly
Greg Goldberg	The Mighty Ducks (1992)	Jewish, lower class, complainer, farts, goalie
Rudy Zoltec	Little Giants (1994)	White, lower class, associated with body functions, continually eating, family in sausage sales
Engelberg	Bad News Bears (2005)	White, lower class, catcher, acerbic, rude, demanding, defensive
Engelberg	The Bad News Bears (1976)	White, lower class, catcher, out-of-shape, complainer, defensive
Fat Albert	Fat Albert (2004)	Black, lower class, urban, group leader, jolly, singing and dancing
Vern Tessio	Stand By Me (1986)	White, lower class, whiner, out-of-shape, pessimistic
Zachary Beaver	When Zachary Beaver Came to Town (2004)	White, lower class, defensive, mean, works as a one-man freak show

Thud Butt	Hook (1991)	Black, lower class, jolly, leader, body used as weapon
Pugsley Addams	The Addams Family (1991)	White, upper class, dim-witted, picked-on by sister, strange (similarly to family)
Horace	The Monster Squad (1986)	Jewish, lower class, whiner, interested in food, teased/bullied
Roy	Heavy Weights (1995)	Black, unathletic, group leader, friendly
Spanky	The Little Rascals (1994)	White, lower class, manipulative, misogynist
Porky	The Little Rascals (1994)	White, lower class, physical comic, dim-witted

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