

**Reading and Rewriting Fat Romance:  
A Study of Twenty-First Century Thai and  
US Fat Romance Novels**

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## Abstract

In the thesis I explore how selected twenty-first century fat romance novels construct, perpetuate, and – in some cases – challenge understandings of gender, fatness, and relationships in two different cultural and social contexts. The fat female body is not usually considered to be an attractive or sexual body in Thai and western culture.<sup>1</sup> Hence, the representation of fat women, especially in terms of their dating and sexual experiences, is lacking. I suggest that fat romance novels are a key popular cultural form that not only places fat women at the center of a narrative, but can also depict them as sexual beings. Weaving my personal reflection into this academic research, the study focusses on the following three significant themes that arose from my reading: 1.) how the ambiguously gendered fat body can elicit disgust in Chapter 1; 2.) the construction of the masculinities of the fat romance heroes in Chapter 2 and 3; and 3.) the depiction of the intersection of fatness and queerness through interrogating coming-out narratives in Chapter 4. My methodology in this thesis comprises two main methods: the close reading of my primary texts, and their “rewriting.” In rewriting, I take significant passages from the selected fat romance novels and revise them from the perspective of a fat woman (myself), who is struggling with her internalized fat hatred whilst attempting to embrace fat politics. Employing a reflexive approach in my analysis of the selected texts, I draw on the fields of fat studies, popular romance studies, masculinity studies (including female masculinities), queer studies, as well as the concept of disgust and pollution.

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<sup>1</sup> Patchareepan Ravangban, “The Charm of Thinness: The Process of Body Managing,” *Journal of Social Sciences Chiang Mai University* 2 (2009): 213–243 (223) (in Thai); Jeannine A. Gailey, “Fat Shame to Fat Pride: Fat Women's Sexual and Dating Experiences,” *Fat Studies* 1, 1 (2012): 114–127 (114); Samantha Murray, “Locating Aesthetics: Sexing the Fat Woman,” *SOCIAL SEMIOTICS* 14, 3 (2004): 237–247 (237).

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## **Author's Declaration**

In accordance with University regulations, I declare that this thesis is a presentation of original work and I am the sole author. This work has not previously been presented for an award at this, or any other, University. All sources are acknowledged as references in the Bibliography.

## Introduction: “Fat Girls Need [Romance] Fiction”<sup>1</sup>

The fat female body is not usually considered to be an attractive or sexual body in either Thai or western culture.<sup>2</sup> Hence, representations of fat women, especially of their dating and sexual experiences, are lacking. I suggest that fat romance novels are a key popular cultural form that not only place fat women at the center of the narrative but can also depict them as sexual beings – in part at least, and under certain conditions, as I will discuss in this thesis. This study is the first of its kind to bring Thai and US fat romance together to explore how selected twenty-first century fat romance novels construct, perpetuate, and – in some cases – challenge understandings of gender, fatness, and relationships in two different cultural and social contexts. In my analysis chapters, I consider a selection of Thai and US fat romance novels published between 2003 and 2018. The selected Thai texts are *Yai Auan Chao Sanae* (2008),<sup>3</sup> *Palosongkrueng* (2003),<sup>4</sup> and *Rak Tem Lon* (2014).<sup>5</sup> The chosen US novels are *Dangerous Curves Ahead* (2013),<sup>6</sup> *Dumplin’* (2015),<sup>7</sup> and *The Summer of Jordi Perez (and the Best Burger in Los Angeles)* (2018).<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> This chapter title is taken from Susan Stinson’s chapter in *The Fat Studies Reader*. Susan Stinson, “Fat Girls Need Fiction,” in *The Fat Studies Reader*, eds. Esther Rothblum and Sondra Solovay (New York, NY: New York University Press, 2009).

<sup>2</sup> Patchareepan Ravangban, “The Charm of Thinness: The Process of Body Managing,” *Journal of Social Sciences Chiang Mai University* 2 (2009): 213–243 (223) (in Thai); Jeannine A. Gailey, “Fat Shame to Fat Pride: Fat Women’s Sexual and Dating Experiences,” *Fat Studies* 1, no. 1 (2012): 114–127 (114); Samantha Murray, “Locating Aesthetics: Sexing the Fat Woman,” *Social Semiotics* 14, no. 3 (2004): 237–247 (237).

<sup>3</sup> The author gave her book the English title *My Fatty Girl*. Some Thai romance novels will have two titles, Thai and English. Having an English title does not mean that a novel has been translated into English. None of the Thai fat romance novels that I use in this thesis have been translated into English. The literal translation of the Thai title of this book is *The Charming Fat Girl*. Chakriya, *Yai Auan Chao Sanae/ My Fatty Girl* (Bangkok: Pimkum Books, 2008). Subsequent references to this text will take the form of *YACS* followed by the page reference and will appear in the main text. All translations from selected Thai novels are mine.

<sup>4</sup> *Palosongkrueng* is the name of a Thai dish literally translated as “a five-spice stew full of extra ingredients.” Sophee Pannarai, *Palosongkrueng* (Bangkok: Ruamsarn, 2003). Subsequent references to this text will take the form of *P1* for the first book or *P2* for the second book followed by the page reference and will appear in the main text.

<sup>5</sup> The author gave her book the English title of *Overload*. The literal translation of the Thai title is *Full Love*. Pinyada, *Rak Tem Lon* (Bangkok: Jamsai, 2014). Further references to this text will take the form of *RTL* followed by the page reference and will appear in the main text.

<sup>6</sup> Sugar Jamison, *Dangerous Curves Ahead* (New York: St. Martin’s Paperbacks, 2013). Subsequent references to this text will take the form of *DCA* followed by the page reference and will appear in the main text.

<sup>7</sup> Julie Murphy, *Dumplin’* (New York, NY: HarperCollins, 2015). Further references to this text will take the form of *D* followed by the page reference and will appear in the main text.

<sup>8</sup> Amy Spalding, *The Summer of Jordi Perez (and the Best Burger in Los Angeles)* (New York, NY: Sky Pony Press, 2018). Further references to this text will take the form of *TSOJP* followed by the page reference and will appear in the main text.

I center this academic research on my own lived experience as a fat woman who has been reading romance novels since adolescence. Thus, part of my methodology entails me responding to selected fat romance novels through rewriting sections of them from my own perspective and in line with my own fat politics. In this introduction, I will first provide the story of how I became interested in reading popular romance and fat romance novels, followed by the examination of fat romance as a subgenre and fat studies as a theoretical framework for this thesis. I will then discuss the selection of my primary texts and my methodology. Finally, I will outline the structure of the thesis.

In this thesis, I am interested in exploring how fat women and their romantic relationships are portrayed in one of the most commercially successful popular fiction genres. I am keen to ponder how fat female bodies are constructed as the “problem” in fat romance novels and have to be managed in certain ways in order for the fat heroines to achieve their happily ever after with their love interests. I also seek to consider the contention of Pamela Regis, a popular romance studies scholar, that the heroines in this popular fiction genre start out as “encumbered” and become “free” at the end.<sup>9</sup> Do the heroines in selected fat romances operate in the same pattern that Regis describes? While the research aims of this thesis are clearly centered on constructions of fat heroines, it is important to reflect on the role and significance of the (normally thin) heroes in my selected fat romances. Sarah Wendell and Candy Tan contend: “the [heterosexual] romance novel itself hinges on the hero...the hero is a male specimen designed to ignite the fantasies and flame the undying passions of all females within his vicinity.”<sup>10</sup> How the heroes impact romance narratives, I argue, also applies to fat romance. It is therefore necessary for me to also consider how the heroes function in my selected fat romances, as well as in my rewriting, where I experiment with constructions of fat heroes/masculinity. Crucially, reflecting on the roles the heroes play in fat romance narratives and the construction of their masculinities allows me to further the discussion of how the heroines’ fatness is depicted as the obstacle in preventing the protagonists’ union in fat romances. It is also significant to consider the heroes’ masculinities as

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<sup>9</sup> Pamela Regis, *A Natural History of the Romance Novel* (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2003), p. 30.

<sup>10</sup> Sarah Wendell and Candy Tan, *Beyond Heaving Bosoms: The Smart Bitches’ Guide to Romance Novels* (New York, London, Toronto, and Sydney: Simon & Schuster, 2009), pp. 69, 75.



it is related to the idea of the fat heroines as sexual beings. Lastly, as fat romances usually disappoint and fail to satisfy a reader like me, I intend to explore whether it is possible to construct fat romance narratives where pleasure can co-exist with my feminist ideologies and fat politics. I shall do so through the method of rewriting.

## Reading Romance

“Why don’t you read something more useful?” my dad demanded when he caught the 14-year-old me reading Judith McNaught’s *Double Standard*, a 1984 US romance novel about a secretary and her boss, at the kitchen table late one night.<sup>11</sup> While I was an avid romance reader during my teenage years, other women in my family (my sister, mom, and maternal grandma) preferred the genre of fantasy, influenced by the global success of *Harry Potter* in the early 2000s. Although my best friends in middle school and I shared the habit of reading adult romance novels and Japanese *shōjo* manga,<sup>12</sup> especially the ones with graphic sex scenes, I still felt uncomfortable at my dad’s disapproval of my romance novel habit, and at the fact that the women in my family did not seem to be on my side. I therefore sought “approval” from my private female English teacher instead. She told me that I could read whatever I wanted to as long as I was still reading. Even though she did not show clear support for my reading preference, that sentence from a female adult at that particular moment granted me peace of mind and a sense of validation for my consumption of “useless” romance novels.

The younger me preferred to avoid being seen reading romance at home. But as I have become older and am no longer under my parents’ surveillance, I have felt at ease to consume romance either in seclusion or in their presence. A year before attending college, my habit of reading romance started to extend beyond heterosexual romance. As *yuri* (girls’ love) and *yaoi* (boys’

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<sup>11</sup> Judith McNaught, *Double Standard* (New York, NY: Pocket Books, 1984).

<sup>12</sup> 少女漫画 *Shōjo* manga does not represent a specific genre or style, but rather caters to a particular demographic target, young girls. Its main theme is usually romantic love.

love)<sup>13</sup> authors have started to sell their works in secret bookstores and online (sent in plain boxes with no label detailing what the item is or who sent it), I have been blessed with access to many more romance novels to read since then.

My discovery of my first fat romance novel came after discovering that fat studies has existed as an academic field since 2013, my last year of pursuing an undergraduate degree. Stumbling upon *The Fat Studies Reader*,<sup>14</sup> the first academic anthology of fat studies, baffled and excited me. I had never thought that “fat” would or could become an academic field. I quickly scanned the book’s contents and found a section on the fat body in popular culture and literature. Susan Stinson’s chapter, entitled “Fat Girls Need Fiction,” caught my attention right away as the title reflected my longstanding and as yet unfulfilled desire for fiction featuring fat women. In this chapter, the novelist Stinson refers to an erotic excerpt from her “magic realist historical”<sup>15</sup> lesbian fat romance, *Martha Moody*,<sup>16</sup> written in 1995—the oldest US fat romance novel that I know of. It is the story of Amanda, a woman stuck in a loveless marriage, who fantasizes about erotic exchanges with a fat general store owner, Martha. Amanda writes all her desire and yearning for Martha into her stories whenever she has the chance. This novel is basically a set of stories within the story. Before stumbling upon Stinson’s chapter in this fat studies book and her fat romance writing, I did not know that we, fat women, were allowed to exist as heroines in romance novels. I had not dared to imagine that it was possible for us to star in our own romance stories. Stinson’s *Martha Moody* gave me confidence and encouragement to search for Thai fat romances for the first time.

I eventually found the oldest Thai fat romance novel, which was written by one of the most well-known and prolific romance authors, Sophee Pannarai, in 2003. Despite watching many soap operas adapted from her romance novels in adolescence, I did not know that she had written one romance novel featuring a fat heroine, which is called *Palosongkrueng* (one of my selected Thai fat romance texts). This novel has never been made into a TV drama and remained relatively

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<sup>13</sup> *Yuri* is the Japanese term that we casually use to refer to romance between female characters. *Yaoi* is also a term we have borrowed from the Japanese language to refer to the genre of romance between male characters.

<sup>14</sup> Esther Rothblum and Sondra Solovay, eds., *The Fat Studies Reader* (New York, NY: New York University Press, 2009).

<sup>15</sup> Susan Stinson, “Fat Girls Need Fiction,” in *The Fat Studies Reader*, pp. 231–234 (p. 232).

<sup>16</sup> Stinson, *Martha Moody* (New York, NY: Spinsters Ink, 1995).

unknown compared to her other popular romances featuring normative-sized heroines, which have been repeatedly adapted into TV dramas. Although I was utterly delighted to discover that fat romance novels do exist in my home country, I did not enjoy reading *Palosongkrueng* at all. Akekasit, the hero, repeatedly insults Sophitnapa's fat body throughout the first book. He only changes his mind about her desirability after the fat heroine decides to lose weight. This storyline is not what I would imagine or consider as "romantic" to read in fat romances at all. I could not understand why the first Thai fat heroine that I ever read fell in love with that kind of hero.

Nevertheless, I continued to read all the fat romance novels written by Thai authors that I could identify at that time, which turned out to be all hetero fat romance. After reading these novels, I ended up feeling disappointed and even further denigrated. There are certain repeating fat romance tropes that bother me very much.<sup>17</sup> During a moment of renewed disappointment, I began to ask myself: "What kind of fat romance do I want to read?" It is that very question that has sparked my interest in conducting a study on fat romance and has significantly shaped one of my methodologies in approaching this research on fat romances.

As an adult, I have managed to freely consume romance novels in front of my parents with no sense of embarrassment, as mentioned above. Nevertheless, when I decided to conduct doctoral research on Thai and US popular romance novels featuring fat female protagonists, my feelings of shame and insecurity reemerged. A decade and a half may have passed, but the stigmatization of reading romance novels still remains, in both my culture and US culture, where popular female narratives are easily dismissed as nothing but silly fantasy written and consumed by women.<sup>18</sup> From time to time, I have found it quite challenging to tell people about my research topic. Admitting that I am researching romance novels from the standpoint of a person who has experienced the genre's ability to grant its readers pleasure is uncomfortable. One of the most difficult tasks in conducting research on romance novels from the viewpoint of a romance reader

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<sup>17</sup> I will discuss the fat romance tropes that I loathe in the analysis chapters and I respond to some of them in my rewrites.

<sup>18</sup> Kay Mussell, "Review of *Reading the Adolescent Romance: Sweet Valley High and the Popular Young Adult Romance Novel*, by Amy S. Pattee," *Journal of Popular Romance Studies* 2, no. 1 (2011): 1–4 (2); Kay Mussell, *Fantasy and Reconciliation: Contemporary Formulas of Women's Romance Fiction* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1984), pp. 3, 12; Tania Modleski, *Loving with a Vengeance: Mass-Produced Fantasies for Women* (New York, NY: Routledge, 1982), p. 4.

is that I am still uncertain as to why romantic relationships and the happiness the protagonists gain from such relationships provides me with so much pleasure that I still continue to consume romance novels even now.

Kay Mussell, a key popular romance studies scholar, argues that most romance readers are “inarticulate” about their reasons for enjoying “such pleasures.”<sup>19</sup> Not only have we, romance readers, been “secretive” about the books we enjoy reading, but we also tend to be “apologetic” about our preferences due to the way in which the romance genre is denigrated as a worthless literary formula.<sup>20</sup> Being unable to clearly articulate why I enjoy reading romance novels is one challenge. Facing tensions between what I call “pleasure” and holding on to feminist ideas as a keen reader of romance and a women studies’ researcher is another key struggle. The tensions that I have experienced throughout this process somewhat resemble the way in which the heroine in contemporary romance novels also struggles to balance her feminist ideals with what she thinks of as “happiness,” made possible through her heterosexual relationship with the hero.<sup>21</sup> These tensions will be reflected in my analysis chapters and rewrites.

The feelings of shame around my consumption of romance are also intertwined with the ambivalent relationship I have with my own fat body. I found myself lowering my voice when I had to tell people I barely knew that my research is not just about any romance novels, but those in which women who possess a fat body like mine are the protagonists. At that very moment, the feeling of shame and insecurity about consuming romance was no greater than the shame I had felt when “coming out” as fat again and again to researchers I was meeting for the first time at conferences, or to taxi drivers who asked me questions about my doctoral studies. I will attempt to explore all of these tangled feelings of shame and ambivalence toward my fat body in my fat romance rewrites. I will also be returning to the issue of “coming out” as fat in full detail in Chapter 4.

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<sup>19</sup> Kay Mussell, *Fantasy and Reconciliation: Contemporary Formulas of Women’s Romance Fiction* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1984), p. 12.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> Eirini Arvanitaki, “Postmillennial Femininities in the Popular Romance Novel,” *Journal of Gender Studies* 28, no. 1 (2019): 18–28 (25).

I am interested in how and why the writing and consumption of romance novels are stigmatized across both Thai and Anglo-American cultures, despite the fact that the idea of “romantic love” has been commodified in many different forms in popular culture, and has proved lucrative for decades. Undoubtedly, the stigmatization of romance novels has affected me at different stages of my life. The teenage me, who was curious about engaging with ideas about romance, sex, and sexuality (at that time, heterosexuality), had to consume romance novels in private, escaping my parents’ surveillance. Now, as a research student, I am struggling to reconcile the contradictions that I have experienced from reading romance. I find myself enjoying some of the elements of romance novels while resisting some of the heteronormative and patriarchy-endorsing messages that would be harshly criticized or disapproved of by feminists.

Tania Modleski, another scholar who produced significant work in the early studies of popular romance, argues: “Perhaps we have internalized the ubiquitous male spy, who watches as we read romances or view soap operas...”<sup>22</sup> She further contends that if “self-aggrandizement” has been the male mode, “self-abasement” would have been the female mode in the writing and consumption of popular masculine and feminine narratives.<sup>23</sup> This partly explains why the female writer, especially of popular feminine texts, has to “disable” herself by apologizing for her inability to write and “disable” her heroine with ignorance so that the man will be “impressed by her purity,” “quit trying to destroy her,” and “instead, reward and elevate her—that is, marry her.”<sup>24</sup>

I quickly learned, at an early age, that love has been defined as part of the “feminine sphere” and that sooner or later I would have to start imagining my future self being in love/having some sort of relationship with a member of the opposite sex.<sup>25</sup> Even though I was socialized to begin connecting myself with the idea of heterosexual romantic relationships, my parents and teachers did not consider it appropriate to be fixated on popular feminine arts that address the issue of love. Girls are often told by various institutions, such as the media, school, and family, that

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<sup>22</sup> Tania Modleski, *Loving with a Vengeance*, p. 4.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 3.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>25</sup> Francesca Cancian, *Love in America: Gender and Self-Development* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), quoted in Stevi Jackson, “Women and Heterosexual Love: Complicity, Resistance, and Change,” in *Romance Revisited*, eds. Lynne Pearce and Jackie Stacey (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1995), pp. 49–62 (p. 52).

wifeness and motherhood (with the intentional absence of any mention of sex and sexuality) will play an integral part in their lives. However, popular feminine narratives that mainly focus on the idea of love and romance are denigrated and even seen as inappropriate for young girls to consume regularly. Hannah McCann and Catherine M. Roach further elaborate on why romance as a popular form of feminine narratives has constantly been stigmatized: “Popular romance fiction is about sex, even when it isn’t. Sexual pleasure—and, most often, *women’s* sexual pleasure—is a fundamental and telling concern of the genre” (emphasis in original).<sup>26</sup> They convincingly contend that the romance genre is “a means for exploring and navigating female desire” in a culture that is “more comfortable” with men’s sexual pleasure than the sexual pleasure of women.<sup>27</sup> Although McCann and Roach refer to Anglo-American culture in framing their arguments, I would suggest that their assertions also apply to Thai culture. Thai culture is also a culture that allows men to freely express and engage with their sexual desire, but makes it more challenging for women to navigate and explore our sexual pleasure through any means.

When I began to seriously ask myself why I have adored romance novels since my teenage years, I have no further explanation to give than that I have seen romantic relationships as a significant part of my identity. Clearly, the hope that there is a person who exists just for me is alluring. Singleness is portrayed in the media and popular discourses as undesirable. Heterosexual coupledness, legalized family-building/expanding, and baby-making are endorsed in national discourses by the Thai government. As recently as February 2021, the Ministry of Public Health launched a campaign called “Life Balance, Smart Family,” encouraging single Thai citizens to meet on blind dates arranged by the ministry itself because the birth rate has fallen dramatically since the coronavirus pandemic started.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> Hannah McCann and Catherine M. Roach, “Sex and Sexuality” in *The Routledge Research Companion to Popular Romance Fiction*, eds. Jayashree Kamblé, Eric Murphy Selinger, and Hsu-Ming Teo (Abingdon, Oxon; New York, NY: Routledge, 2020), pp. 411–427 (p. 411).

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 412.

<sup>28</sup> “สธ. ชวนคนไทยบ้ีมลูก กู้วิกฤติเด็กเกิดน้อย จัดมีตติ้งคนไร้คู่ เปิดรับสมัครวันนี้ The Ministry of Public Health is urging people to make babies. Register for a meeting for singletons now,” *Matichon*, Feb 10, 2021, accessed Feb 20, 2021, [https://www.matichon.co.th/local/quality-life/news\\_2572094](https://www.matichon.co.th/local/quality-life/news_2572094). This translation is my own and all subsequent translations are also mine.

Janice Radway, who conducted the first key study on romance readership, points out that the consumption of romance fiction is an adaptation to women's dissatisfaction within the institution of marriage.<sup>29</sup> Reading romance, Radway suggests, may remove the desire for women to "demand satisfaction in the real world" as it can be "successfully met in fantasy" instead.<sup>30</sup> Modleski reinforces Radway's argument by explaining that romance novels often have to go to extremes to "neutralize" women's anger and to make "masculine hostility" endurable for women.<sup>31</sup> While Radway suggests that women's consumption of romance novels is an adaptation to discontent rather than a challenge to patriarchy or heterosexual relationships,<sup>32</sup> Modleski argues that the term "adaptation" itself implies female agency, not just a passive acceptance of whatever is handed out to women.<sup>33</sup>

I personally think that Radway's argument about women's consumption of romance novels being the result of an adaptation to their discontent with marriage and family life is convincing. However, it is also grounded in the context of the late-twentieth-century USA, with middle-class housewives as the main consumers of romance novels used as the subjects in Radway's study.<sup>34</sup> When I think about my own experience of reading romance novels, I certainly did not come to them in seventh grade because I was unhappy about my long-term heterosexual relationships with men. Indeed, I came to read romance because I connected romantic love to my femininity. Getting to read romance stories, imagining what it is like to be in love, and fantasizing about the possibilities of choosing to act differently from the heroine have granted me various degrees of pleasure since then. Nevertheless, the "pleasure" to which I refer is definitely framed within the ideal, heteronormative womanhood that has been embedded in my subjectivity.

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<sup>29</sup> Janice Radway, *Reading the Romance: Women, Patriarchy, and Popular Literature* (Chapel Hill, NC, and London: The University of North Carolina Press, 1984), pp. 212, 220.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 212.

<sup>31</sup> Modleski, *Loving with a Vengeance*, p. 49.

<sup>32</sup> Radway, *Reading the Romance*, pp. 212, 216, 103.

<sup>33</sup> Modleski, *Loving with a Vengeance*, p. 30.

<sup>34</sup> Radway, *Reading the Romance*, pp. 56–57.

## “Fat Romance” As a Romance Subgenre

There are a number of studies that interrogate US romance novels featuring fat heroines, but to date no research has been conducted on their Thai counterparts. Lara Frater contends that “Bigger Girl Lit” as a subgenre of chick lit offers the possibility for fat women to “star” in popular media.<sup>35</sup> Nevertheless, she acknowledges that this literary subgenre still has flaws because it has never portrayed fat heroines larger than US size 20 (most of the time only size 16) and celebrates weight loss as the ultimate requirement for the heroines to achieve love and happiness.<sup>36</sup> Sonya C. Brown agrees with Frater that “plus size romance” novels reveal ambivalent messages about size acceptance.<sup>37</sup>

When I started my PhD, I did not quite know what to call this literary subgenre. I felt uncomfortable calling it “Bigger Girl Lit” or “plus size romance,” as Frater and Brown do, because I did not want to use euphemisms to replace the term fat. On the day when I met Gemma Gibson, a fellow fat studies researcher at the Centre for Women’s Studies, in her office, she casually asked: “So, you’re working on fat romance?” That gave me the confidence and validation to start referring to this subgenre simply as “fat romance.” Nevertheless, when it comes to the Thai language, I am still struggling to find an exact term for the subgenre of fat romance that is instantly comprehensible and not too much of a mouthful. Although I have attempted to literally translate “fat romance” into Thai as *niyai rak auan*, it baffled my family and friends in Thailand when they first heard the term. I eventually ended up referring to the subgenre in full detail, *niyai rak tee mee nang-eak auan* (romance novels featuring fat heroines). I will now attempt to define the genre of “fat romance,” based heavily on my reading experience of the genre itself.

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<sup>35</sup> Lara Frater, “Fat Heroines in Chick-Lit: Gateway to Acceptance in the Mainstream?” in *The Fat Studies Reader*, eds. Esther Rothblum and Sondra Solovay (New York, NY: New York University Press, 2009), pp. 235–240 (p. 235).

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 240.

<sup>37</sup> Sonya C. Brown, “Does This Book Make Me Look Fat?” *Journal of Popular Romance Studies* 1, no. 2 (2011): 1–20 (1).



Pamela Regis, who studies the modern romance novel written in English, defines the romance novel as a genre that places the heroine and her desires at the center of the narrative.<sup>38</sup> Her “desires” in the context of romance novels, I contend, refer to the desires to gain emotional, financial, and social stability and/or fulfilment through the successful union of a heroine and hero at the end of each book. Regis argues that a heroine must overcome obstacles in order for her to be united with the hero.<sup>39</sup> These barriers between heroines and heroes can be both external and internal. External barriers are generated by conditions “outside” of a heroine and hero’s mind, such as society, the family, economic circumstances, societal norms, and geography (physical separation). Internal obstacles include a heroine and/or hero’s attitude, temperament, values, and beliefs that prevent the union.<sup>40</sup> Interestingly, Regis contends that all of these restrictions are placed upon a heroine in the romance novel “simply because she [is] female.”<sup>41</sup> She goes on to conclude: “The romance novel’s focus on the heroine, then, is a focus on women’s problems.”<sup>42</sup>

I would argue that fat romance is a sub-genre within the wider genre of romance itself. Fat romance novels place fat women, their desires, and concerns (particularly related to the possibility of their union with the heroes) at the center of the narrative. For this particular genre, fat, I contend, is treated by the authors as the biggest barrier or conflict that a fat heroine has to “overcome” in order for her to be united with a normatively sized hero. In Thai fat romance, the heroines have to lose weight by the end in order to deserve the hero’s love and marriage proposal. In US fat romance, the heroines do not have to lose weight, but they do have to learn to acknowledge themselves as “beautiful, but not fat” in front of the heroes in order to achieve their happy ending. I will further discuss these issues in Thai and US fat romances in Chapters 2 and 3.

Not only do the authors of fat romance use fat as a barrier to the union, but they also depict fat as a barrier to the heroine’s overall happiness by showing readers how fat (negatively) affects their

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<sup>38</sup> Pamela Regis, *A Natural History of the Romance Novel* (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2003), p. 29.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 36–37.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 32.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 29.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*

heroine's daily life, work, and interactions/relationships with family and other people. In line with how, according to Regis, the hindrances that a heroine has to experience in the romance novel are tailored to her identity in society as female, so fat in fat romance novels is portrayed as a problem or an obstacle that only applies to women, not men. In the selected Thai fat romance novels used in this thesis, fat is clearly treated differently when it is applied to men. In *Palosongkrueng*, a wealthy young man who has been wooing a fat heroine for several years is described as *auab* (chubby), but not *auan* (fat) even though he and the heroine share a similar weight and height (*PI*, 18). The author inserts her opinion, through the narration of the heroine's point of view, that fat men are not considered ugly, unlike fat women, especially if those men are rich (*P2*, 167). In *Rak Tem Lon*, the hero decides to put on some weight to match the heroine's body size (which is still considered "chubby" at the end of the novel despite hard-core exercise and starvation) for their wedding day. His bigger body (five more kilograms) is described with positivity because his new body enables him to look even "more handsome, elegant, and mature, suiting his job as an academic,"<sup>43</sup> whilst weight gain for the heroine in the same story is condemned and judged with negativity (*RTL*, 205–206).

Furthermore, the authors of fat romance usually depict fat as being both external and internal obstacles for their heroines. The authors of this subgenre explore how a fat heroine lives in a fat-phobic society and interacts with her family, people whom she meets in daily life, and institutions that are deeply embedded in a fat-hating culture. Not only do the authors of my selected works write about how the fat heroine struggles with the external fat-loathing societal norms, but they also attempt to depict how she must deal with her own internalized fat hatred. Whether intentionally or not, I think what the authors of fat romance have written in their novels resonates with the argument of Marilyn Wann, an influential US fat activist. Wann remarks, "Every person who lives in a fat-hating culture inevitably absorbs anti-fat beliefs, assumptions, and stereotypes..."<sup>44</sup> It is not possible to effectively address internalized values without addressing external power dynamics, and vice versa.<sup>45</sup> Therefore, in all of the fat romance novels

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<sup>43</sup> ส่วนพีรกรผู้เป็นเจ้าบวมน้ำหนักขึ้นรวมห้ากิโลกรัม เขาตัวใหญ่ขึ้นมีเนื้อหนังมากขึ้น หากยังไม่ถึงกับอ้วน ชายหนุ่มดูภูมิฐานหล่อเหลา เป็นผู้ใหญ่มากขึ้นสมกับบุคลิกของนักวิชาการ

<sup>44</sup> Marilyn Wann, "Foreword," in *The Fat Studies Reader*, eds. Esther Rothblum and Sondra Solovay (New York, NY: New York University Press, 2009), pp. ix–xxv (p. xi).

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, p. xii.

that I have read, including those that I have chosen to explore in my thesis, the fat heroines are depicted as having to simultaneously deal with the external pressure from society to conform to body norms and also with their internalized hatred of their own fat bodies. This observation will be developed in my analysis of the selected Thai and US fat romance novels in this thesis.

In the context of fat romance, I disagree with Regis's conclusion in her chapter on the definition of the romance genre about how the heroine goes from being "encumbered" to "free" by the end of the book.<sup>46</sup> Although Regis defends her stance by saying that this freedom is nonetheless "limited" due to how women are positioned within a patriarchal society, from my personal interpretation of fat romance novels, I would suggest that the pattern is unambiguously different, especially in Thai fat romance novels.<sup>47</sup> I seek to argue that the fat heroines, particularly in Thai fat romances, actually regress from a state of "freedom" to "unfreedom"<sup>48</sup> by the end of each novel.

My disagreement with Regis regarding how the fat heroine actually goes from being "free" to "encumbered" at the end of all the selected Thai fat romance novels is similar to how Eirini Arvanitaki contends that the heroine in popular romance is initially living her life with autonomy, but eventually abandons her agency just for the sake of a happy union with the hero.<sup>49</sup> Arvanitaki summarizes the plots of popular romance novels through examining three Mills & Boon modern romance novels, *The Most Expensive Lie of All*, *The Rings that Bind*, and *The Ultimate Seduction*,<sup>50</sup> as follows: "the initially self-sufficient and autonomous heroines progressively abandoning their feminist ideals because self-sufficiency is an inferior state to the heterosexual relationship."<sup>51</sup> She completes her analyses of her chosen romance novels by concluding that the authors place their heroines in "an original pre-feminist situation," "then liberate and portray them as feminist characters" who finally recognize that their lives will only

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<sup>46</sup> Regis, *A Natural History of the Romance Novel*, p. 30.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid., p. 31.

<sup>49</sup> Arvanitaki, "Postmillennial femininities in the popular romance novel," p. 26.

<sup>50</sup> Michelle Conder, *The Most Expensive Lie of All* (Richmond: Mills & Boon, 2014); Michelle Smart, *The Rings that Bind* (Richmond: Mills & Boon, 2013); Dani Collins, *The Ultimate Seduction* (Richmond: Mills & Boon, 2014).

<sup>51</sup> Arvanitaki, "Postmillennial femininities," p. 26.

be completed by the presence of and union with the heroes.<sup>52</sup> I will further explore this idea in my analysis chapters and draw a concrete conclusion at the end of this thesis.

I am keen to engage with a further argument by Arvanitaki: her contention that heterosexual popular romance novels perpetuate the idea that “happiness cannot co-exist with feminist beliefs...the only way for women to have one is to reject the other.”<sup>53</sup> Arvanitaki points out that twenty-first century romance novels often begin with their heroines adhering to feminist ideologies. However, once they fall in love, or realize that they want to be with the heroes, the heroines decide to abandon all the feminist thoughts that they initially claimed to believe in by submitting to male dominance.<sup>54</sup> I seek to explore whether it is possible for popular romance novels, particularly those featuring fat heroines, to portray heterosexual romantic relationships in ways that can satisfy feminist readers. Will the compulsory formula of heterosexual romance novels (particularly a happily-ever-after ending/ “prospect for eternal love”<sup>55</sup> through her union with the hero) prevent this genre from achieving such a purpose? Through my methodology of experimentally rewriting significant passages from the chosen fat romance novels, I hope that I will be able to re-work these fat romance narratives in such a way that I can at least satisfy myself as a reader and live up to my feminist ideologies and my vision of what I consider “romantic” in fat women’s romantic relationships.

I return now to my dad’s rhetorical question, “Why don’t you read something more useful?” It is interesting to consider the term “useful” as applied to the reading of fat romance novels. Mussell argues that romance novels may differ in “plot, setting, time period, problems, and solutions,” but the way in which they operate and construct their value system is predictable.<sup>56</sup> One of the themes that heterosexual romance novels attempt to explore is that the woman will be rewarded with a happy marriage or suitable lovers if she behaves “correctly.”<sup>57</sup> Romance novels serve to a

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<sup>52</sup> Ibid.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid., p. 25.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid., p. 26.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid.

<sup>56</sup> Mussell, *Fantasy and Reconciliation*, p. 7.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid., p. 8. In recent romance novels, the heroines’ happy ending does not always involve marriage, as Mussell suggested it did in her 1984 text. Nevertheless, I would argue that being able to find “Mr. Right” at the end of the story is still a guaranteed happy ending for most of the romance novels regardless of when the novels were published.

certain extent as a sort of “doctrine” that teaches women to conform to gender roles and the gender hierarchy. Clearly, this function of romance novels could be reconsidered as “useful” in the eyes of my father as a way of assisting in the preservation of patriarchy. Romance novels with fat heroines are also worth reading in this “useful” sense. Seemingly rebellious fat heroines in Thai fat romance novels are gradually tamed and taught how to behave within a patriarchal, fat-hating society by changing their body size to fit the body norm and ceasing to resist weight prejudice. As I have argued, fat is treated as the “problem” in fat romance novels. Fat romance authors utilize fat and fat-phobic oppression as the main obstacle preventing the union of the fat heroine and her hero, or even to prevent the fat heroine from achieving overall happiness within a fat-hating society. In my selected novels, the Thai fat heroines have to lose weight, whilst their US counterparts have to disconnect themselves from a fat identity in order to achieve their happy ending.<sup>58</sup> Although Thai and US fat romance novels preserve the existence of patriarchy and body conformity, they are nevertheless part of a significant body of literary work reminding fat women that we are allowed to exist as the center of the narrative in popular culture.

## **Fat Studies As a Theoretical Framework**

Fat studies is an emerging field that critically investigates, questions, and destabilizes traditional discourses on body weight and “obesity.”<sup>59</sup> While fat is usually reduced to pathology and medicalization in a plethora of dominant obesity literature, the influential fat activist Charlotte Cooper argues that fat studies aims to add complexity and richness to the understanding of fatness. It does not treat fat bodies per se as a problem, but rather the social construction of fat and fat phobia.<sup>60</sup> Fat studies acknowledges that body weight is part of human diversity, no different from how people consider height as a neutral and natural human characteristic.<sup>61</sup> Esther

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<sup>58</sup> These ideas will be discussed in full detail in Chapters 2 and 3.

<sup>59</sup> Obesity is a euphemistic term that pathologizes the fat body.

<sup>60</sup> Charlotte Cooper, “Fat Studies: Mapping the Field,” *Sociology Compass* 4, no. 12 (2010): 1020–1034 (1020–1021).

<sup>61</sup> Esther D. Rothblum, “Fat Studies,” in *The Oxford Handbook of the Social Science of Obesity*, ed. John Cawley (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2011), pp. 173–183 (p. 173); Wann, “Foreword,” in *The Fat Studies Reader*, p. x.

D. Rothblum defines the field as attempting to look at how people and societies view body weight and calls for equality for people of all sizes. Not only does fat studies focus on interrogating weight-based oppression, but it also attempts to remove the stereotypes, stigma, and negative connotations that surround fatness. Furthermore, who and which institutions benefit from the oppression and stigmatization of fat people is a question that it is deemed significant to ask among scholars working in the field.<sup>62</sup>

Fat studies, like other academic fields, came into existence after a liberation movement.<sup>63</sup> Leading fat activist Marilyn Wann decided to “come out” as a fat person to the public by declaring: “We’re here, we’re spheres! Get used to it!” echoing the ACT-up and Queer Nation’s popularized slogan: “We’re here, we’re queer, get used to it!” She later remarked in an interview that “living in the closet [was] not working” and she tried to come out as fat “really publicly and really loudly because...[she] wasn’t going to put up with exclusion.”<sup>64</sup> Cooper contends that the discourse of gay rights movements has been significantly “woven into the history of fat liberation...via the experience of queer fat activists” from the inception of the fat activist movement.<sup>65</sup> The fat pride community, usually referred to as the size acceptance movement, formally began in 1969 in the USA with the establishment of NAAFA, the National Association to Advance Fat Acceptance (formerly the National Association to Aid Fat Americans). The organization works to eradicate size discrimination in various contexts, such as education, the workplace, and the media.<sup>66</sup> In the 1970s, the Fat Underground was founded by a group of fat women in Los Angeles who mainly focused on fighting the diet industry and medical authorities that promote sizeism. The communities of the size acceptance movement and fat activists have created diverse cultural products, such as theater, music, fiction, magazines, and films, around fat issues (e.g., self-esteem, medicalization, fashion, and exercise).<sup>67</sup> Therefore, fat activism has provided a plenitude of material for fat studies scholars to work with. Wann argues that the conference “Fat Attitudes: An Examination of an American Subculture and the Representation of

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<sup>62</sup> Rothblum, “Fat Studies,” p. 173.

<sup>63</sup> Wann, “Foreword,” in *The Fat Studies Reader*, p. x.

<sup>64</sup> Wann interview 8/17/01, quoted in Abigail C. Saguy and Anna Ward, “Coming Out as Fat: Rethinking Stigma,” *Social Psychology Quarterly* 74, no. 1 (2011): 53–75 (53).

<sup>65</sup> Charlotte Cooper’s response to their paper, quoted in Saguy and Ward, “Coming Out as Fat,” p. 63.

<sup>66</sup> Rothblum, “Fat Studies,” p. 174.

<sup>67</sup> Wann, “Foreword,” in *The Fat Studies Reader*, p. x.

the Female Body” at Columbia University Teachers College in 2004, and the associated art show “Fat Attitudes: A Celebration of Large Women” organized by the same person, Lori Don Levan, served as a starting point for the field of fat studies.<sup>68</sup> Also, events such as the annual Popular Culture Association/American Culture Association conferences in the USA and the Fat Studies UK seminar held in York in 2008 have helped to form the field and expand fat studies literature.<sup>69</sup>

In fat studies, there is an ongoing attempt to reclaim the word fat as a “neutral adjective” similar to other descriptive words, such as short or tall, and as a chosen “political identity.”<sup>70</sup> More importantly, there is also an effort to problematize the medical term “obese” and the seemingly polite and harmless word “overweight.” The term “obese” is far from being innocuous; it naturalizes the medicalization of weight, another human diversity that is as natural and neutral as our height or age. The word “overweight” implies that there is a desirable, normal, and healthy weight that people should aim to attain. Comparing height with weight, you can never be too tall, with no word to put a limit on your height, such as *overheight*, but you should never allow yourself to be too fat, over the “normal” range of weight.<sup>71</sup> Interestingly, health is another concept that is tied to these two words. Health is usually, if not always, used to justify the right of people to label or evaluate someone as abnormal and disqualified based on their body size. Fat studies scholars have been trying to make it clear that health is not exactly irrefutable science, but rather a socially inspired position when it is used to regulate weight and ensure the continuation of body size conformity.<sup>72</sup>

In Esther Rothblum and Sondra Solovay’s *Fat Studies Reader*, various topics around fat and fat bodies have been examined by a variety of authors in the form of short essays. The book’s editors categorize all of the essays into subsections covering history, public health and science, social inequality, legal theory and civil rights, economics, political theory, education, literature, popular culture, embodiment, fat activism, and intersectionality. In the book’s foreword, Wann

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<sup>68</sup> Ibid., p. xi.

<sup>69</sup> Charlotte Cooper, “Fat Studies: Mapping the Field,” p. 1021; Wann, “Foreword,” in *The Fat Studies Reader*, p. xi.

<sup>70</sup> Wann, “Foreword,” in *The Fat Studies Reader*, p. xii.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid., pp. xii–xiv.

suggests that people who engage with fat studies could work to examine both larger social forces regarding weight and their own position in relation to “weight-based privilege” and “oppression.”<sup>73</sup> Wann further explains that a person’s relationship to weight-based privilege and oppression is both internalized and external. It is best to examine these two sides simultaneously.<sup>74</sup> I found her advice particularly helpful when I decided to not just treat the topic of fat merely as a subject of my study, but to maximize the potential of my research by examining my own involvement and assumptions within a set of power dynamics and social structures that are based on weight and body size through the use of a reflexive approach and the methodology of rewriting.

As *The Fat Studies Reader* is the first “comprehensive anthology that maps the contours of this emerging field,”<sup>75</sup> exploring this significant publication in depth will allow us to gain a good overview of the field itself. The fat politics with which I am constantly engaging, and which manifests in all the analysis chapters and rewrites, has been significantly shaped by the ideas discussed in this book.

In the section “Fat Studies in Health and Medicine,” different authors approach the dominant public health discourse through the lens of fat studies. I will choose to discuss one work that I refer to in one of my analysis chapters. Deb Burgard writes about the grassroots movement called Health at Every Size (HAES); its approach has been adopted by healthcare workers, health researchers, and activists. As health is typically used to degrade and disapprove of fat people, HAES offers an alternative, weight-neutral public health model that urges people of all sizes to adopt “sustainable day-to-day self-care” without having the goal of reaching a “specific ideal weight.”<sup>76</sup> This movement elaborates on the ideas of self-acceptance, the possibility of eating with enjoyment following the body’s nutritional needs and hunger, and engaging in physical activities for pleasure and health without setting weight loss as a goal.<sup>77</sup> Most importantly, HAES

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<sup>73</sup> Ibid., pp. xi–xii.

<sup>74</sup> Ibid., p. xii.

<sup>75</sup> Sondra Solovay and Esther Rothblum, “Introduction,” in *The Fat Studies Reader*, pp. 1–7 (p. 3).

<sup>76</sup> L. Bacon, J. Stern, M. Van Loan, and N. Keim, “Size Acceptance and Intuitive Eating Improve Health for Obese, Female Chronic Dieters,” *Journal of American Dietetic Association* 109 (2005): 929–936, quoted in Deb Burgard, “What is ‘Health at Every Size’?” in *The Fat Studies Reader*, pp. 42–53 (p. 50); Burgard, “What is ‘Health at Every Size’?” pp. 42, 44.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid., pp. 42–43.



clinicians attempt to eradicate body-size bias by encouraging the public to realize that body size does not serve as an accurate representation of someone's health, morality, or lifestyle.<sup>78</sup>

Interestingly, Burgard also points out how senseless and useless it is to prescribe regimens for fat people that would be seen as eating disorders when applied to thin people.<sup>79</sup> Although the size acceptance movement and HAES share the goal of ending weight stigma, they differ in terms of their focus on defining health. The size acceptance movement promotes the rights of everyone without emphasizing any health models. HAES seeks to label health with a weight-neutral approach and advocate for people of all sizes to improve their health. Being able to value and nurture the body you have, regardless of size and levels of stigmatization, is central to the HAES model.<sup>80</sup>

The field of fat studies has also touched on popular culture, literature, poetry, theater, and performance. The contributors to this section write about various topics: fat fiction (Stinson), chick-lit (Frater), fat queer zines (Snider), representations of fat and Hispanic masculinity (McCrossin), fat female characters on television (Giovanelli and Ostertag), fat women in theater (Jester), a visual and historical analysis of how tourist postcards depict fat women in the early twentieth century (Farrell), fat female celebrities who have lost weight after a certain amount of success in show business (Bernstein and John), the connotations of the "big butt" in US popular culture (Burns-Ardolino), and the use of fat suits in (comedy) films (Mendoza).<sup>81</sup> As I have already mentioned, Lara Frater argues that chick-lit novels featuring fat female protagonists allow fat women to be placed at the center of the narratives.<sup>82</sup> Nevertheless, this genre fails to include women who are larger than size 20 as protagonists and still portrays weight loss as a cause for

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<sup>78</sup> Ellen Shuman and Karin Kratina, quoted in Burgard, "What is 'Health at Every Size'?" p. 43.

<sup>79</sup> Burgard, "What is 'Health at Every Size'?" p. 42.

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 52.

<sup>81</sup> Stinson, "Fat Girls Need Fiction," pp. 231–234; Frater, "Fat Heroines in Chick-Lit," pp. 235–240; Stefanie Snider, "Fat Girls and Size Queens: Alternative Publications and the Visualizing of Fat and Queer Eroto-politics in Contemporary American Culture," pp. 223–230; Julia McCrossin, "The Fat of the (Border)land: Food, Flesh, and Hispanic Masculinity in Willa Cather's *Death Comes for the Archbishop*," pp. 241–248; Dina Giovanelli and Stephen Ostertag, "Controlling the Body: Media Representations, Body Size, and Self-Discipline," pp. 289–296; JuliaGrace Jester, "Placing Fat Women on Center Stage," pp. 249–255; Amy Farrell, "'The White Man's Burden': Female Sexuality, Tourist Postcards, and the Place of the Fat Woman in Early 20<sup>th</sup>-Century U.S. Culture," pp. 256–262; Beth Bernstein and Matilda St. John, "The Roseanne Benedict Arnolds: How Fat Women Are Betrayed by Their Celebrity Icons," pp. 263–270; Wendy A. Burns-Ardolino, "Jiggle in My Walk: The Iconic Power of the 'Big Butt' in American Pop Culture," pp. 271–279; Katharina R. Mendoza, "Seeing through the Layers: Fat Suits and Thin Bodies in *The Nutty Professor* and *Shallow Hal*," pp. 280–288.

<sup>82</sup> Frater, "Fat Heroines in Chick-Lit," p. 235.

celebration in a woman's life.<sup>83</sup> Wendy A. Burns-Ardolino investigates the connotations of the "big butt" in US culture. The female big butt, Burns-Ardolino argues, represents both empowerment and an "object of ridicule."<sup>84</sup> Mary Beltrán insists that Jennifer Lopez's butt is caught in a liminal state against the ideal body shape of dominant (White US) culture. JLo's butt represents an alternative power that transgresses dominant beauty ideals, but simultaneously stands for the exotic, raced, hypersexualized, and classified "other."<sup>85</sup> Although the female big butt has been stigmatized in relation to the intersecting layers of gender, race, ethnicity, and class throughout the history of "white supremacist capitalist patriarchy," Burns-Ardolino remarks that it is still possible for us, ordinary women with big butts, to resist the dominant discourse on beauty standards.<sup>86</sup> As of 2021, it is pertinent to reflect on other female big butts in US culture, such as those of Kim Kardashian and her half-sister, Kylie Jenner. Kardashian's and Jenner's big buttocks cannot be read in the exact same way as JLo's. Kardashian and Jenner represent (albeit racially ambiguous) white femininity associated with the "aesthetics of blackness."<sup>87</sup> Although their big butts are also sexualized and exoticized, the complexities of how the female big butt, whiteness, femininity, wealth, capitalism, celebrity, plastic surgery, cultural appropriation, and blackfishing intersect have to be investigated. Are these two women perceived as the Other as Lopez?; to what degree are these three famous female figures with big butts similar and different in the eyes of the public and with regard to media narratives?

Katharina R. Mendoza examines the use of fat suits in two movies, *The Nutty Professor* and *Shallow Hal*.<sup>88</sup> Mendoza reads the casting of a thin actress/actor to play a fat character by wearing fat suits as conforming to the dominant weight loss discourse that there is always a thin person waiting to get out of the fat body.<sup>89</sup> Interestingly, Mendoza backs up her claim by

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<sup>83</sup> Ibid., pp. 235–240.

<sup>84</sup> Burns-Ardolino, "Jiggle in My Walk," p. 272.

<sup>85</sup> Mary Beltrán, "The Hollywood Latina Body as Site of Social Struggle: Media Constructions of Stardom and Jennifer Lopez's Cross-Over Butt," *Quarterly Review of Film and Video* 19 (2002): 71–86, quoted in Burns-Ardolino, "Jiggle in My Walk," p. 274; Burns-Ardolino, "Jiggle in My Walk," p. 275.

<sup>86</sup> Ibid., p. 278.

<sup>87</sup> Cady Lang, "Keeping Up with the Kardashians Is Ending. But Their Exploitation of Black Women's Aesthetics Continues," *Time*, June 10, 2021, accessed October 15, 2021, <https://time.com/6072750/kardashians-blackfishing-appropriation/>.

<sup>88</sup> *The Nutty Professor*, directed by Tom Shadyac (1996; CA: Universal Pictures), Motion Picture; *Shallow Hal*, directed by Peter Farrelly and Bobby Farrelly (2001; CA: 20th Century Fox), Motion Picture.

<sup>89</sup> Katharina R. Mendoza, "Seeing through the Layers: Fat Suits and Thin Bodies in *The Nutty Professor* and *Shallow Hal*," in *The Fat Studies Reader*, pp. 280–288 (p. 281).

pointing out how Rosie, the fat female protagonist played by Gwyneth Paltrow in *Shallow Hal*, is always depicted in the film as Skinny Rosie (in the eyes of the male protagonist and us, the viewers) whenever she does “good deeds,” helping people, in contrast to how the film chooses to show Fat Rosie in all the embarrassing scenes in the public domain (jumping into the pool and causing a super big splash, breaking furniture near her). This, Mendoza argues, perpetuates the idea that inside a fat person is hidden a real and good thin self.<sup>90</sup> Whenever the film shows Fat Rosie, only her flesh and cellulite-stippled body parts are shot, and the viewer does not see her face. This reduces Fat Rosie to “pieces of a fat body,” a total act of dehumanization.<sup>91</sup> In contrast to Fat Rosie, Skinny Rosie is given a full-body shot and subtlety in her character portrayal; she is not just living flesh like Fat Rosie, but a beautiful human being, inside and out. When I first saw this film in middle school, I felt ambivalent about it. I was happy to see a “fat” female lead, but I also felt that fat women were still not accepted and the romance plot featuring a fat female lead like the one in *Shallow Hal* was merely being used to serve the purpose of entertainment and crack tasteless jokes at the expense of fat people. Marisa Meltzer compares fat suits to blackface performances by referring to a number of US films featuring normative-sized actors/actresses wearing fat suits, including *The Nutty Professor* and *Shallow Hal*.<sup>92</sup> Similar to blackface performances, fat-suit performances are placed in between two opposite concepts: “desire/disgust,” and reaffirm that only normative bodies in the dominant culture are permitted to cross the dividing line between two opposing categories: fat and thin or black and white.<sup>93</sup>

Dina Giovanelli and Stephen Ostertag explore how the media acts as a cosmetic panopticon, pressuring women to regulate their own bodies (self-discipline) in order to maintain their position in the hierarchy of the patriarchal system.<sup>94</sup> In their detailed analysis, they interrogate two prime-time television shows featuring the frequent appearance of fat female characters, Katrina on Fox’s *Stacked* and Berta on CBS’s *Two and a Half Men*.<sup>95</sup> Both quantitative

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<sup>90</sup> Ibid., p. 283.

<sup>91</sup> Ibid.

<sup>92</sup> Marisa Meltzer, “Hollywood’s Big New Minstrel Show,” *Bitch: Feminist Response to Pop Culture* 15 (2002): 19–20, quoted in Mendoza, “Seeing through the Layers,” p. 283.

<sup>93</sup> Mendoza, “Seeing through the Layers,” p. 284.

<sup>94</sup> Dina Giovanelli and Stephen Ostertag, “Controlling the Body: Media Representations, Body Size, and Self-Discipline,” in *The Fat Studies Reader*, pp. 289–296 (pp. 289, 295).

<sup>95</sup> *Stacked*, created by Steven Levitan, aired from April 13, 2005 to January 11, 2006, Fox; *Two and a Half Men*, created by Chuck Lorre and Lee Aronson, aired from September 22, 2003 to February 19, 2015, CBS.

approaches (frequency of appearances in the shows) and qualitative methods (how are they portrayed?) are used to analyze these two shows. The authors conclude in their findings that fat female characters are depicted as asexual and sexually unattractive. Most of the time, Giovanelli and Ostertag argue, fat women on prime-time television in the USA function as “props” for thin women to compare themselves to and evaluate their status and values against.<sup>96</sup>

As of 2021, there remains a lack of Thai academic work about fatness which does not promote weight prejudice. I have located only two pieces of research written by Thai scholars about fatness which contribute to the construction of “non-traditional knowledge”<sup>97</sup> about fat people. In 2012, Ajintai Hengruamyat wrote her master’s dissertation on US chick-lit novels featuring fat women. She argues that there are fat heroines who “suffer” in their work and love life because of their fatness. But there are also fat heroines who are “non-conformists,” challenging the negative meanings of fatness and redefining their identities on their own terms in her selected US chick lit novels.<sup>98</sup> In 2010, Kanruthai Sangsrijirapat conducted research about a Thai fat women’s beauty pageant called *Tida Chang* (literally translated as Elephant Daughters) by means of interviews. She argues that the contest provides opportunities for fat women to be in the spotlight and showcase their talent, but nevertheless it still perpetuates the stereotypes of the fat female body as a source of laughter and entertainment. Sangsrijirapat concludes in her study that fat women should arrange the *Tida Chang* contest for themselves so that it will truly represent the actual needs of fat women and involve fewer stereotypical images of the fat female body.<sup>99</sup> Cooper, a British fat activist, criticizes fat studies as an academic field that is heavily dominated by US culture. She contends: “non-traditional knowledge about fat, embodied in Fat Studies, remains locked inside [the USA].”<sup>100</sup> She hopes that one day the field of fat studies will not be limited by “national boundaries” and that its knowledge will be constructed “far and wide.”<sup>101</sup> When searching the *Journal of Fat Studies* in 2021, I could see a growing number of studies about fat conducted in the context of South Asia by Shailendra Kumar Singh. All in all, I perceive

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<sup>96</sup> Ibid., p. 294.

<sup>97</sup> Cooper, “Maybe It Should Be Called Fat American Studies,” in *The Fat Studies Reader*, pp. 327–333 (p. 327).

<sup>98</sup> Ajintai Hengruamyat, “Women and Fatness: Female Body and the Construction of Identity in Chick-lit,” (Master’s diss., Chulalongkorn University, 2012).

<sup>99</sup> Kanruthai Sangsrijirapat, “Identity Negotiation of Fat Women in Public Areas: A Case Study of Jumbo Queen Contest,” (Master’s diss., Thammasat University, 2010).

<sup>100</sup> Cooper, “Maybe It Should Be Called Fat American Studies,” in *The Fat Studies Reader*, pp. 327–333 (p. 327).

<sup>101</sup> Ibid., p. 333.

Sangsrijirapat's master's dissertation about a fat beauty pageant contest and its fat female contestants as a pioneering work in Thai fat studies, and I hope that in the future there will be many more works to further expand this non-conventional field in the Thai context. I am certain that my study about Thai and US fat romances will serve to expand the field of fat studies beyond its US dominance and become part of the pioneering work in Thai fat studies.

## Selecting Primary Sources and Methodology

The USA, I contend, is undoubtedly the largest producer of fat romance novels. Therefore, I consider that studying fat romance narratives produced by authors from both my home country and the country that dominates the fat romance market and the field of fat studies will greatly enrich the arguments I develop in my thesis. There is a plethora of heterosexual US fat romance novels to choose from, especially in electronic format published by the authors themselves, compared to only eight Thai heterosexual fat romance novels<sup>102</sup> that I was able to identify using a search engine up to the year 2018. The popularity of ebooks<sup>103</sup> provides authors access to a “self-publishing platform.”<sup>104</sup> Ebooks significantly allow anyone to write and commercially publish their own romance stories with fat heroines online without having to navigate the conventional way of publishing their works via publishing houses. This digital publishing platform has also opened up the possibility for the public to buy and read romance novels featuring heroines with non-normative bodies, who are able to “establish their social and romantic worth”<sup>105</sup> in just a few clicks or taps.

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<sup>102</sup> Only three of them are also available in electronic formats.

<sup>103</sup> Ebooks have gradually become a popular platform for Thai readers since 2011 when the website selling ebooks called “MEB” rose to prominence. “รู้จัก MEB สตาร์ทอัพอีบุ๊กที่โตเงียบๆ แต่ถือส่วนแบ่งตลาดเพียงเบสิคาคาด Getting to know MEB, a start-up ebook seller that is gaining its large market share in the ebook industry,” *Blognone*, June 27, 2019, accessed October 14, 2021, <https://www.blognone.com/node/110591>. This translation is my own and all subsequent translations are also mine.

<sup>104</sup> Katherine Morrissey, “Fifty Shades of Remix: The Intersecting Pleasures of Commercial and Fan Romances,” *Journal of Popular Romance Studies* 4,1 (2014): 1–17 (3).

<sup>105</sup> Kyra Kramer, “Getting Laid, Getting Old, and Getting Fed: The Cultural Resistance of Jennifer Crusie’s Romance Heroines,” *Journal of Popular Romance Studies* 2, no. 2 (2012): 1–21 (1).

When I typed the keywords “plus size romance” and “BBW<sup>106</sup> romance” on the Amazon website, there were over 4,000 results, with 16 pages for both of the two searches, albeit not all of the romance novels that appeared in the search are fat romances. After reading the synopses, if there was no obvious physical description of the heroine as fat, I would dismiss that book as not being a fat romance, although I am aware that there are US fat romances in which the authors do not wish to emphasize fatness as a significant attribute of their heroines or as a selling point in the synopses. For the purpose of narrowing down this massive list of potential US fat romances, I needed to look for a clear keyword in synopses pointing to the non-normative sized body of the heroines in order to identify fat romances. Several of the fat romances that I was able to identify from these two keywords are only available in kindle format. When I typed the keyword “fat romance” on Amazon, the website shows a new wording suggestion: “Did you mean fast romance?” Despite the suggestion for a word replacement, there were 10,000 results, amounting to over 48 pages. Some irrelevant works, such as cookbooks for rapid weight loss recipes and the diary of a former fat woman after gastric bypass surgery, were suggested in this search.

An Goris points out that “the methodologically sound selection of study texts” has “haunted” the study of popular romance in response to a lecture by Pamela Regis about popular romance criticism.<sup>107</sup> Goris remarks: “As Regis implies, . . . many older studies – like the ones by Ann Snitow [1979], Tania Modleski [1982], and Janice Radway [1984] – make quite general claims about the entire genre of ‘the’ popular romance novel despite being based on rather small and/or undiversified corpi.”<sup>108</sup> Jonathan A. Allan makes the observation that the issue of corpus selection also seems to exist in Regis’s own work published 20 years after the work of her predecessors.<sup>109</sup> He points out that Regis uses 37 novels written between 1692 and 1999, with a total of 15 authors, to define the entire genre of popular romance in her often-cited *A Natural History of the Romance Novel* published in 2003. Regis’s definitions of the genre, Allan argues, are nevertheless widely accepted by scholars in the field, including Allan himself. Allan, who

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<sup>106</sup> BBW is an abbreviated term for “Big Beautiful Women,” a euphemism for fat women. BBW was coined by Carole Shaw in 1979, the year she launched *BBW Magazine*, a lifestyle and fashion magazine for fat women.

<sup>107</sup> An Goris, “Matricide in Romance Scholarship? Response to Pamela Regis’ Keynote Address at the Second Annual Conference of the International Association for the Study of Popular Romance,” *Journal of Popular Romance Studies* 2, no.1 (2011): 1–7 (2).

<sup>108</sup> Ibid.

<sup>109</sup> Jonathan A. Allan, *Men, Masculinities, and Popular Romance* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2020), p. 19.

was also criticized for choosing only “a handful of books” for his study on virgin male romance heroes, ponders: “A part of me wished at the time that someone would just tell me exactly how many novels to study.” He follows this by asking, with a hint of frustration: “So what is enough? And when is *enough* enough?” (emphasis in original).<sup>110</sup> Although I have a much “easier” job in drawing a conclusion about particular patterns and conventions that I have seen in only eight Thai heterosexual fat romance novels, I am experiencing the same struggle as all the other scholars in the field of popular romance when it comes to the study of US fat romances.

The authors of all eight of the Thai heterosexual fat romance novels that I was able to identify up to 2018 have portrayed the fat female body as ugly and unwanted romantically. However, there is only one novel in which the author places emphasis on depicting the fat body of the heroine as not just an ugly or undesired body, but rather as a disgusting body. In my history of reading Thai and US fat romance novels, *Yai Auan Chao Sanae* is the only novel that has ever featured a scene in which the hero literally runs to the bathroom to vomit out of disgust when he meets the fat heroine for the first time. With such an exaggerated portrayal of the fat female body as extremely disgusting in the eyes of the hero, I think this novel deserves a chapter of its own. The analysis of this novel in Chapter 1 will certainly allow us to gain insight into how a Thai fat romance author constructs the narrative of desire/disgust surrounding the fat female body.

I will now move on to explain how I chose the other two Thai fat romances. As an avid romance reader, I have always fixed my attention on how the heroine’s love interest has been portrayed in each novel. The heroine’s love interest serves as the key source of pleasure, or even as an object of desire at times in my consumption of romance. In heterosexual romances, the significance of male heroes to the romance narratives is immense. Mary Putney argues that romance novels can still succeed even with a “bland” heroine, but that they are certain to fail with a “weak” hero.<sup>111</sup> Considering how significant the heroes are to heterosexual popular romance narratives, I will devote two chapters (Chapters 2 and 3) to exploring the complexity of fat romance heroes’ masculinity. In Chapter 3, I am keen to consider how Thai heterosexual fat romance authors

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<sup>110</sup> Ibid.

<sup>111</sup> Mary Putney, “Welcome to the Dark Side,” in *Dangerous Men and Adventurous Women*, ed. Jayne Ann Krentz (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1992), pp. 99–105 (p. 100).

construct the version of masculinity that they consider to be ideal, desirable, and acceptable in their fat romance novels. I decided to pick two Thai fat romance novels, *Palosongkrueng* and *Rak Tem Lon*, which share the archetype of the “gentlemanly” fat romance hero. Although the authors of the other six Thai fat romances also aim to write their heroes with “gentlemanly” qualities, only the authors of *Palosongkrueng* and *Rak Tem Lon* explicitly define their heroes as gentlemen and repeatedly appraise, compliment, and chastise the heroes’ masculinity through the idea of being gentlemanly/ungentlemanly.

I will now turn to discuss my US fat romance selection. I attempted to narrow down my primary source selection by choosing US fat romance novels that were written by authors who clearly identify themselves as fat on their social media or author websites and/or those who have been recommended by people within a fat-positive community. As I have already stated, all eight of the Thai heterosexual fat romances that I was able to identify up to 2018 feature denigrating portrayals of the fat female body. As there are large numbers of US fat romances to choose from, I chose to select those that depict the fat female body in a less demeaning way. I wished to explore seemingly more positive portrayals of the fat female body in the selected US fat romances written by female authors who identify themselves as fat and/or are approved by a community that embraces fat politics as I do. Getting to explore both negative and seemingly more positive portrayals of the fat female body has allowed me to complicate and enrich my arguments about how gender, fat bodies, and relationships are constructed in these selected romances.

The way in which I picked only three US fat romance novels out of such a massive corpus for my thesis may seem to incidentally resemble how, as a teenager, I would go to a bookstore and buy romance novels that were recommended by the store clerks or other customers standing close to me. One day in 2017, Gemma Gibson sent me a link to Jessica Pryde’s article on the website bookriot with a recommendation list of what Pryde refers to as “BBW” romance featuring “authentic representations” of fat women, who are not just “a touch overweight” and “[have] a thing for chocolate and donuts.”<sup>112</sup> In Pryde’s list, I saw Sugar Jamison’s *Dangerous*

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<sup>112</sup> Jessica Pryde, “9 Romances Featuring Fat Heroines.” Bookriot, 2017, accessed March 14, 2021, <https://bookriot.com/9-romances-featuring-fat-heroines/>.



*Curves Ahead*. I gave it a try and, surprisingly, the book did not irritate me in the same way as every Thai heterosexual fat romance novel makes me feel. The hero of this novel embodies a mixture of hard and soft masculinity that is worth including in my discussion of representations of the heroes' masculinity. I thus added *Dangerous Curves Ahead* to the list of primary texts for this thesis. This novel is used as one of the two core books analyzed in Chapter 2 about the construction of US heroes' masculinity.

During the years 2016–2018, when I was searching for US fat romance novels for my PhD research, there were two prominent fat romance novels that were frequently retweeted on my Twitter timeline by people from the fat-positive community. Before this, they had never retweeted about fat romance novels. These two novels were Julie Murphy's *Dumplin'* and Amy Spalding's *The Summer of Jordi Perez (and the Best Burger in Los Angeles)*. Both *Dumplin'* and *The Summer of Jordi Perez* are examples of teen fat romances and were written by fat female authors; the first is a hetero teen fat romance, and the second is a queer teen fat romance featuring two heroines. I then selected these two texts for my thesis. In this thesis, I do introduce the genre of young adult novels: I will discuss this adolescent literary genre in detail in Chapter 2 (about the US fat romance heroes' masculinities) and Chapter 4 (about the intersection of queer and fat), where the two novels are used as core texts in the analysis. I am aware that this selection method for choosing US fat romance novels may be perceived as problematic, and my thesis will not be able to escape from the same criticism that my predecessors in studying popular romance have received. What I can do is be transparent about my source selection and avoid making generalizations about the whole corpus of US fat romances based on a few selected examples.

At this point it is important to point out one major difference between US and Thai fat romance authors that affects my analysis of the selected novels. Whilst there is an absence of Thai fat romance authors on social platforms, their US counterparts have a significant online presence, which provided a valuable source of information. By contrast, I was barely able to find any relevant information about my selected Thai authors' backgrounds or interviews about their novels, all of which would have been helpful for expanding my arguments in Chapter 1 and 3. I was able to find the writer of *Yai Auan Chao Sanae*'s blog and realized that Chakriya was a

former journalist with an interest in health and science. Although that information enabled me to better understand why she may have written an extremely fat-phobic fat romance, I wish that my chosen Thai authors would permit their readers to get to know them more through an online presence. In contrast to the absent presence of Thai female authors, I was able to gather much more detail about the selected US fat romance writers. Amy Spalding and Julie Murphy conducted a number of interviews during their book promotion. Murphy in particular has always been an active participant in social media activism, for example through tweeting fat-positive messages. I am thus able to supplement my analysis of their novels through their public input on the subject of fat, sexuality, and romance writing.

As already stated above, there is little accessible information about the selected Thai female fat romance authors. A key reason for this is that they published their works with big romance publishers before there was easy and widespread access to online communities with shared interests in Thailand (except for the 2014 novel, *Rak Tem Lon*). In addition, and unlike their male counterparts, Thai female authors of any literary genres have a history of tending to reveal as little information about themselves as possible. Writing behind pen names allows Thai women writers to freely write about any topics particularly those that may be considered controversial and inappropriate for women to write about in Thai society, such as sex and sexual desire.

My methodology in this thesis is made up of two primary methods: the close reading of my primary texts, and their “rewriting.” Close reading, Jasmina Lukić and Adelina Sánchez Espinosa argue, is “a method of interpretation” that “remains a useful tool for feminist analysis.”<sup>113</sup> Jane Gallop contends that close reading enables us to “discover things [we] would not otherwise have noticed.”<sup>114</sup> By rewriting, I refer to taking significant passages from the selected fat romance novels and revising them from the perspective of a fat woman, who is struggling with her internalized fat hatred whilst attempting to embrace fat politics. Rewriting is, I argue, a strategy for doing self-representation, a method for a fat person to respond to work

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<sup>113</sup> Jasmina Lukić and Adelina Sánchez Espinosa, “Feminist Perspectives on Close Reading,” in *Theories and Methodologies in Postgraduate Feminist Research: Researching Differently*, eds. Rosemarie Buikema, Gabriele Griffin, and Nina Lykke (New York, NY, and London: Routledge, 2011), pp. 105–118 (p. 105).

<sup>114</sup> Jane Gallop, “The Historicization of Literary Studies and the Fate of Close Reading,” *Profession* (2007): 181–186 (183).

produced about us, but not necessarily by us. The method of rewriting romance fiction has also been employed by Mary Beth Tegan; I discovered her project in the final stages of my doctoral research.<sup>115</sup> Tegan asked thirteen feminist “critics of romance and women’s narrative”<sup>116</sup> to revise selected popular or canonical romances. The thirteen feminist scholars were asked to pay attention to the same key struggle that I have in mind: “how they managed the tensions between their convictions as feminists and the pleasures or displeasures they discovered reading romance.”<sup>117</sup> Revising fat romances, I contend, is a form of writing that permits me to negotiate and reconcile these tensions; something I discuss at length in the analysis sections of my rewrites for all four chapters.

The method of rewriting selected fat romances can be considered a form of writing “fan fiction” – another mode of storytelling.<sup>118</sup> The power of fan fiction lies with its ability to tell a different story. It provides me with the possibility to challenge hierarchy and pervasive discourses and it even grants me pleasure in writing and reading this form of writing. Katherine Morrissey contends that fans gain pleasure from reading and writing fan fiction through how they are able to read and write “within and against the traditions and possibilities of that system.”<sup>119</sup> Being able to “play with form and archetype” and “balancing familiarity and surprise,” Morrissey explains, are some of the key aspects that are central to the pleasure of fan fiction communities.<sup>120</sup>

Rewriting the fat romances of my choice definitely grants me immeasurable pleasure. I find myself ending up by being disappointed with the compromises and negotiations that the Thai and US fat female protagonists have made in order to achieve that happily-ever-after ending. The over-exaggeration of traditional femininity, body-size transformation, and the abandoning of their former rebellious values, which are replaced with conventional ones, are some of the

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<sup>115</sup> Mary Beth Tegan, “Becoming both Poet and Poem: Feminists Repossess the Romance,” in *Empowerment versus Oppression: Twenty First Century Views of Popular Romance Novels*, ed. Sally Goade (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2007), pp. 231–263.

<sup>116</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 232.

<sup>117</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 235.

<sup>118</sup> Morrissey, “Fifty Shades of Remix,” 1.

<sup>119</sup> Eric Selinger and Sarah Frantz, “Introduction: New Approaches to Popular Romance Fiction,” in *New Approaches to Popular Romance Fiction: Critical Essays*, eds. Selinger and Frantz (Jefferson: McFarland, 2012), pp. 1–19 (pp. 6–7); Morrissey, “Fifty Shades of Remix,” 11.

<sup>120</sup> Morrissey, “Fifty Shades of Remix,” 11.

aspects that really irritate me in Thai fat romances. In the selected US fat romances, seeing how the fat heroines are not fully allowed by the heroes to embrace their fat identity also leaves me feeling frustrated. Rewriting is therefore a method that allows me to respond to my discontent at reading fat romance novels and to reshape the fat romance narrative in the way that I desire and how I perceive it as being in sync with my lived experience. Although I had a more positive reaction after reading my selected US fat romance novels, I have also rewritten passages from these texts. Through doing so, I have aimed to modify certain aspects that I do not like, at one point even turning a secondary fat male character, whom I would have chosen, into the hero of my US romance revision.

Pamela Cotterill and Gayle Letherby argue that it is highly significant for researchers in feminist research (particularly in their field, sociology) to include themselves in the research.<sup>121</sup> In contrast to the traditional model of objectivity, which promotes detachment or distancing the self from one's research, these two scholars contend that weaving the stories of both the researcher and the researched into the writing process allows the research to be "more honest and accurate," producing an account of "our" experiences rather of "their" experiences.<sup>122</sup> Research that is grounded in objectivity, or what Liz Stanley and Sue Wise call "hygienic research,"<sup>123</sup> avoids presenting the existence of problems ("ethical, political, and personal"<sup>124</sup>) and the involvement of emotion. However, all research, Stanley and Wise argue, is "grounded in consciousness."<sup>125</sup> They suggest that adding personal involvement, histories, and experiences strengthens, rather than weakens, the research.<sup>126</sup>

Even though my research on the representation of the fat female body in romance novels is not the kind of sociological interview-based research that Cotterill and Letherby are referring to in their article, their arguments are still relevant to my own research. How I write myself into my

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<sup>121</sup> Pamela Cotterill and Gayle Letherby, "Weaving Stories: Personal Auto/Biographies in Feminist Research," *Sociology* 27, no.1 (1993): 67–79.

<sup>122</sup> *Ibid.*, 72.

<sup>123</sup> Liz Stanley and Sue Wise, *Breaking Out: Feminist Consciousness and Feminist Research* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1983), p. 153, quoted in Cotterill and Letherby, "Weaving Stories," p. 75.

<sup>124</sup> Kenneth Plummer, *Documents of Life: An Introduction to the Problems and Literature of a Humanistic Method* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1983), p. 136, quoted in Cotterill and Letherby, "Weaving Stories," p. 75.

<sup>125</sup> Stanley and Wise, *Breaking Out*, p. 61, quoted in Cotterill and Letherby, "Weaving Stories," p. 75.

<sup>126</sup> *Ibid.*

research on the work of representation is the question that popped into my head while I was reading their piece. When I look at the representations of fat bodies in novels, films, or in any other pop culture medium, I certainly interpret and make sense of their meanings based on my own personal experiences, history, cultural background, and the disciplines that I came from (cultural studies, American studies, and women's studies). It will be helpful for me not just to interrogate the meanings and discourses of the texts, but also to analyze and deconstruct my interpretations and understandings of the texts that I have chosen to work with. How and why I have become influenced to interpret the texts in the ways I do adds more complex dimensions to my own research. In other words, I will not just look at the texts themselves, but also at my own relation and connection to the texts, or my place within them. Although I have employed a reflexive approach in my analysis of the selected texts, some chapters in my thesis are more reflexive than others. I have attempted to add more reflexive moments in all four analysis chapters where I can. As well as employing a reflexive approach in my analysis of the selected texts and in the construction of my arguments, I also draw on the fields of fat studies, popular romance studies, masculinity studies, and queer studies, as well as the concepts of disgust and pollution.

## **Outline of the Thesis**

Having discussed the context for my research, the limited existence of works on US fat romance novels, the absence of any work on Thai fat romances, and the dominance of US fat studies, and explained my source selection and methodology, I will now outline the structure of my thesis. There are four analysis chapters following this introduction. I begin with Chapter 1, examining how the ambiguously gendered fat body can elicit disgust in *Yai Auan Chao Sanae*. As I have previously stated, *Yai Auan Chao Sanae* is the only fat romance novel that has explicitly portrayed the heroine's fat body as evoking the feeling of disgust in the hero, and therefore I think this novel deserves a chapter of its own. I use Mary Douglas's concept of purity and pollution as a lens to explore how the novel constructs gendered disgust at fat bodies. In the rewriting part of this chapter, I seek to explore how my fat heroine and I can both acknowledge and confront the disgust

displayed toward our own fat bodies and those of others, through writing a feminized fat male body as my hero.

Chapters 2 and 3 function as a two-part examination of masculinities in selected US and Thai heterosexual fat romance novels. From my reading experience, the hero is one of the most significant elements in the heterosexual romance novel, providing “the tension, the excitement, the danger, and the satisfaction”<sup>127</sup> in the story. Considering how significant the hero’s function is in heterosexual fat romance novels, I decided to devote two chapters to examining how the heroes’ masculinity is constructed in US and Thai fat romances. I would like to consider how the heroes and their masculinities are depicted – particularly in relation to the transgressive fat female bodies of the heroines in heterosexual fat romances. Focusing the analysis on two US fat romance texts, *Dangerous Curves Ahead* and *Dumplin’*, Chapter 2 examines how these two selected US fat romances share the archetype of a strong and good-hearted hero. This chapter also considers how the authors of the two chosen novels are interested in stretching the representation of masculinity in romance fiction toward the model of emotive masculinity endorsed by sociologist Eva Illouz.<sup>128</sup> In my revision for Chapter 2, I seek to explore how I can construct a hero who embodies the model of emotional masculinity that Illouz suggests could “take us closer to the goals of feminism.”<sup>129</sup> In Chapter 3, my intention is to continue the discussion of the heroes’ masculinity by examining two Thai fat romances, *Palosongkreung* and *Rak Tem Lon*. I seek to ponder how the heroes’ masculinity is evaluated, complimented, and condemned in terms of their display of gentlemanliness and/or ungentlemanliness. I argue that the two heroes will perform gentlemanly masculinity toward the heroines if the heroines meet the condition of being a “good fatty.” In my rewriting for Chapter 3, I seek to reject the model of gentlemanly masculinity by writing a feminized fat hero who wins the heart of a fat heroine in the end.

While in my creative revisions in Chapters 1–3, I explore implicit queerness through constructing feminized fat men as my heroes, in Chapter 4 I choose to examine the queer fat romance text itself.

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<sup>127</sup> Wendy Larcombe, *Compelling Engagements: Feminism, Rape Law, and Romance Fiction* (Alexandria: Federation Press, 2005), p. 42.

<sup>128</sup> Eva Illouz, *Why Love Hurts* (Cambridge, Oxford, and Boston, MA: Polity Press, 2012), p. 247.

<sup>129</sup> *Ibid.*

I set out to explore the intersection of fat and queer through interrogating the coming-out narrative of the fat heroine in *The Summer of Jordi Perez (and the Best Burger in Los Angeles)*. Drawing on Samantha Murray's discussion of coming out as fat, Eve Sedgwick's theory of coming out as queer, and Judith Butler's theory of gender and impersonation, this chapter examines how the fat heroine is able to come out as both queer and fat, but nevertheless is still veiling her shame toward one of these identities. In the creative section of the chapter, I aim to explore how I can construct my own Thai queer fat romance in response to specific scenes from the US novel and one aspect of Thai *yuri* romance that I am seeking to subvert.

In these four analysis chapters, I seek to explore how fat female bodies are constructed as a problem in fat romance narratives. These chapters argue that the fat heroines in my selected novels are required to embody the archetype of a good fatty in order to earn their happily-ever-after ending. By using the method of rewriting, I have attempted to explore whether it is possible to construct fat romance narratives in which pleasure can co-exist with my fat politics and feminist ideals. I now move on to Chapter 1, in which I discuss how the masculinized fat female body in *Yai Auan Chao Sanae* can evoke disgust, and consider the concept of disgust as a gendered cultural construct.

## Chapter 1: Disgust and the Ambiguously Gendered Fat Body

All the heroines in the eight Thai fat romance novels that I could identify up to 2018 are depicted by the authors as acknowledging that being fat is a denigrated trait and an obstacle for them to achieve success, particularly in relation to (heterosexual) romantic relationships. Although fat is constructed in this genre as an undesirable and ugly characteristic that women would want to avoid if possible, only one – *Yai Auan Chao Sanae*<sup>1</sup> written in 2008 by Chakriya – explores the feeling of disgust that fatness, especially fat female bodies, can provoke. The novel is narrated in the third person from the point of view of Pran, the normative-sized hero, and occasionally from the perspective of Muslin, the fat heroine. The parents of the protagonists, both from upper-class families, have arranged for them to meet in a matchmaking encounter. Muslin sabotages the meeting by dressing in a military outfit and presenting an unkempt appearance, hoping to scare Pran and chase him away. Pran runs to the bathroom to vomit the minute he sees her fat body. He does not want to see her again and tells his mother that he will never marry Muslin. However, the protagonists' parents do not give up on their marriage plan. They come up with a plan to tell Muslin and Pran that, if they can fix their flaws, they will no longer be forced to marry one another. Muslin has to lose weight by limiting her food intake and exercising, whilst Pran has to consult a psychologist to cure his fat phobia. Their parents create many situations in which the two young people have to be close to one another. Muslin and Pran eventually fall for one another despite attempts by May, a weight-loss doctor whom Pran has been casually dating, to prevent their union. Later, the doctor decides to hire someone to abduct both Muslin and Pran and lock the couple into a room. May plans to fatten up Muslin so that Pran will change his mind about dating her. The police come to help Muslin and Pran in time. Muslin decides not to press charges against May if she promises to stay out of their lives for good. In the last few pages of the novel, Pran makes Muslin promise that she will continue to lose weight until she has achieved a thin body. Muslin is initially upset by his demand, but she agrees to go on a diet when Pran explains that he wants to spend the rest of his life with her, and for that to be as long as possible. The novel ends with the couple looking forward to their marriage.

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<sup>1</sup> *Yai Auan Chao Sanae* [*My Fatty Girl*] (Bangkok: Pimkum Books, 2008). Subsequent references to this text will take the form of *YACS* followed by the page reference and will appear in the main text. All the translations for the quotations are my own.



*Yai Auan Chao Sanae* is the Thai fat romance novel that I have hated the most since I first read it in 2015, before I started my PhD research. It is not merely that the fat body in *Yai Auan Chao Sanae* is depicted as ugly, but that this type of body is presented as disgusting. Now, as a researcher, I seek to explore how disgust, fat, and gender are constructed in this particular novel. Weaving my personal life into this thesis, particularly in this chapter, I seek to explore the feelings of disgust that I and the characters have toward our own and other people's fat bodies in the rewriting part of the chapter. In the novel, the author writes from two points of view, those of both Pran and Muslin, but in my revision, I will write only from Muslin's perspective.

From the first chapter of the novel, readers are introduced to the idea of disgust in relation to the fat female body. When Pran, the hero, initially sees Muslin, the fat heroine, at a matchmaking meeting, he “feels his breath shaking as though a great volume of wind in his stomach is generating itself into a strong wave ready to gush from his mouth” (*YACS*, 6).<sup>2</sup> The fat body that provokes Pran into feeling this urge to vomit or to have what he calls “sudden food poisoning”<sup>3</sup> is not just any fat body, but the fat female body of Muslin (*YACS*, 6). And there is something very specific about this fat female body: it is not only “fat,” but manly. By writing in the third person, through the hero's eyes, Chakriya, the author, depicts Muslin as a “big and tall”<sup>4</sup> woman (*YACS*, 5). Muslin dresses in a masculinized green military uniform and fills her pockets with items that she thinks soldiers should have, such as a Swiss army knife, a torch, a thermos flask, a pen, and a journal, as though she has just returned from a war (*YACS*, 5; 6; 13). She also adds a touch of hair gel, olive oil, and powder to her untied hair to make it appear messy, greasy, and dirty, as though she has not washed it for three months (*YACS*, 15–16). We are told from the heroine's point of view that she “intends” to “scare [Pran] and [his] mother” with “her ready-to-fight posture and her unruly fat body,”<sup>5</sup> hoping to sabotage this matchmaking encounter (*YACS*,

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<sup>2</sup> ทันทีที่สบตา เขารู้สึกถึงลมหายใจที่กระตุกผิดจังหวะจนน่าตกใจ แล้วจู่ๆ มวลลมหขนาดใหญ่ก็รวมตัวเป็นลูกคลื่นจากช่วงท้องพุ่งทะยานสู่เบื้องบน มันจู่โจมรวดเร็วรุนแรง เขาริบก็มหน้างุดหมายหักมุมหลอดอาหารที่กำลังจะนำสิ่งที่อยู่ในกระเพาะเดินทางย้อนศรกลับออกมาทางเดิม โชคดีที่เขาหยุดมันไว้ได้บริเวณต้นคอ เหงื่อเริ่มซึม มือเท้าเย็น เกิดอาการปวดมวนท้องจนอยากวิ่งเข้าห้องน้ำภายในหนึ่งวินาที เป็นความรู้สึกเดียวกับอาหารเป็นพิษเฉียบพลันและใกล้จะอาเจียนเต็มที

<sup>3</sup> อาการอาหารเป็นพิษเฉียบพลัน

<sup>4</sup> เธอเป็นหญิงสาวร่างสูงใหญ่

<sup>5</sup> เธอตั้งใจใส่ชุดนี้ เธอ...หวังให้สองแม่ลูกกระเจิงเมื่อเห็นท่าทางบู๊แกมพะรุ่งพะรังและอ้วนทอทะของเธอ ซึ่งได้ผลเกินคาด

16). Her plan to appear extra bulky (through the use of a thick military uniform stuffed with several items inside the pockets), manly, and intimidating is successful. The minute the fat heroine “looks straight into his eyes,”<sup>6</sup> the hero is unable to control his bodily reaction and immediately has to run to the rest room to vomit (*YACS*, 6). The masculinized fat female body in *Yai Auan Chao Sanae*, I argue, is depicted as a body that is culturally constructed as disgusting, rather than being perceived as disgusting by instinct. In other words, Pran’s immediate repulsed response to the manly fat female body of Muslin is not depicted by the author as an instinctive response but one that relies on comparison with the cultural construction of ideal femininity, and complicated by layers of fat phobia. I will now move on to explore my chosen theories of disgust and will elaborate on how I have reached this conclusion.

## **Reading the Manly Fat Female Body Through Selected Theories of Disgust**

Scholars who have worked on the concept of disgust often begin their investigation with Charles Darwin’s *The Expression of the Emotions in Man and Animals* (1872). By using his story of being repulsed by the cold preserved meat touched by a native’s finger while traveling in Terra del Fuego, Darwin argues that disgust is an instinctive bodily reaction associated with “anything unusual in the appearance, odor, or nature of our food.”<sup>7</sup> By solely considering disgust as an outcome of seeing a particular kind of food “that is offensive to the taste,”<sup>8</sup> Darwin is able to avoid exploring the cultural and – specifically here – racial implications of his own disgust. Perhaps it is not just the “unusual” food, but rather food that has been touched by a racially inferior person, in Darwin’s perception, that induces disgust here.<sup>9</sup> The sight of a “naked savage,”<sup>10</sup> as opposed to a clothed Englishman, touching his food provokes Darwin to draw a clear boundary between himself and the natives, to ensure that he will never be one of them, based on his disgust at and rejection of such “contaminated” food.

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<sup>6</sup> ดวงตาเรียวยาวนัยน์ตาดำขลับที่จ้องตรงมายังเขา

<sup>7</sup> Charles Darwin, *The Expression of the Emotions in Man and Animals* (London: Murray, 1872), pp. 256–257.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 256.

<sup>9</sup> Michelle Meagher, “Jenny Saville and a Feminist Aesthetics of Disgust,” *Hypatia* 18, no. 4 (2003): 23–41 (31).

<sup>10</sup> Darwin, *The Expression of the Emotions*, p. 256.

Stepping away from connecting unfamiliar food with disgust, I turn to Mary Douglas's work on purity and pollution in *Purity and Danger* (1966) as a significant lens through which to interrogate disgust. According to Douglas's structural theory on purity and pollution, the contaminating and the dangerous are those things that do not fit into existing societal patterns.<sup>11</sup> Douglas specifically utilizes the word "dirt" to name things that are "out of place."<sup>12</sup> She contends that "dirt is essentially disorder."<sup>13</sup> By drawing a strict boundary between "the pure" and "the polluting," Douglas views the imposition of order on an unruly system in a positive sense. She argues that: "In chasing dirt...we are not governed by anxiety to escape disease, but are positively re-ordering our environment, making it conform to an idea."<sup>14</sup> While Darwin and more recent scholars who have worked on the idea of disgust, such as Paul Rozin, Jonathan Haidt, and Clark McCauley,<sup>15</sup> have theorized the concept of disgust as a protective mechanism against disease and harm to the body, Douglas's explanation places greater emphasis on the elimination of undesirable contamination as a process of social construction. Michelle Meagher, who refers to Douglas's concept of pollution when analyzing Jenny Saville's<sup>16</sup> paintings of fat women, concludes that "natural dirt" does not exist.<sup>17</sup> As Douglas contends, "There is no such thing as absolute dirt: it exists in the eye of the beholder."<sup>18</sup> Following Douglas's model, disgust, Meagher argues, is not a biological instinct to prevent harm to the body, but rather a "bodily habit" that functions to support the imposition of order on a societal system.<sup>19</sup>

Instinctively driven as it may seem, Pran's disgust at the sight of fat bodies is not depicted as fixed but is applied rather selectively. When Pran's fake psychologist (hired by his mother and

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<sup>11</sup> Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger* (Oxon and New York: Routledge, 1966), p. 45.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 50.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 2.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 3.

<sup>15</sup> Paul Rozin, Jonathan Haidt, and Clark McCauley, "Disgust," in *Handbook of Emotions*, eds. Michael Lewis and Jeannette M. Haviland-Jones (New York, NY: The Guilford Press, 2000), pp. 815–834.

<sup>16</sup> Jenny Saville, a Scottish painter, works with and explores the concept of "fat female bodies" by painting large-scale nude portraits of fat women. Meagher argues that her paintings embody "disgust," or what she calls the "aesthetics of disgust" (p. 24). She further argues that Saville's paintings encourage women to confront and think about the disgust we have toward our own bodies when they fail to live up to body ideals (p. 38). Meagher, "Jenny Saville and a Feminist Aesthetics of Disgust," p. 32.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>18</sup> Douglas, *Purity and Danger*, p. 2.

<sup>19</sup> Meagher, "Jenny Saville and a Feminist Aesthetics of Disgust," p. 32.

the heroine's father) suggests that he volunteers as a fitness coach for fat kids, he does not look at those kids with disgust and does not react with revulsion, as he did with Muslin; instead, he views them with pity and compassion (*YACS*, 98). When Muslin and her best friend invite Pran and his weight-loss-doctor girlfriend to a fat-friendly restaurant called Fat Factory, Pran, for the first time, is stunned by how beautiful Muslin is, even though she is still fat. What brings about this change? In this scene, the heroine is depicted as exaggerating her femininity by wearing a sleeveless red blouse, showing her cleavage and her bare upper arms, which are full and round, and high heels (*YACS*, 304).<sup>20</sup> So extreme is this gendered presentation that the author describes Muslin as “a pageant making an appearance at an event” in reference to her unusually feminine appearance (*YACS*, 304).<sup>21</sup> Muslin is also depicted through Pran's eyes as “sexy and powerful, like Cleopatra played by the young Elizabeth Taylor”<sup>22</sup> (*YACS*, 304). He concludes in private that “she is no longer that fat woman who makes him scared and faint”<sup>23</sup> (*YACS*, 304). Clearly, Pran is not intimidated or disgusted by a fat female body that is sexy, pageant like, feminine, and ready to be an object of his male gaze.

Why does the more “manly” fat female body of Muslin disgust Pran when her more “feminine” fat female body does not have the same effect? One possible answer can be found in the way in which Chakriya chooses to depict Pran, the hero, as full of confusion when he first sees Muslin. When Pran sees Muslin walking to the dining table for the first time, he immediately recognizes her as a fat woman (*YACS*, 5). However, as his eyes wander over Muslin's body, he becomes increasingly uncertain. He thinks to himself: “Her pockets are filled with lots of items; they are protruding in such a way that he *can no longer distinguish* which part is the military items, and which is parts of her body”<sup>24</sup> (*YACS*, 5; emphasis added). Narrated from Pran's perspective, her heavy build and the objects in her pockets all seem to merge together to make her appear “stout, like a big mountain”<sup>25</sup> (*YACS*, 5). Obviously, Pran cannot make sense of who or even what

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<sup>20</sup> เธอสวมเสื้อตัวแรกที่เขาเลือกให้ เสื้อสีแดงโชว์เนินอกอวบขาวนวล แขนเสื้อเว้าลึกโชว์ต้นแขนอวบอิมกลมมกลึง เธอสวมรองเท้าส้นสูงสีแดงจัดพอๆ กับสีเสื้อ

<sup>21</sup> ด้วยความสูงหนึ่งร้อยเจ็ดสิบเซนติเมตรบวกกับรองเท้าส้นแหลมสูงสามนิ้วทำให้เธอดูสูงโป่งผิวดตา รวากับนางงามออกงานสังคม

<sup>22</sup> ปรากฏอาศัยช่วงตะลึงงันสังเกตเธออย่างเต็มตา วันนี้มีสลีนเป็นสาวสวยที่ดูเซ็กซี่และมีอำนาจราวกับพระนางคลีโอพัตราที่แสดงโดยอลิซาเบท เทอเลอร์ สมัยยังสาว

<sup>23</sup> เธอไม่ใช่ผู้หญิงอวบอ้วนที่เขาเคยหวาดกลัวถึงขั้นลมจับอีกต่อไป

<sup>24</sup> กระเป๋าเสื้อและกางเกงตุงทุกกระเป๋า จนแทบแยกไม่ออกว่าส่วนใดเป็นข้าวของและส่วนใดเป็นส่วนหนึ่งของร่างกายเธอกันแน่

<sup>25</sup> โครงร่างที่สูงใหญ่รวมเข้ากับสัมผัสการรอบตัวทำให้เธอดูบึกบึนราวภูเขาลูกโต

Muslin is. After being told by his mother that the heroine's name is Muslin, the hero is baffled. He ponders in private: "Her name refers to lightweight cotton cloth. The name evokes the image of a fragile, tender, and sweet lady in his head. But, in reality, this woman possesses none of those pleasant traits" (*YACS*, 8).<sup>26</sup> When the hero finally locks eyes with the heroine, he feels that she is trying to "threaten" and "defy"<sup>27</sup> him, resulting in more confusion, now about Muslin's professional expertise. Although he is told by his mother that she is a computer programmer, Pran still wonders whether this mannish fat woman dressed in a military uniform has previously served in the army.<sup>28</sup> His confusion in this scene leads him to feel the urge to throw up in the next scene, in which he covers his mouth with his hand, abruptly stands up, and runs to the bathroom to vomit out of disgust.

Muslin's fat body in this particular scene confuses and disgusts the hero because it dislocates Pran's constructed knowledge of sex and gender. Gail Bederman points out that the ideological process of sex and gender works within a complicated political technology, which consists of "institutions, ideas, and daily practices" that generate a set of truths about who a person is, evaluated on the basis of what her/his body looks like.<sup>29</sup> Extending this idea, Jean Bobby Noble argues that one major effect of the sex/gender system is that it allows people with male bodies to have access to a man's identity and a man's right to use power.<sup>30</sup> In the context of the novel, the manly fat female body of Muslin makes Pran feel perplexed and disgusted because he can no longer make sense of her masculine, and yet female, body – the body of a woman with a feminine name who is exercising her power over him just by staring at him or, to be more precise, by turning the gaze back on him. Muslin's manly fat female body leaves Pran unable to draw a connection between physicality, identity, and authority.<sup>31</sup> Muslin's fat body is ambiguously gendered; Pran therefore finds it hard to precisely categorize her body within the gender system, and in this way, Muslin's body is queered. His revulsion toward Muslin's

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<sup>26</sup> มัสลิน...ชื่อของเธอหมายถึงผ้าไปง์เบาบางชนิดหนึ่ง ฟังแล้วทำให้จินตนาการถึงหญิงสาวอบบางอ่อนหวานน่ารัก แต่ตัวจริงกลับมีคุณสมบัติน่ากลัวเข้าประจวบคิดซ้ำได้

<sup>27</sup> ดวงตาเรียวยาวนานตาดำลึบที่จ้องตรงมายังเขาซึ่งฉายแววขมขู่และท้าทายอยู่ในที

<sup>28</sup> เธอเป็นโปรแกรมเมอร์หรือนักรบที่เพิ่งกลับจากสงครามกันแน่!

<sup>29</sup> Gail Bederman, *Manliness and Civilization: A Cultural History of Gender and Race in the United States, 1880–1917* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1995), p. 7.

<sup>30</sup> Jean Bobby Noble, *Masculinities without Men? Female Masculinity in Twentieth-Century Fictions* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2004), p. x.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*

“queer” body is not a biological mechanism to prevent harm to his body, but rather “a bodily habit” that serves to foster the regulation of the social order and morality.<sup>32</sup> Thus, Pran’s immediate revulsion exists in response to Muslin’s unruly fat body and unconventional femininity because – I would argue – they are potentially a threat to his own authority and manhood. It is the body of a fat woman who dares to stare back at him and who presents a violent masculinity/military masculine style that challenges his masculinity and power.

### **Rewriting the *Disgusting* Body Through the Fat Female Gaze**

Although Muslin defies conventional femininity and traditional male authority, by engaging with the concepts of disgust, masculinity, and fat, whether consciously or not, the author still chooses to narrate her first chapter by focusing on what Pran, the hero, thinks and how he feels when he sees Muslin’s manly fat female body. Toward the end of the first chapter, narrated from his viewpoint, Pran compares Muslin’s *disgusting* body to that of Bonnie, a fat housebound mother in the film *What’s Eating Gilbert Grape* (1993). In the bathroom where he vomits, the hero has goosebumps and feels shivers over his entire body when he pictures himself marrying Muslin. He is repulsed by the idea of himself having to watch a fat wife sitting and eating all day until she dies, just as Bonnie’s son does in the film (*YACS*, 7).

The first chapter ends with the hero running out of Muslin’s house in disgust without waiting for his mother. In other chapters of the novel, the narrator does take on Muslin’s perspective at times, but Chakriya generally switches back to Pran’s point of view whenever she wants to stress how repulsive the heroine’s masculinized fat female body is. Therefore, I am keen to subvert the male gaze by turning Chakriya’s first chapter into a short story, which will be narrated by Muslin, the heroine. By employing this strategy, I intend to explore the heroine’s disgust toward her own fat body and toward Fat Pran’s body in my revision. Elspeth Probyn, a scholar who criticizes the fat pride politics of the early 2000s, argues that the strategies of fat acceptance

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<sup>32</sup> Meagher, “Jenny Saville and a Feminist Aesthetics of Disgust,” p. 32.

politics will perpetuate “cultures where shame is absent, but where disgust, blame and resentment seethe under the surface of a sanitized veneer of acceptance.”<sup>33</sup> Probyn points out that the politics of fat acceptance discourages us from fully engaging with the feeling of disgust that the fat body can elicit and leaves no room for people who are straddling the gap between developing their fat acceptance and dealing with their internalized fat hatred. Her argument on the “hidden” facet of fat pride politics provokes me to attempt to tease out how “fat disgust” has been written in the novel. Inspired by Probyn’s idea, I will not simply reject “disgust” as an unacceptable feeling that the characters and I should not have, but will rather attempt to theorize it as it has been constructed in the novel. Meagher, in her analysis of the aesthetics of disgust in Jenny Saville’s paintings of fat women, contends that, by being able to acknowledge and confront our disgust, we can explore the way in which we “inhabit” the world through the influence of social conventions and cultural norms.<sup>34</sup> By taking a close look at my own and the characters’ disgust toward fat bodies, I will expand on how Chakriya constructs gendered disgust at fat bodies with a twist on her plot in my revision.

One specific aspect of fat disgust in this novel is, of course, the invocation of the masculine fat woman. Inspired by S. Bear Bergman’s article, “Part-Time Fatso,” I am excited to put a twist on Chakriya’s idea because the author has made a fat female body become disgusting by using masculinity. By recounting his personal stories, Bergman, a self-identified butch with a trans-masculine identity at the time he wrote this piece,<sup>35</sup> contends: “Whether the world thinks of me as fat depends entirely on how it interprets my gender.”<sup>36</sup> He further explains that when he is thought to be a man, he is not fat, but when he is being recognized as a woman, he appears “unattractively mannish” and “grossly fat.”<sup>37</sup> Interestingly, Bergman perceives his fat body as granting him a place of “privilege” in relation to his “gender” because it allows him to be read as a man without having to go through expensive surgery and post-op medical complications.<sup>38</sup> By exploring the ways in which Chakriya and Bergman address how fat female bodies are

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<sup>33</sup> Elspeth Probyn, *Carnal Appetites: FoodSexIdentities* (London: Routledge, 2000), p. 128.

<sup>34</sup> Meagher, “Jenny Saville and a Feminist Aesthetics of Disgust,” p. 39.

<sup>35</sup> Now, Bergman identifies as a transman.

<sup>36</sup> S. Bear Bergman, “Part-Time Fatso,” in *The Fat Studies Reader*, eds. Esther Rothblum and Sondra Solovay (New York and London: New York University Press, 2009), pp. 139–142 (p. 139).

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 141.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 142.

constructed as disgusting, I am curious to discover what constitutes disgusting fat male bodies. I attempt to play with Chakriya's invocation of masculinity as a means to turn a fat female body into a disgusting one. In my short story, I explore the ways in which I can turn a fat male body into a disgusting one through the use of femininity.

Here is my take on developing the main ideas I have discussed above into a short story based on the first chapter of Chakriya's *Yai Auan Chao Sanae*:

Today's matchmaking meeting will turn out great. I carefully picked the outfit and created a new hairdo just to be sure that everything will proceed as planned. After taking a good look at my body two or three times, I can't stop smiling, satisfied at what I've seen in the mirror. A face marked with beads of sweat, a military uniform with its pockets fully stuffed with items, and unwashed frizzy hair are the perfect combination.

My name is Muslin, the name of a light cotton fabric. I was born as a big baby, so big that my grandma had to ask a monk for his advice. Superstitious as it is, my family believed that a name could magically save me from my own fat flesh. Of course, I've never once lived up to that name...

Strangely, when I see my reflection in the mirror again, I have to repeatedly console myself that what I see is not who I am. Normally, I don't look disgusting. I don't look this disgusting, I mean. I can no longer make them wait. I've never wanted to become disgusting. I've never wanted to see strangers giving me that look. It is done out of necessity.

Pushing the door open and stamping my feet loudly while making my way into the dining room, I feel my heart beating faster, because I know what look and reaction I will soon be receiving.

The moment the man sees me, he is frightened, as I expected. His mouth opens wide, and he has a helpless look on his face. What I've witnessed should make me smile, but no, not at all, because I'm having the exact same reaction that he is having right now.

The man sitting at the dining table next to his mother has a gigantic body. It is unfair of me to choose to depict him in this way, since I am certain that he won't hesitate to call me fat in his head the moment he sees me.



Let me start again. He is a fat man. I guess our height is approximately the same, around 175 centimeters. His eyes are wandering over my body, as mine wander over his.

His hair is perfectly slicked back. His eyebrows are neatly plucked. His face is bright, without facial hair. His lips are moist and glossy. He smells like my childhood vanilla candies. Sadly, the company went bankrupt before I hit puberty.

I can't seem to take my eyes off the floral shirt that is too small to contain his belly. When he breathes, his girth moves. I can't help but look at my own stomach, hoping that mine is smaller. I notice that there are colors on his eyelids, copper bronze and sparkling pearl or something like that. I grew up idolizing K-Pop<sup>39</sup> male singers in my adolescence. Those guys wear heavy make-up. They apply eyeliner on waterlines and wear dramatic eyeshadow. Soft masculinity has never stopped me and my friends lusting after them.

But this man is not a pop idol who can pull off that look and walk along the street without being stared at!

I am walking slowly to a seat next to my father. I keep staring at the fat man, trying to intimidate him as much as I can, even though I no longer know whether my plan is still needed.

Initially, he stares back at me, but then decides to avert his gaze, looking at the ceramic plate in front of him instead. His ears are turning reddish.

Is he being shy?

The voice inside my head keeps telling me not to believe what I've seen. But his trembling hands on his lap, his averted gaze, and those blushing cheeks are all inviting me to believe in what he is presenting.

I no longer know what I'm doing...or what he's doing.

I don't hate him. And I'm not sure how he feels about me.

I'm so curious right now. If possible, I want to grab his arms and take him outside my house so that we can escape our parents' surveillance and get a chance to talk freely.

Not really sure, but I think we can become friends.

Perhaps not.

My dad is smaller than me.

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<sup>39</sup> (South) Korean pop music

It's hard to accept that. Every time Dad reveals that he's on a diet, I will secretly monitor his reading on the scales. I will be depressed if his weight has become much lower than mine. And I will be happy if I hear that his weight is increasing, becoming close to his daughter's weight.

Being heavier than my dad is indeed a one-sided mental burden that has been with me for a long time. I'm praying that once I become older, I will get over it. But our weight difference keeps haunting me, no matter how much time has passed.

I'm using a fork to quietly push jasmine rice onto a spoon while glancing at him.

He has breasts. They look soft. I wonder whether mine or his are softer.

The person at whom I'm gazing is finally aware of what I'm doing. He raises his head, and our eyes meet. He smiles, and I respond to his friendliness with a sneer.

It shouldn't be like this. I'm prepared to be his enemy, not intending to befriend. But I have to admit that having a man of my own size sitting in close proximity renders me unusually warm.

If I'm weird, he's also weird.

"Pran, do you want some more rice?" My grandma, who is sitting at the head of the table, chooses to ask him first, and then Dad. I'm waiting and waiting. But she does not ask me if I want more rice.

"I want some more rice, Grandma." I decide to announce my appetite right after I become certain that she has chosen to ignore me. I'm not asking for permission and I don't wait to be served. I stand up immediately and try to reach for a rice serving bowl near my grandmother.

"Muslin!" My dad whispers hastily. He is pulling at my uniform aggressively.

"I'm hungry!" I'm deliberately playing the role of a hungry beast.

"Let me serve it to you." The only young man in the room stands up and reaches for the serving bowl at the end of the table. He lifts the stainless-steel lid and I see the hot steam coming out of it.

I give my plate to him while presenting an emotionless face, not showing that I'm grateful for what he's done.

"That's not enough. Give me more." He's nodding in return without looking startled like my dad. He is giving me one more spoonful of rice as requested.

“Would you like some more?”

He asks softly. No sign of a sneer or irony. I don't like this. I don't like what I'm seeing so far. We won't become friends. We'll never be friends.

I'm shaking my head and asking him back, “What about you? Don't you want more rice?”

“I do. The rice here is cooked perfectly firm.”

“I also like my rice to be al dente. If I have to choose between hard-to-swallow rice and mushy rice, I'll always choose the former.” I can't help continuing our “rice” talk since it's one of my top concerns in life.

He smiles and nods in agreement.

“We like the same thing.”

Doesn't this angry fat woman fully dressed in a military uniform scare him? Don't smile. Don't try to talk to me nicely. Although we're both fat, we don't need to become friends!

My dad, my grandma, and his mom are giving each other a satisfied look. They are probably thinking that their fat kids are interested in each other...romantically or something close to that.

At the end, all the older adults have left the room. Now, there are only the two of us in the dining room. I'm looking at him and he's also looking at me.

“So, what now? You also don't want to get married, right? That's why you dressed like that. And stop smiling at me. It just drives me nuts.”

I choose to start the conversation first. We have wasted almost two hours of our time in this dining room.

He stops smiling and looks a bit confused.

“What do you mean by ‘dressed like this’? And yes, I don't agree with the arranged marriage.”

“So, you're telling me that, normally, you would go out wearing a tight shirt showing off your...erm...curves, full eye make-up, and some sort of lip product on your lips? Who'd believe that?”

This time he laughs before asking me back.

“And you? Do you normally dress in a camouflage military uniform and look sullen all the time?”

I remain silent. I’m not ready to answer. There are two ways to reply.

First, go with truth. The truth that I’m trying to make my fat body as ugly, intimidating, disgusting, and unbearable as possible.

Second, lie. Lying that this is my personal taste in clothing. It will never change, and he should be scared and escape from this place and this sight right now.

Whether to be honest or to lie, the only thing I want is for him to go home and tell his mom that there will be no marriage between him and this fat woman.

“Oh. Don’t tell me you’re a fan of the military government?”

I immediately hit the table loudly. Better call me a fat pig than to accuse me of siding with those who are ridding me of my basic rights.

“Don’t be absurd. I can’t wait to cast my vote whenever the junta allows an election to happen!”

His eyes are filled with sparkles. His beautiful lips are turning into a smile.

“We’re having the same thought again. I’m dying to vote as well.”

My heart is racing. Would the election take place at the end of this year? Or next year? Or the year after next? I want to ask him so badly. I know he has no clue, just like me. Still, the hope excites me.

And so what? I still have no clue why he dressed up the way he did.

“We barely know each other. So, we won’t talk about politics. The next thing I know you might report me to the police for criticizing the military junta, and I end up being a political prisoner for a lifetime.”

In a society where its citizens can face many decades in jail for rebelling against the ruling authority, a coward like me has to be extra careful. Certainly, in the life of a fat woman, her body is not the only issue. There are also other societal concerns for her to worry about.

“Khun<sup>40</sup> Muslin.”

He calls my name repeatedly until I am able to bring myself back to the present situation.

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<sup>40</sup> Khun is a prefix that a person adds before saying someone’s name politely.

“Sorry. So, what about you? Why did you dress up like this for the matchmaking meeting? Be honest and tell me that you actually want me to have a bad impression of you, right?”

He looks baffled again.

“For you, dressing up like this is considered not ‘good’? So, you’re wearing a military uniform and acting sulky to me the entire time, because you want me to see you in a bad light?”

“Don’t return the same question to me! Please tell me the truth.”

He licks his lips and smiles again. I stop counting how many times I’ve seen him smiling today.

“I just like dressing this way. Except for work, where I need to wear more formal clothes.”

I shoot him a question right away.

“So...you like men? Are you *Tood*<sup>41</sup>?” I’m well aware that I’m trying very hard to specify what a person is, which category or label I should give him.

He pauses to think for a brief moment, before slowly replying.

“I like men and I like women. I like whomever I like, and it took me so long to be able to admit this.”

I need to confess that the thing inside my chest is beating faster once more.

“What about you? You told me that you didn’t like the military regime. So, why are you dressing like this?”

My head is bursting with plenty of words. Should I be honest, or should I lie? I’m watching his beaming face. It wouldn’t hurt to admit what I’m actually thinking, right?

“To be honest, I want you to be scared of me...scared of this fat sullen woman in a military uniform. I want you to be intimidated by my messy hair and unruly body. Everything that I put on display is far from being feminine. I hope that all of these will make you run for your life.”

He is ducking his head and has a look of disappointment on his face.

Why is he making such a face?

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<sup>41</sup> This roughly translates as a feminine gay man.

“So, the way I am...the way I like to wear tight floral shirts, eye make-up, and lip gloss isn't what you like, right? A fat man with insufficient manhood is disgusting to you, Khun Muslin?”

I'm breathing heavily and giving him a sullen look again.

“Don't try to turn me into a soap villain! I don't feel good playing with the negative images of fat women either. I just want to be a fatty, just a fatty with no negative words attached to it. No 'ugly'...no 'disgusting'...nothing whatsoever. I hope that if I can make you feel disgusted, I can stop our parents from forcing us to marry.”

His mouth is moving, suggesting that he's about to say something. But I remove his chance of speaking.

“Hold on. I haven't finished! Please listen...”

I pause for a while. Debating whether to continue or not.

“Yes?”

“Do I make you feel disgusted? Now, I'm not disgusted by you. But if you see me as disgusting, I will also find you disgusting. Not because of what you're wearing or the body you have, but only because of the way you think. Do you understand what I'm saying?”

I'm lying as much as telling the truth. I guess this is what he wanted to hear and, more importantly, this is also what I wanted to hear from myself.

“Perfectly understood.” He has a broad smile, and his eyes are filled with delight.

He goes on to say: “I'm not disgusted by you. Don't really like the military uniform. But that doesn't have anything to do with you or your body. I'm just purely sick of the regime. And now, I'm so glad to hear you say that you don't find the person in front of you disgusting.”

I'm so fed up with the excitement that he's caused. I stand up and declare: “All right. It's time for us to tell our parents that we disagree with their plan. There will be no marriage, okay?”

He pauses again. It seems as though he's been having some fuzzy thoughts of his own right now. Why is it so hard for an adult nearly in his thirties to make a decision?

“Don't take too long to think. This is not difficult!”

“So, if we tell them that we won't marry each other, would that have an effect on how we may like or may not like each other in the future?”

His words are confusing me.

“Could you repeat that? I don't get it.”

He's grinning.

"I'm sorry. I ramble when I get excited."

Does he think he's the only one who gets excited?

"After today, would we still be strangers?" he asks.

I scratch my head.

"What have you been thinking?" I grab his arm gently and speak in a demanding voice.

"We need to get out of this room and tell them that we can't accept their arrangement. In the future, who knows...you and I might marry someone for financial need or social stability. But that's not for now. It's not necessary right now."

He resists walking out of the room with me.

"You still haven't answered my question," he persists.

I'm giving him that sulky look again and pulling his arm intensely.

"Khun Muslim..." Why does my name sound so nice coming from his lips?

"After we're done talking to our parents, would you mind giving me your LINE<sup>42</sup> ID? If our time matches, we may get to talk again. Satisfied now?" I'm staring at him, waiting for his answer. I know I'm hoping for something.

"Yes, I'm satisfied. Thank you for being so kind." He smiles until his cheeks become swollen. I don't like to smile at a stranger or a person whom I barely know. But I'm moving the corners of my upper lip slightly. Not exactly a smile, but not a sullen face anymore.

"After talking more, we might end up hating each other. But it would be good if we could be friends," I say.

He's nodding.

"I want to get to know you better," he agrees.

I'm wrinkling my nose because of his straightforwardness.

"Actually, it was nice to get to meet you today," I murmur.

He's grinning, and I'm smiling a little.

"Shall we go now?" I ask.

I push the door to open it. Today was not bad. I will be glad if I will get to know him better in the future.

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<sup>42</sup> LINE is a chatting application popular in Thailand.

But it will also be fine if we remain strangers to each other, as it is now.

I am eager to bring myself into conversation with Probyn's "politics" of exploring disgust and shame as the "hidden" facet of body pride through writing my short story.<sup>43</sup> Similarly to how Pran in Chakriya's novel is disgusted and confused by Muslin's masculinized fat female body and unconventional femininity, Muslin, in my short story, is also troubled by the way in which Fat Pran presents his obscure masculinity. She finds it easy to accept K-Pop male singers' outer appearance, which does not conform to traditional masculinity, but does not approve when those feminine traits belong to a fat man like Pran. Seeing his effeminate physical appearance and his soft demeanor, Muslin suspects that Pran is also utilizing the "misgendering"<sup>44</sup> strategy to arouse disgust in order to sabotage their parents' matchmaking plan. She thus does not hesitate to pressure Pran into admitting that her reading of his visual presentation for the effect of disgust is correct. Probyn contends: "In disgust we seek acknowledgement that we are not alone in our judgements. Unchecked, this can lead to a culture of hatred and scapegoating, whereby certain objects are publicly deemed to be *universally disgusting*" (emphasis added).<sup>45</sup> If I chose to let Pran agree with Muslin that he has the same idea of playing with gender identity, disgust, and fatness, these two would not have to engage in a deeper conversation about what they think constitutes disgust and why. Disgust, as Probyn has warned us, will remain buried "underground" and left unspoken, when it is naturally acknowledged as such and thus requires no further debate.<sup>46</sup>

Public acknowledgement of what is considered disgusting is not the only discourse that silences the conversation about our recognition of certain bodies as disgusting. The antagonistic rhetoric of "us" and "them" in body pride politics also downplays the significance of interrogating disgust as a social and cultural construct. When Muslin confesses that it is indeed her plan to put a *disgusting* fat female body on display, Pran shows his disappointment. He questions Muslin's

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<sup>43</sup> Probyn, *Carnal Appetites*, p. 128.

<sup>44</sup> I define "misgendering" as when there is no obvious connection between a person's physicality, her/his gender/sexual identity, and her/his access to power. See Noble, *Masculinities without Men?*, p. x.

<sup>45</sup> Probyn, *Carnal Appetites*, p. 142.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 129.



opinion toward his body and manhood in a seemingly accusing tone, which provokes Muslin to stop him from turning her into a “soap villain.”

That particular scene is written to address Probyn’s criticism of pride movements, in which she argues that these movements use the rhetoric of antagonism producing “‘us,’ the shamed, and ‘them,’ the guilty.”<sup>47</sup> Probyn contends that this rhetoric is particularly “effective” when the bodies that have been shamed gather en masse to shame those who have shamed them by returning “the shaming epithets”: “Shame at your attitudes – feel guilt at your aversion.”<sup>48</sup> What actress Camryn Manheim wrote in her fat pride book, entitled: *Wake up, I’m Fat!* is an example of how the shamed return “the shaming epithets” to those who have shamed them. She demands: “Was it your intention to embarrass me in front of my friend? And if so, the shame doesn’t belong to me, it belongs to you.”<sup>49</sup> This tactic transfers the shame of the disgusting onto those who place others in the category of the disgusting.

This strategy of pride movements, argues Probyn, is rather unproductive. Ideally, the one who is disgusting is expected to reject the shame and attempt to embrace corporeal pride, while the “culprit” who has shamed others will be forced to feel guilty and leave the topic of the disgusting ones unspoken.<sup>50</sup> Therefore, any conversations about our recognition and acknowledgment of why something/someone within a particular context is or is not labelled as disgusting will be concealed from public and individual speculation; disgust will thus always remain there, but veiled and unexamined. Inspired by Probyn’s argument, I seek to devote a space for Muslin and Pran to move beyond the rhetoric of “who is to blame, who should feel guilty” and to let them tease out how and why their ambiguously gendered fat bodies can both bring out their own disgust and elicit such feelings in others.

Muslin’s answer to Pran’s question about whether she is disgusted by him, as well as her inner thoughts afterwards, reflect the reality of my personal life as a fat woman who is researching in the field of fat studies. I remember that I was hesitant to allow Muslin to admit that she is “lying

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<sup>47</sup> Probyn, *Carnal Appetites*, p. 128.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 130.

<sup>49</sup> Camryn Manheim, *Wake up, I’m Fat!* (New York: Broadway Books, 1999), p. 165.

<sup>50</sup> Probyn, *Carnal Appetites*, p. 129.

as much as telling the truth” after gracefully declaring that she is not disgusted by the sight of him but will become disgusted by his “disgusting” thoughts instead. In the short story, I deliberately attempt to write inconsistencies and paradoxical thoughts in terms of how the fat heroine perceives her own fat body and the hero’s fat body. Muslin declares that she wants to be labelled as a fatty but does not want to be attached to the negative associations that come with the term “fat.” She is aware of fat politics to a certain extent and knows the “right” thing to say when asked whether the feminized fat male body disgusts her. However, in her private thoughts, she cannot bring herself to admit to whether the positive answer she has given is deception or candor.

Sam Orchard, a “semi-butch chubby” producer of a web comic based on his experiences as a fat transmasculine person, contends that there is an expectation that our politics will “neatly fit” with our actual feelings and experiences.<sup>51</sup> However, it is not always the case that I can force my feelings to cooperate with the fat politics that I seek to fully embrace. Muslin, in my short story, allows me to express this frustration toward my ambivalence in relation to fat and endorses what James Burford, a queer and feminist “knowledge worker” calls the “messiness” of practicing a progressive fat politics in a society that has endlessly sent the message that “whatever [fat people] are doing with their bodies, [they] are not doing it right.”<sup>52</sup>

## **“Delayed” Disgust, Fattening Foods, and Female Indulgence**

In the climactic scene of *Yai Auan Chao Sanae*, Chakriya grants the now thinner heroine a chance to experience a feeling of “disgust” toward fat, fattening food, and the potential to become “fatter” for the first time in the novel. Toward the end of the novel, Muslin and Pran are abducted by Dr May, the thin female antagonist. After their blindfolds are removed, Muslin and

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<sup>51</sup> James Burford and Sam Orchard, “Chubby Boys with Strap-Ons: Queering Fat Transmasculine Embodiment,” in *Queering Fat Embodiment*, eds. Cat Pausé, Jackie Wykes, and Samantha Murray (London and New York: Routledge, 2016), pp. 61–73 (p. 65).

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 64.

Pran are given what Pran calls “good food” to eat. These are stir-fried pork belly in fish sauce, chicken green curry, stewed pork knuckle on rice, and banana in coconut milk as a dessert. While the hero sniffs the food with pleasure and remarks, “At least, we have ‘good food’ to eat, unlike other captives,”<sup>53</sup> the heroine pulls a wry face saying, “If I [she omits the pronoun in the original text; it could be “I” or “we”] eat all of these, I’ll choke to death because of the pork and coconut fat”<sup>54</sup> (*YACS*, 410–411). Although Muslin shows disdain toward the food, which she criticizes for being made of “pork fat and the saturated fat in coconut milk,” she nevertheless acknowledges that these dishes are too good for captives (*YACS*, 411).<sup>55</sup> She agrees with Pran in private that captives are not supposed to “live well, eat well, be in possession of abundant food”<sup>56</sup> (*YACS*, 411).

Looking closely at Muslin’s sentence, “If I eat *all* of these...,” the implication seems to be that she does not altogether reject the notion of eating the food, but will attempt to eat a limited amount so that she does not “choke to death.” Imagine if she had said this instead: “If I eat these, I’ll choke to death...” This would indicate that Muslin fully rejects the notion of consuming any of these “fatty” foods. I would argue that, up until here, Muslin is not repulsed by such fattening foods or the act of consuming such food. Her reaction (a wry face and the comment showing disapproval of the notion of finishing *all* the fatty food) reveals that she will not allow herself to transgress the gender-coded norm regarding food, eating, and appetite. Women are not *supposed* to have a “cool” or “casual” relationship to food in order to achieve and maintain a slender body.<sup>57</sup> Only men are *supposed* to have “hearty, even voracious, appetites.”<sup>58</sup> Bordo thus concludes: “It is a mark of the manly to eat spontaneously and expansively,”<sup>59</sup> just as Pran is permitted to express his happiness about the fatty food through the act of sniffing.

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<sup>53</sup> “ดีนะ อย่างน้อยก็ยังมีข้าวดีๆ ให้กิน” ปรานยังมองโลกในแง่ดี ก้มลงสูดกลิ่นอาหารที่ทางมีความสุข “ไม่เหมือนถูกจับมาเป็นตัวประกันเลย”

<sup>54</sup> มัสลินทำหน้าเบ้ “ซินกินหมดนี้ มันจุกอกตายพอดี”

<sup>55</sup> ทุกงานมีไขมันจากหมูและกะทิซึ่งเป็นกรดไขมันอิ่มตัวชนิดที่ทำให้มีโอกาสเป็นโรคหลอดเลือดหัวใจ โรคเบาหวาน โรคความดัน และโรคอ้วนสูงขึ้น

<sup>56</sup> ปรานพูดถูก มีตัวประกันที่ไหนได้อยู่ดีกินดีและมีอาหารมากมายขนาดนี้

<sup>57</sup> Susan Bordo, *Unbearable Weight: Feminism, Western Culture, and the Body* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London: University of California Press, 1993), pp. 100, 103.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 108.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*

I contend that not having a free and easy relationship with food and the act of being “disgusted” by certain kinds of food are not exactly the same thing. The prohibition of female indulgence, particularly in regard to eating rich and fattening food, has been culturally reproduced to impose “self-restraint” and the “containment of impulse” on women. This serves to maintain gender ideology and gender differences (which result in perpetuated gender inequality), with women behaving like women and men acting like men.<sup>60</sup> Imagine what would happen if Muslin did not talk about food in such a cautious and restrictive manner but was ready to grab some eating utensils, take big bites, and finish all the food served to her with a smile on her face.

Chakriya answers this question for me. In the final chapter, Muslin goes on a date to an ice-cream shop with Pran. Her eyes sparkle, and she swallows her saliva unconsciously (*YACS*, 423).<sup>61</sup> Pran tells Muslin to eat so that the ice-cream will not melt. Muslin, ready to dig in, smiles and grabs a spoon. However, after the second bite, Pran touches her hand as it grabs at the spoon, and remarks, “There is a research finding that shows dessert only tastes good in the first two bites. The rest is just the brain making us want to finish all of it regardless of whether it still tastes good or not” (*YACS*, 423).<sup>62</sup>

Now follows the ending I have hated the most in all of the history of my fat romance consumption: Pran slowly hands to Muslin two thick books entitled *Mindless Eating*<sup>63</sup> in both the original English and translated Thai versions (with no reason stated why he has to give her the same book in two languages). He describes it as a “life bible”<sup>64</sup> that will allow them to “build the environment and atmosphere that will enable [them] to have good health together for the rest of [their] lives” (*YACS*, 426–427).<sup>65</sup> This particular scene indicates that “good and thin(ner)” women will not be allowed to eat whatever, whenever, and wherever they want to. In contrast to Muslin, Pran has never had to experience restricted food intake throughout the course of the

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<sup>60</sup> Ibid., p. 130.

<sup>61</sup> ตาวาวเป็นประกายและกลืนน้ำลายโดยไม่รู้ตัว

<sup>62</sup> “มีคนเคยทำวิจัยพบว่าของหวานจะอร่อยในสองคำแรก ที่เหลือเป็นแค่ความเคยชินที่สมองสั่งการว่าเราต้องกินให้หมด ไม่ว่าจะอร่อยหรือไม่ก็ตาม”

<sup>63</sup> Brian Wansink, *Mindless Eating: Why We Eat More Than We Think* (New York: Bantam Books, 2006).

<sup>64</sup> “ผมคิดว่าหนังสือเล่มนี้มีความสำคัญกับชีวิตเรามากพอที่จะถือเป็นคัมภีร์ชีวิตเลยนะครับ...”

<sup>65</sup> “ผมอยากให้คุณอ่านหนังสือเล่มนี้ให้จบ แล้วรับปากกับผมว่าเราจะสร้างสิ่งแวดล้อมและบรรยากาศที่เอื้อต่อการมีสุขภาพดีร่วมกัน...แบบตลอดชีวิต...นะ”

novel. In this scene, he acts like a gatekeeper who decides how much and what type of food his girlfriend and potential wife will and can eat for the rest of her life.

During this climax, Muslin starts to suspect why she and Pran were fed with “good” food despite being kidnapped. Her realization of the purpose of being fed excessively later elicits her feelings of disgust toward fattening foods. According to Douglas, there is no such thing as “absolute dirt.”<sup>66</sup> This viewpoint can be extended by stating that there is no object that is naturally disgusting without a reliance on specific social and cultural contexts: “Dirt then, is never a unique, isolated event. Where there is dirt there is system. Dirt is the by-product of a systematic ordering and classification of matter.”<sup>67</sup>

William Ian Miller, a scholar who works on disgust, extends Douglas’s idea as follows: “Social and cognitive structures create dirt less by assigning something to play that role than as a consequence of categorization itself.”<sup>68</sup> The notions of seeing and eating fattening food do not bring out feelings of disgust in Muslin. Her contempt toward the food, as I argued earlier, is an outcome of the gendered norm designed to regulate the female appetite and the female body. However, after working out that the female antagonist plans to feed her and fatten her up with rich food,<sup>69</sup> Muslin pushes the pork knuckle and pork belly dishes off the table, scattering them across the floor (*YACS*, 411–412).<sup>70</sup> Muslin is viewed through Pran’s eyes as “neurotic”<sup>71</sup> when she tries to distance herself as much as possible from the pieces of white pork fat on the floor, as though they were “germs or *disgusting* monstrous animals”<sup>72</sup> (*YACS*, 411). Muslin’s reaction is not an immediate gut response toward fattening food, but rather what I call a feeling of “delayed” disgust after understanding the purpose or function of the given food, or, to go further, a recognition of the power of the villainess through this force feeding. (In accordance with his

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<sup>66</sup> Douglas, *Purity and Danger*, p. 2.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 44.

<sup>68</sup> William Ian Miller, *The Anatomy of Disgust* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997), pp. 43–44.

<sup>69</sup> “ยายหมอมเมโรคจิตของคุณนะสิ!” “เขาตั้งใจขังฉันไว้ที่นี่ เอาอาหารมันๆ ให้กินทุกมื้อจนฉันอ่อนเหมือนหมูตอน แล้วคุณก็จะกลั้วฉันจนเป็นลมล้มพับ...”

<sup>70</sup> มัสลินเอื้อมมือไปปัดจานขาหมูและหมูสามชั้นคว่ำเค็มกระเด็นตกกระจายเต็มพื้น

<sup>71</sup> ปรานจ้องหน้ามัสลิน รู้ว่าเมื่อคืนเธอนอนไม่หลับพลิกตัวไปมาทั้งคืน การอดนอนอาจทำให้เธอเกิดอาการประสาทเสียขึ้นมาได้

<sup>72</sup> มัสลินกระเียบถอยหลังเพื่อให้ห่างจากชิ้นขาหมูและหมูสามชั้นติดมันเป็นก้อนๆ ให้มากที่สุด รวากับเป็นตัวเชื้อโรคหรือไมก็สัตว์ประหลาดน่าขยะแขยง

boss's orders, the man who comes to serve the food to Pran and Muslin threatens to dump it on their heads if they do not finish everything on their plates.)<sup>73</sup> Before the food is served by the female antagonist's male assistant, and before she finds out why she and Pran were abducted,<sup>74</sup> Muslin tells Pran that she does not want to die yet: "I don't want to die; my life has just started. I have so many things that I want to do, but haven't done yet."<sup>75</sup> "What do you mean by saying that 'your life has just begun?'"<sup>76</sup> Pran asks. Muslin then replies: "I've just become thinner. I want to see the snow on top of Mount Everest, learn how to scuba dive so that I can dive in the Maldives, and have a boyfriend" (*YACS*, 402).<sup>77</sup> To borrow Douglas's language, Muslin's reaction of "delayed" disgust toward the fattening food does not depict such rich food as naturally disgusting; rather, her "delayed" disgust is a rejection of the villainess's attempt to disrupt the order of Muslin's ideally feminized life<sup>78</sup> because her life has just started – not in a biological sense but in a gendered, socially accepted sense – after she became thinner.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, by using Douglas's concept of purity and pollution as a lens through which to view Chakriya's *Yai Auan Chao Sanae*, I seek to argue that the fat female body in this novel is depicted as a body that is culturally constructed as disgusting, rather than a body that is perceived as disgusting by instinct. Pran, the hero, cannot make sense of who or what Muslin is because her masculinized female body, obscured gender/sexual identity, and superior authority

<sup>73</sup> "กินให้หมดนะ นายบอกว่าถ้ากินไม่หมดให้เอาราดหัวทั้งสองคน"

<sup>74</sup> The villainess reveals her reason for the abduction, which is correctly guessed by Muslin: "I want to feed you with rich food for one month. I want Pran to know that it feels like hell to live with a bad-tempered fat woman like you. After you become fat again, I will send you back home." "ฉันแค่อยากเลี้ยงดูปุ๊บเสียให้อิ่มหน้าสำราญซักเดือนหนึ่ง อยากให้ปรากฏว่าการอยู่กับยายอ้วนเจ้าอารมณ์อย่างเธอเดือนหนึ่งเต็มๆ นะเหมือนตกรอกทั้งเป็นขนาดไหน หลังจากอ้วนท้วนสมบูรณ์แล้วก็จะปล่อยตัวกลับไป" (*YACS*, 413–414)

<sup>75</sup> "ฉันยังไม่อยากตาย ตอนนี้ชีวิตฉันเหมือนเพิ่งเริ่มต้น ฉันยังไม่ได้ทำอะไรที่อยากทำอีกตั้งเยอะ"

<sup>76</sup> "หมายความว่าอะไร ทำไมชีวิตเพิ่งเริ่มต้น?" ปรากฏพยายามชวนคุยเหมือนอยู่ในสถานการณ์ปกติ

<sup>77</sup> "ฉันเพิ่งผอมลง ฉันอยากไปดูหิมะบนยอดเขาเอเวอเรสต์" "ฉันอยากเรียนดำน้ำจะได้ไปดำน้ำที่มัลดีฟส์ ฉันอยากมีแฟนด้วย"

<sup>78</sup> I define "ideally feminized life" according to the Westernised concept of a "modern" or "new" woman whose trim and tightened body enables her to easily enter the traditionally male preserve of the public sphere, have success in heterosexual romantic relationships, move freely to a certain extent, and pursue various activities across national borders (Bordo, *Unbearable Weight*, pp. 208–212).

over him do not allow him to categorize her conventionally or easily.<sup>79</sup> His confusion, and even terror, at being unable to precisely define Muslin leads him to become disgusted at seeing her masculinized fat female body. However, once he witnesses how beautiful the feminized fat Muslin can become, he no longer feels repulsed by the sight of her. His disgust toward the fat body of Muslin, I contend, is applied rather selectively, thus revealing that disgust is a “habituated emotion” associated with, or provoked in response to, social norms and cultural patterns.<sup>80</sup> In rewriting the first chapter of the novel, I was curious to explore how I could produce the “fat” female gaze narrative, to enable both the fat heroine and myself to acknowledge and confront our disgust toward our own and someone else’s fat bodies. It also allowed me to ponder how the fat male body might possibly be considered “disgusting” by playing with femininity, similar to the way in which Chakriya masculinizes Muslin’s body for the *disgusting* effect.

In the final section of this chapter, I investigate how Muslin’s “delayed disgust” toward fattening food depends on her knowledge and recognition of the villainess’s power to make Muslin’s body and gender identity difficult to “fit” into the existing patriarchal pattern or systematic sizeist, heterosexist/cissexist social ordering and classification.<sup>81</sup> In my revision of the story for this chapter, I have created my feminized fat hero who, I argue, challenges the ideal, desirable, and acceptable masculinity of both selected Thai and US fat romance heroes. I turn, now, in Chapters 2 and 3, to explore the construction of the heroes’ masculinities in chosen US and Thai fat romance novels.

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<sup>79</sup> Noble, *Masculinities without Men?*, p. x.

<sup>80</sup> Meagher, “Jenny Saville and a Feminist Aesthetics of Disgust,” p. 32.

<sup>81</sup> Douglas, *Purity and Danger*, pp. 44, 50.

## Chapter 2: Strong and Good-Hearted Heroes: Masculinities in US Heterosexual Fat Romance Novels

In this chapter, I explore how the masculinity of the heroes is represented in two US fat romance novels: Sugar Jamison's *Dangerous Curves Ahead* (2013) and Julie Murphy's *Dumplin'* (2015).<sup>1</sup> The key questions that this chapter seeks to answer are: What models of masculinity do these US fat romance heroes possess and what do these models reveal about the construction of ideal, desirable, and acceptable masculinity in US culture? Finally, how are the heroes' masculinities constructed in relation to the fat heroines and their transgressive bodies? I seek to argue that the two heroes from *Dangerous Curves Ahead* and *Dumplin'* share in common the qualities of being strong and good-hearted. In the creative section of the chapter, I attempt to construct my ideal version of the masculinity of the fat romance hero – one that I wish had been available for me to read – by rewriting specific scenes from *Dumplin'*. I specifically choose to revise this novel because I would like Mitch, the secondary male character who is rejected by the fat heroine, to be the hero instead. I like Mitch and root for him throughout the novel despite being aware that he will never be a hero. Unlike Bo, the hero of *Dumplin'*, who is known to be detached and non-communicative, Mitch is emotional, caring, and able to articulate his feelings really well. I perceive his masculinity as a desirable form that should be validated in US fat romance novels. Mitch possesses the masculine emotionality that Eva Illouz seeks to invoke as an ideal model of masculinity, which I will later discuss at length.<sup>2</sup>

The hero is an essential element in the (heterosexual) romance novel, and – I argue – this also applies to fat romance. Writing in 1992, Mary Putney, an author of historical romance novels in the English language, asserted that “the hero is the most crucial character in a [heterosexual] romance, the linchpin who holds the story together.”<sup>3</sup> In 2019, Fatmah Al Thobaiti was still

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<sup>1</sup> Sugar Jamison, *Dangerous Curves Ahead* (New York: St. Martin's Paperbacks, 2013), p. 223. Subsequent references to this text will take the form of *DCA* followed by the page reference and will appear in the main text. Julie Murphy, *Dumplin'* (New York: HarperCollins, 2015). Further references to this text will take the form of *D* followed by the page reference and will appear in the main text.

<sup>2</sup> Eva Illouz, *Why Love Hurts* (Cambridge, Oxford, and Boston: Polity Press, 2012), p. 247.

<sup>3</sup> Mary Putney, “Welcome to the Dark Side,” in *Dangerous Men and Adventurous Women*, ed. Jayne Ann Krentz (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1992), pp. 99–105 (p. 100).



reaffirming the continuing significance of heroes in romance novels: “Without the hero, there would be no story” because “falling in love with him *is* the story” (emphasis in original).<sup>4</sup>

Although the role of the male hero in popular romance would seem to be considerable, Jonathan A. Allan, a scholar of men and masculinities, suggested as recently as 2020 that the representation of masculinity in popular romance (of which popular fat romance is a subgenre), has not been sufficiently examined.<sup>5</sup> Given that popular romance novels tend to be understood as – in the words of Kay Mussell – “written by women” and “read by women,”<sup>6</sup> Allan asks (with reference to critical masculinity studies): “Why are we not studying ‘feminine’ or ‘feminized’ cultural texts, especially when these texts have much to say about men and masculinities?”<sup>7</sup>

Meanwhile Sarah S. G. Frantz and Katharina Rennhak also reflect on the significance of exploring the construction of masculinities by female novelists in cultural texts more broadly, and their reflections also apply to popular romance; they contend that the versions of masculinities that female novelists construct in their novels unveil the writers’ attempts to “negotiate,” “manipulate,” and “experiment” with ideologies of gender,<sup>8</sup> where gender intersects with other categories of oppression and identity, such as class, race, sexuality, and fatness, as in the case of the fat romance genre that I am examining.

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<sup>4</sup> Fatmah Al Thobaiti, “Afterlife of the Romance Hero: Readers’ Reproduction of Romance,” *Journal of Popular Romance Studies* 8 (2019): 1–19 (1).

<sup>5</sup> Jonathan A. Allan, *Men, Masculinities, and Popular Romance* (New York: Routledge, 2020), p. 11.

<sup>6</sup> Kay Mussell, *Fantasy and Reconciliation: Contemporary Formulas of Women’s Romance Fiction* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1984), p. 3.

<sup>7</sup> Allan, *Men, Masculinities, and Popular Romance*, p. 32.

<sup>8</sup> Sarah S. G. Frantz and Katharina Rennhak, *Women Constructing Men: Female Novelists and Their Male Characters, 1750–2000* (Plymouth, UK: Lexington Books, 2011), p. 3.

## **“He was Clark Kent and Superman and Super Hot”<sup>9</sup>: The Strong, Sensitive, and Good-Hearted Hero**

*Dangerous Curves Ahead* is the first book of three from the Perfect Fit Novel series. The novels in this series feature three heroines who have non-normative bodies: Ellis and her two friends who work at her clothing store in *Dangerous Curves Ahead*; Cherri who has often wished “she were thin and graceful like a ballerina instead of being a six-foot-tall...with curves that require serious caution” in *Thrown for a Curve*; and Belinda, who has “even come to love her voluptuous body” in *Gentlemen Prefer Curves*.<sup>10</sup>

*Dangerous Curves Ahead* is narrated by a third-person narrator who at times takes on the perspective of Ellis and at other times the perspective of Mike, the hero. In the novel, Ellis has quit her highly paid job at a law firm and has ended the relationship with her boyfriend and colleague, Jack, because he mistreated her during their time together (*DCA*, 38–39). She has returned to her small hometown Durant and opened a tailored clothing store called Size Me Up. Her store specializes in altering garments to fit customers’ body size, catering not only to fat women, but to all women with “unique figures” (*DCA*, 92). One day, she runs into Mrs. Toomey, Jack’s fat-phobic aunt, at a bakery shop, who proceeds to preach to her about eating unhealthy cookies despite being fat. Mike, her sister’s ex-fling from four years ago and a policeman, happens to be in the shop and intervenes in their conversation when the skinny aunt, the owner of a successful weight-loss clinic, suggests that Ellis should lose weight so that her nephew might want to get back together with her (*DCA*, 3). The hero, Mike, does not hesitate to jump in and “rescue” the young woman whose face has turned red: “Back off. Weren’t you the one puffing away outside? Don’t you think you should be worried about the state of your lungs instead of what she puts in her mouth?” (*DCA*, 4).

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<sup>9</sup> Ellis, the fat heroine, describes Mike, the hero, as such in her head when they meet for the first time after four years (*DCA*, 5).

<sup>10</sup> Jamison, *Thrown for a Curve* (New York: St. Martin’s Paperbacks, 2014); Jamison, *Gentlemen Prefer Curves*, (New York: St. Martin’s Paperbacks, 2014).

The way in which Mike draws attention to Mrs. Toomey's smoking habit to stop her reprimanding Ellis highlights that other causes of illness or other health concerns do not tend to receive the same level of "disapproval and censure" as fat bodies can evoke in the public mind.<sup>11</sup> Mike is the first and only hero in the fat romance novels I have come across to produce a statement that challenges the stereotype of fat bodies signifying ill health and premature death. To my great astonishment, his exertion of male power (potentially a form of mansplaining) in the middle of two women's heated conversation does not annoy me; rather, I perceive it as an act of care and a romantic gesture of sorts. It fulfills my fantasy of fat romance as having a love interest who protects a fat gal from public scorn regarding her fat body and her eating habits.

The text is narrated at this point from the heroine's point of view, and we learn that Ellis turns around and immediately recognizes the hunky man who has saved her from Jack's aunt. However, it is clear that Mike has completely forgotten that they met four years ago. After this incident, Mike attempts to find out who Ellis is, and she continues to tease him about the fact that they have met before. The hero proceeds to drop by her clothing store whenever he has free time and soon the two develop feelings for one another. However, their relationship faces setbacks. While Mike struggles to confess his romantic feelings for the fat heroine, Ellis finds it extremely difficult to believe that a conventionally good-looking man like Mike is interested in a fat woman like her. The two protagonists eventually overcome their personal challenges by frankly discussing their issues and in the end decide to get married.

Mike clearly exhibits the traits of both "alpha heroes" and "beta heroes," two "popular" types of romance heroes.<sup>12</sup> In Catherine Roach's terms, the alpha hero that is stereotypically viewed as more desirable is "powerful in key ways upheld as masculine ideals within traditional patriarchy. He is tall, big, strong, capable, or masterful in various ways, sexually skilled, successful, and often downright dominant."<sup>13</sup> For Roach, a beta hero, on the other hand, is "a gentler, more everyday, less macho man" whose desirability is still debated in the genre of popular romance.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Deb Burgard, "What is 'Health at Every Size'?" in *The Fat Studies Reader*, eds. Esther Rothblum and Sondra Solovay (New York: New York University Press, 2009), pp. 42–53 (p. 42).

<sup>12</sup> Wendell and Tan, *Beyond Heaving Bosoms*, p. 76.

<sup>13</sup> Catherine Roach, *Happily Ever After: The Romance Story in Popular Culture* (Bloomington & Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2016), p. 66.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*

I ultimately seek to challenge this romance hero convention: in my revisions, I show how beta heroes can be written as an object of desire. Wendell and Tan also define the beta hero, in harmony with Roach, as “the buddy hero, the best friend, the kindlier, a mellow guy, a nice dude.”<sup>15</sup> In their opinion, the qualities that the beta hero displays are opposite to “the strength, domination, aggression, and power”<sup>16</sup> that the alpha hero embodies.

Whilst the beta hero owns and expresses what I would define as soft masculinity, the alpha hero represents hard masculinity and conforms to normative, ideal, and – in most cases – hegemonic masculinity.<sup>17</sup> R.W. Connell and James W. Messerschmidt explain Connell’s concept of hegemonic masculinity as follows: “It embodie[s] the currently most honored way of being a man, it require[s] all other men to position themselves in relation to it, and it ideologically legitimate[s] the global subordination of women to men.”<sup>18</sup> Amy E. Street and Christina M. Dardis summarize Connells’s ideas of hegemonic masculinity as follows: “Hegemonic masculinity refers to a societal pattern in which stereotypically male traits are idealized as the masculine cultural ideal, explaining how and why men maintain dominant social roles over women and other groups considered to be feminine.”<sup>19</sup> The hegemonic masculinity that alpha heroes typically display is thus what I seek to resist, undermine, and challenge in my heterosexual fat romance rewriting.<sup>20</sup>

I would argue that Mike represents a blend of hard and soft masculinity that, as discussed above, can be mapped onto the distinction between alpha and beta heroes. Don Sabo, in his analysis of US male prisoners’ masculinities, defines men who possess hard masculinity primarily in terms of physique: “Being hard can mean that the individual is toned, strong, conditioned, or fit, rather

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<sup>15</sup> Wendell and Tan, *Beyond Heaving Bosoms*, p. 79.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 75.

<sup>17</sup> R. W. Connell, *Masculinities* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed) (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005).

<sup>18</sup> Connell and James Messerschmidt, “Hegemonic Masculinity: Rethinking the Concept,” *Gender & Society* 19, no. 6 (2005): 829–859 (832).

<sup>19</sup> Amy E. Street and Christina M. Dardis, “Using a social construction of gender lens to understand gender differences in posttraumatic stress disorder,” *Clinical Psychology Review* 66 (2018): 97–105 (99).

<sup>20</sup> With that goal in mind, I have constantly written feminized fat men as the heroes in my revisions for Chapters 1, 2, and 3 and I discuss my reasons for doing so at length in the analysis section of my rewriting in those stated chapters.

than weak, flabby, or out of shape.”<sup>21</sup> Sabo further points out that hard and soft masculinities each acquire meaning in relation to the other. “To be ‘hard’ means to be more manly than the next guy, who is said to be ‘soft’ and more feminine,”<sup>22</sup> he explains. In *Dangerous Curves Ahead*, the hero’s portrayal of hard masculinity is also constructed in opposition to the “softer” masculinities of other male characters in the novel, specifically that of Jack, Ellis’s ex-boyfriend, and also that of a robber – at the beginning of the novel, Ellis’s clothing store is robbed, and she is injured by the thief. The robber who, at the end, is successfully put in jail by Mike is described by Ellis as a “short, fat, middle-aged, balding” man who doesn’t look “dangerous” (*DCA*, 100). This description contrasts powerfully with how Ellis describes Mike’s physical characteristics in her head after he rescues her from being insulted by Jack’s aunt:

The man was absolutely gorgeous. He was tall with short inky black hair and eyes so dark blue, they were cobalt. And his body! He was brawny, [...], thickly built without being overly muscular, and she had to pull her lower lip between her teeth just to stop from shouting out her appreciation. He was Clark Kent and Superman and super hot. (*DCA*, 5)

The version of masculinity that Ellis wants to “shout[...] out her appreciation” for is clearly not the type of manhood possessed by the nameless robber. Jeffrey A. Brown, a popular culture scholar, contends that masculinity is generally “defined by what it is not,”<sup>23</sup> which is also implied by Sabo, as discussed above. Mike’s “brawny” body, which Ellis clearly perceives as desirable, is constructed in opposition to the thief’s aging, fat, seemingly harmless male body. Brown points out further that the male body serves as one of the most visible and “central focal” points for characterizing masculinity.<sup>24</sup> The muscular body in particular, he argues, serves as a highly visibly “external signifier” of masculinity that conventionally connotes power and male superiority.<sup>25</sup> Mike’s male body is depicted as “brawny” and “thickly built,” but not “overly

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<sup>21</sup> Don Sabo, “Doing Time, Doing Masculinity: Sports and Prison,” in *Prison Masculinities*, ed. Sabo, Terry A. Kupers, and Willie London (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2001), pp. 61–66 (p. 64).

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>23</sup> Jeffrey A. Brown, “Comic Book Masculinity and the New Black Superhero,” *African American Review* 33, no. 1 (1999): 25–42 (26).

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 27.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*

muscular” (*DCA*, 5). His body is not portrayed as just muscular, but rather as “well-muscled.”<sup>26</sup> The kind of “well-muscled” body that Susan Bordo refers to is the muscular male body that has been adequately trained but not “developed to extremes.”<sup>27</sup> The hero’s “firm” and “well-developed” male body symbolizes what Bordo claims to be the display of “correct *attitude*” (emphasis in original).<sup>28</sup> Mike’s “well-muscled” body represents sufficient self-care, his ability to assert willpower and control, overcoming “infantile impulse,” and the capability to “shape [his] life,”<sup>29</sup> which are the qualities traditionally associated with masculinity. The “correct attitude” that Mike exhibits is also congruous with Sabo’s emphasis that “a hard man [must] care[...] for...his body”<sup>30</sup> regardless of his environment or life conditions.

While muscles symbolize masculine power by means of physical strength, a key way to reinforce the “naturalness” of sexual difference in the West, Bordo contends that “[muscles] have often been suffused with [class and] racial meaning[s] as well.”<sup>31</sup> The muscular male body, she argues, has connoted proletarian manual labor, as well as “unintelligent” and “animalistic” qualities, typically linked to the racist ideology and imagery of non-European/non-white races. The overly muscular body seems to lean toward the “nature” side of a nature/culture duality of how the body is imagined in the West, as Bordo concludes: “the more body one has had, the more uncultured and uncivilized one has been expected to be.”<sup>32</sup> The superior masculine status of Mike’s “well-muscled,” white, middle-class, male body is thus achieved in contrast to the devalued feminized/unmasculine, unruly, uncivilized, fat, aging, and possibly lower-class male body of the robber. Following Bordo’s argument, Mike’s not overly muscular male body can be perceived as the ideal male body; he does not have too much body, thus saving him from being associated with lower-class status, being a “brute,” and “unconscious materiality.”<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> Susan Bordo, *Unbearable Weight: Feminism, Western Culture, and the Body* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London: University of California Press, 1993), p. 195.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>28</sup> Bordo, “Reading the Slender Body,” in *Body/Politics: Women and the Discourses of Science*, ed. Mary Jacobus, Evelyn Fox Keller, and Sally Shuttleworth (New York: Routledge, 1990), pp. 83–112 (p. 94).

<sup>29</sup> Bordo, *Unbearable Weight*, p. 195.

<sup>30</sup> Sabo, “Doing Time, Doing Masculinity,” p. 64.

<sup>31</sup> Bordo, *Unbearable Weight*, p. 195.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*

Not only does Mike's "well-muscled" body enable him to maintain his superior masculine status, but the body of his potential lover also plays a significant role in the construction of his masculinity. Throughout the novel, Mike forbids the heroine from calling herself fat. Whenever the hero hears Ellis labelling her body as fat, he immediately responds with "annoyance" shown on his face: "You're not fat. Are you blind? Do you have a mirror?" (*DCA*, 7); "Why are you so obsessed with fat? Ellis, you're soft and beautiful" (*DCA*, 59); and "I don't see you as fat. You're curvy and sexy" (*DCA*, 149). All of these assertions imply that he does not think Ellis has a correct perception of her own body. Interestingly, the hero chooses to describe Ellis's fat body in his head using physical traits associated only with hyperfemininity, such as "soft," "curvy," "lush," "luscious," "sweet," and "creamy" (*DCA*, 6, 28, 63, 143, 146). Fat studies scholars Celia Hartley, Allison Taylor, and Kimberly Dark all agree that fat female bodies can be read as unfeminine and/or masculine.<sup>34</sup> Mike, I argue, fears that not only will Ellis's fat body mark her as unfeminine, but it will also mark him "as part of an inferior," "less evolved" class due to having a defeminized potential partner.<sup>35</sup> This notion of, and need for, differentiation between women and men can be traced back to the thinking prevalent in the 19th-century USA, in which "roles, dress, deportment, and even physiognomy" between men and women were clearly demarcated as a mark of a "civilized" nation.<sup>36</sup> The hero would potentially risk losing the superior masculine status that his muscular, white, and middle-class male body embodies by desiring an unfeminine woman, who may resemble him too much in demeanor.

By repeatedly arguing that the heroine is not fat and complimenting her on her beauty and sexiness, Mike is of course implying that being fat does not and cannot equate to being beautiful and sexy, which perpetuates the dominant fat-phobic discourse regarding the undesirability of the fat female body. Fat Studies scholar Kathleen LeBesco states that fat women are depicted as

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<sup>34</sup> Celia Hartley, "Letting Ourselves Go: Making Room for the Fat Body in Feminist Scholarship," in *Bodies Out of Bounds: Fatness and Transgression*, eds. Jana Evans Braziel and Kathleen LeBesco (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2001), pp. 60–73 (p. 69); Allison Taylor, "'Flabulously' Femme: Queer Fat Femme Women's Identities and Experiences," *Journal of Lesbian Studies* 22, 4 (2018): 459–481 (467); Kimberly Dark, "Becoming Travolta," in *Queering Fat Embodiment*, eds. Cat Pausé, Jackie Wykes, and Samantha Murray (Surrey, England: Ashgate, 2014), pp. 27–30 (p. 28).

<sup>35</sup> Amy Erdman Farrell, *Fat Shame: Stigma and the Fat Body in American Culture* (New York and London: New York University Press, 2011), p. 63.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*

“ugly, disgusting, sometimes laughable objects of derision.”<sup>37</sup> Samantha Murray, another scholar in the same field, contends that, in the West, the fat woman is degraded as an asexual being: “she is not permitted to experience sexual desire at all, let alone sexual pleasure.” This proves to be a valid statement in the novel.<sup>38</sup> Ellis laments that Jack has “robbed her of her joy in sex, of her confidence, of her pride” (*DCA*, 135). It is Mike who has the ability to return what has been stolen from her; the male hero grants the fat heroine what she calls “the best sex [she’s] ever had” (*DCA*, 160). Ellis concludes in private: “When she was with him she stopped feeling like the insecure little fat girl and more like the desirable woman she always wanted to be” (*DCA*, 186). However, for Ellis to be able to regain her identity as a sexual, adult being, she has to let Mike strip away her identity as a fat female. It is not possible for Ellis to possess and embrace both identities; she will never be allowed to be sexual and fat at the same time under Mike’s dominance.

Although Jack is depicted as possessing the same kind of “lean,” manly body and “dazzling blue eyes,” suggesting whiteness, as Mike, his personality and demeanor are actually constructed as far less masculine than Mike’s, as I will go on to show (*DCA*, 38). Ellis describes her former lover Jack as smelling “expensive” and dressing in an “expensive suit” (*DCA*, 38–39), which she describes as being “much different” from Mike, who dresses simply and smells “good” only from “shampoo and clean skin” (*DCA*, 52). Jack clearly spends more time, attention, and money on personal appearance than Mike does. His selection of expensive suits and perfumes are written in contradiction to Mike’s simple clothes and basic grooming. Robert Brannon argues: “a ‘real man’ must never, never resemble women, or display strongly stereotyped feminine characteristics.”<sup>39</sup> Susan M. Alexander elaborates further: “Physically, real men...avoid the use of cosmetics and give minimal attention to their clothes and hygiene.”<sup>40</sup> Jack’s decadent tendency to be narcissistic, flashy, and excessively concerned about his appearance feminizes

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<sup>37</sup> Kathleen LeBesco, *Revolt Bodies: The Struggle to Redefine Fat Identity* (Amherst and Boston: University of Massachusetts Press, 2004), p. 41.

<sup>38</sup> Samantha Murray, “Locating Aesthetics: Sexing the Fat Woman,” *Social Semiotics* 14, 3 (2004): 237–247 (239).

<sup>39</sup> Robert Brannon, “The Male Sex Role: Our Culture’s Blueprint of Manhood and What It’s Done for Us Lately,” in *The Forty-nine Percent Majority: The Male Sex Role*, eds. D. David and R. Brannon (New York: Random House, 1976), pp. 1–14 (p.14).

<sup>40</sup> Susan M. Alexander, “Stylish Hard Bodies: Branded Masculinity in *Men’s Health Magazine*,” *Sociological Perspective* 46, no. 4 (2003): 535–554 (537).



him and removes his chance of achieving the status of a “real man.” The way in which Mike allocates only “minimal attention” to his personal appearance, but still manages to look “super hot” (*DCA*, 5) in Ellis’s eyes, accentuates the depiction of his masculinity as more ideal, more natural, and more “real” than the feminized masculinity owned by Jack.

Jamison writes one major scene in order to pit Mike’s hard masculinity against the “softer” masculinity of Jack. She attempts to highlight that Mike’s version of masculinity is indeed more ideal, more acceptable, and more desirable than Jack’s masculinity for both the fat heroine and her readers. Toward the end of the novel, it is revealed that the robber was actually hired by Jack to frighten Ellis so that she would want to get back together with him through asking for help. When the thief reveals this to Mike, Mike runs to the house of Jack’s aunt, Mrs. Toomey, looking for Jack. The moment Ellis’s ex-boyfriend sees Mike in his aunt’s home, where he also resides, he quickly moves behind her, using his aunt as a shield as though he were a little child requiring protection from a female adult (*DCA*, 285). Mike angrily yells: “Coward...you can’t even act like a man now” (*DCA*, 286). The hero then “grab[s] [Jack] by the collar and slam[s] him into the wall so hard the plaster crack[s]” while demanding, “What kind of man does that to a woman?” (*DCA*, 286). These two lines and this scene as a whole imply that Mike believes men should behave in protective and gentle ways toward women, who are stereotypically perceived as weaker and helpless, whilst taking immediate, violent action against men who treat women poorly. Violence, according to Michael S. Kimmel, is often “the single most evident marker of manhood.”<sup>41</sup> The most obvious way for men to construct themselves as manly, or far from being unmanly, in the public’s eyes is to be able to display “the willingness to fight,” “the desire to fight,” and the “readiness to fight” at all times with anyone whom they think has violated them or their people.<sup>42</sup> Mike’s dialogue and action in this particular scene arguably reflect how, in typical heterosexual romance novels, the hero and the heroine are expected to fulfil “distinctly delineated masculine and feminine roles”<sup>43</sup>; Mike is assigned the role of protector and Ellis is the hopelessly passive damsel needing to be rescued. The way in which Mike questions Jack’s

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<sup>41</sup> Michael S. Kimmel, “Masculinity as Homophobia: Fear, Shame, and Silence in the Construction of Gender Identity,” in *Theorizing Masculinities*, eds. Harry Brod & Michael Kaufman (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 1994), pp. 1–15 (p. 9).

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>43</sup> Al Thobaiti, “Afterlife of the Romance Hero,” p. 2.

manhood and evaluates his performance of masculinity as failed in this scene reinforces the idea that masculinity must constantly be “demonstrated for other men’s approval.”<sup>44</sup> The hero has thus “unmask[ed],” “emasculate[ed],” and “reveal[ed]” that the antagonist is not man enough, or is far from being a real man.<sup>45</sup>

While Jamison allows her hero to eliminate his competitor in the game of who’s got the more dominant and ideal version of masculinity, the heroine Ellis has no idea whatsoever about what has happened until Lester, Mike’s colleague, calls her to tell her that Mike has been sent to hospital after “beat[ing] the shit out of [Jack]” (*DCA*, 287). Jamison allows Mike to be injured in this scene, but she carefully reassures her readers that his masculinity will not be diminished, as Jack’s manhood has been. The author stresses that, when Jack decides to punch Mike back, the hero “barely fe[els] the impact” (*DCA*, 286). While Mike is busily punching Jack on the floor, unaware of his surroundings, Mrs. Toomey uses the chance to stab Mike’s arm with a ballpoint pen, attempting to rescue her almost unconscious nephew. In contrast to how Jamison narrates Jack’s injuries in gruesome detail (“Mike...knocking Jack’s head so hard on the floor that spit and blood flew from his mouth” (*DCA*, 287)), the hero’s pain is not as visibly depicted (“he feels a searing pain in his arm” (*DCA*, 287)). The violent scene ends abruptly after Mike is stabbed in the arm by Mrs. Toomey and then fast forwards to the moment when Lester informs Ellis via the telephone that Mike is already in hospital (*DCA*, 287).

The absence of the fat heroine during the two men’s competition for maleness is congruous with how Pierre Bourdieu contends that the struggle for “honor” is a competition among men that seems to exclude women because they are never considered to be equal players with men.<sup>46</sup> Although there is no mention of whether Jack has been sent to receive medical care or not, Jamison has Lester reveal to Ellis that Mike is the one who solved the case and that Jack and the thief will both be sent to prison for being part of the robbery set-up, thus tacitly declaring Jack’s defeat in the manhood contest (*DCA*, 288).

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<sup>44</sup> Kimmel, “Masculinity as Homophobia,” p. 7.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 9.

<sup>46</sup> Pierre Bourdieu, *Masculine Domination* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2001), pp. 42–44.

Jamison also constructs the hero as a good-hearted man set against the evil-hearted antagonist by relying on how the two men talk about the heroine's fat body. When Mike admits to the fat heroine that he did not like the fact that his former self had "barely batted a lash" at seeing an old person close to dying, Ellis consoles him by saying that she could sense before she knew Mike that he is "a *good* man and a *good* cop" (*DCA*, 167; emphasis added). Jamison positions Mike and Jack in a clear opposition by making the hero "a *good* man and a *good* cop" and the antagonist a *bad* narcissistic snob who hatches the robbery plot hoping to get Ellis to come back to him.

The ways in which the good-hearted Mike and the evil-hearted Jack talk about the fat heroine's body are also constructed in a seemingly contradictory manner. On one occasion, Mike explicitly forbids the heroine from calling herself fat and regards her choice of label as an act of self-deprecation: "Don't [refer to yourself as fat]. I already told you not to put yourself down in front of me. I don't like it, damn it" (*DCA*, 88). In opposition to Mike's will, Ellis insists on calling herself fat throughout the novel: "But I'm not putting myself down. I like the way I look. I'm simply stating facts. Like the sky is blue. I have a big ass. Grass is green and Ellis likes cupcakes" (*DCA*, 270). Nevertheless, the heroine's contradictory and ambivalent attitude toward fatness leads her to eventually admit to the hero's mother later in the novel that Mike is "so sweet" to "get mad" whenever she defines her body as fat (*DCA*, 270). Ellis is clearly complimenting the good-hearted Mike as "so sweet" to prohibit her from defining her body as fat. In the meantime, she recalls a bitter memory of her "jack-ass" (*DCA*, 44) ex-boyfriend who acknowledged her as fat by calling her a "fat pig" (*DCA*, 150) whenever she did something to displease him.

I would contend that Jamison is seeking to suggest that a good-hearted hero in fat romance novels is one who will never acknowledge a fat heroine as fat and will never allow her to call herself fat in front of him, while a villain with an evil heart will acknowledge her as fat and even utilize the term fat as a cuss word against her. Nevertheless, I would argue that both Mike and Jack are equally perpetuating the discourse of fat as a denigrating term to apply to a woman's body. The good-hearted hero treats the term fat as a prohibited, "rude" word that should not be used to describe a woman's body. His tendency to use "soft" as a euphemism for Ellis's fat body

reinforces that fat is a *bad* quality in a human, especially a female human. At the same time, Jack also considered “fat” to be a denigrating trait that could be used as a swear word whenever Ellis did something he did not like.

In this novel, the hero’s masculine identity is constructed by distancing it from the traits assigned to femininity that Ellis and the male antagonist are depicted to embody.<sup>47</sup> Kimmel defines masculinity as “the flight from women” or “the repudiation of femininity.”<sup>48</sup> Soofia Khan and Patricia Wachholz further expand Kimmel’s argument: “In order to be fully masculine, [a] man must establish dominance over and, metaphorically, kill off his feminine impulses and influences. Therefore, masculinity and manhood...are defined by what they are not – soft, feminine.”<sup>49</sup> Jack’s feminized qualities, such as cowardice, decadence, and dependence (relying on his aunt’s help), thus stand in opposition to Mike’s more dominant form of masculinity, which is evident in his bravery, straightforwardness, aggression, and independence. The gendering of their jobs is also in opposition. Mike is a policeman, while Jack is a lawyer at a law firm. Policing has traditionally been considered “men’s work.”<sup>50</sup> Blue-collar jobs like policing require strength, “physical agility,” and/or violence, and are thus typically seen as more masculine than white-collar ones, which seem to demand less physical movement and working mostly indoors.<sup>51</sup> Mike’s blue-collar status, which grants him less income and social prestige, nevertheless enables him to become even more masculine than Jack, who is a white-collar worker. Jamison sharply distinguishes between the two men, who possess equally strong and perfect manly bodies in Ellis’s eyes, by designating them totally opposing inner characteristics. Therefore, ideal masculinity is presented by the author not just in terms of outward “manly” traits, such as a strong physique, wealth, and success, but also inner “manly” attributes. These

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<sup>47</sup> Susan Crane, *Gender and Romance in Chaucer’s “Canterbury Tales”* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1994), p. 19.

<sup>48</sup> Kimmel, “Masculinity as Homophobia,” p. 6.

<sup>49</sup> Soofia Khan and Patricia Wachholz, “Rough Flight: Boys Fleeing the Feminine in Young Adult Literature,” *The Alan Review* (2006): 66–73 (67).

<sup>50</sup> Bonnie McElhinny, “An Economy of Affect: Objectivity, Masculinity and the Gendering of Police Work,” in *Dislocating Masculinity: Comparative Ethnographies*, eds. Andrea Cornwall & Nancy Lindisfarne (London and New York: Routledge, 1994), pp. 158–170 (p. 159).

<sup>51</sup> McElhinny, “An Economy of Affect: Objectivity, Masculinity and the Gendering of Police Work,” pp. 159–160; Susan Martin, *Breaking and Entering: Policewomen on Patrol* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980), p. 89.

external and internal masculine qualities are both important for the author in shaping the perfect hero in fat romance narratives.

Ellis equates Mike's idealized male body and the desirable masculinity at which she enjoys gazing not only to Superman, but also to Clark Kent. Although Clark Kent's and Superman's personae coexist in the same male body, their masculinities are portrayed as being in opposition. Superman with his superpowers, Brown argues, represents ideal masculinity in US culture in the twentieth century, which is somewhat different from the ideal manhood of the moderately muscular male body with humanly physical strength to which Bordo refers:

He can fly faster than the speed of light, cause tidal waves with a puff of breath, see through walls, hear the merest whisper from hundreds of miles away, and squeeze a lump of coal in his bare hands with enough pressure to create a diamond. He is intelligent, kind, handsome, and an ever[-]vigilant defender of truth, justice, and the American way.<sup>52</sup>

In contrast to the dominant/hyper masculinity of Superman, Clark Kent represents a softer and more feminized masculine identity.<sup>53</sup> Brown defines Clark Kent as “shy, clumsy, insecure, cowardly, and easily bullied by others.”<sup>54</sup> Unambiguously, Superman's hypermasculinity is defined against Clark Kent's feminized masculinity. Despite embodying completely opposite male qualities, Superman has never been “complete” without Clark Kent, his alternative self.<sup>55</sup> The way in which Ellis equates Mike's “super hot” male body and desirable masculinity with the dual archetype of Superman and Clark Kent suggests that she perceives the co-existing hypermasculine and feminized-masculine identity of Superman/Clark Kent to be both desirable and acceptable. This concept of male duality invoked in the Superman/Clark Kent figure is manifested in the portrayal of Mike's mixed traits of both hard and soft masculinity. The remainder of this section will further explore this duality in the character of Mike.

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<sup>52</sup> Brown, “Comic Book Masculinity,” p. 31.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 32.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 31.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*

Although Mike is portrayed as a strong and assertive man, he is revealed to be at times sensitive, emotional, and caring – softer traits that he wants to hide from everyone, including himself. Jamison initially depicts Mike as a stereotypical emotionless man. When the hero worked as a cop in New York, we learn, he “barely batted a lash” when he saw an old woman being severely assaulted (*DCA*, 23). Mike admits to the heroine that he is disgusted with his emotionless former self (*DCA*, 166). He tells Ellis that he decided to move to a smaller town, taking a pay cut, so that he could spend time thinking about how to have feelings (*DCA*, 166). Mike chooses a more feminized, idle, and unambitious career path. His tendency and desire to be reflective and introspective points to the softer side of his masculinity. Ironically, once Mike realizes that he does indeed have feelings, he has to pretend that he does not have them, especially in front of the fat heroine. Writing through the hero’s eyes, the narrator informs the reader that Mike suddenly feels “a rush of warm, unmanly feelings,” in contrast to how he always puts on a manly demeanor, when the heroine confesses that she is pretending to like watching a football game with him because she likes him (*DCA*, 263). He wants to say: “I’ll miss you” so badly when he is about to leave her to go on a trip with his friend, but has to stop himself from doing so, because he “fe[els] like a girl” (*DCA*, 263).

Mike is clearly depicted as constantly experiencing a struggle to balance his hard masculinity with his tendency to be “too soft”; what he calls behaving like “a petty teenage girl” (*DCA*, 241). The language that Mike uses in his head whenever he attempts to suppress his feelings for Ellis and to remain an emotionless male being, despite having “a rush of...feelings,” is full of uncertainty and contradiction. On one occasion, the narrator informs us: “He wasn’t looking to be loved by those women [whom he had slept with in the past], but if Ellis loved him...it *wouldn’t* be so bad if she loved him. He *might* like to be loved by her” (*DCA*, 234; emphasis added). This manly hero cannot seem to allow himself to admit that he yearns to be loved. Even when he realizes that he wants to marry Ellis, the hero once again cannot permit himself to directly admit to that feeling. He thinks in private: “He was going to *have to* marry Ellis. *Not want to, but have to*. She was that missing piece for him” (*DCA*, 280; emphasis added). For a man who desires to be seen as manly, wanting to associate himself with romantic love and marriage seems unnecessary, trivial, and effeminate to Mike. He only allows himself to pursue

such romantic feelings whenever he can justify in his head that it is a must, an absolute necessity for him to survive or continue his life under the societal pressure for a man to get married and settle down, forming a family of his own.

Ellis is written to critique Mike's emotionally unresponsive masculinity as "damaged" and "confus[ing]" (*DCA*, 167). She warns him not to break up with her without properly informing her: "Don't get all *weird and mannish* on me" (*DCA*, 223; emphasis added). Ellis recognizes that the conventional masculinity that Mike possesses, such as his unwillingness to talk about his feelings and his tendency to keep his true emotions to himself, is problematic and tiresome for the people around him, especially his potential lover. Even when Mike feels devastated when Ellis decides to break up with him because she cannot truly believe that he really loves her *despite* her fatness, he is still "unwilling" to tell her that "she [is] what he need[s]" and "unwilling" to "demand she...give them a shot" (*DCA*, 343). The fat heroine has to eventually show him an example of how to honestly speak one's feelings in a very heteronormative fashion by confessing her love to him first: "I want to be your wife...I want to be married to you, okay? I want your last name. I want you to love me like my father loves my mother. I want it all from you, Mike" (*DCA*, 352).

Linda Barlow and Jayne Ann Krentz, romance novelists, contend that the standard plots of romance novels center on how the heroine has to "*teach* [the hero] [how] to love," and I add: she also has to teach him how to declare his love.<sup>56</sup> Only after Mike hears Ellis's confession is he finally able to express his true feelings to her for the first time: "I love you. I don't tell you enough but if I have to spend every day of the rest of my life making you believe that, I will. You have to marry me. Life is no good without you" (*DCA*, 353). The author seems to suggest that the dominant masculinity of the romance hero can be replaced by a more emotionally responsive way of being a man, in agreement with what sociologist Eva Illouz asks for: "Instead of hammering at men [for] their emotional incapacity, we should invoke models of emotional masculinity other than those based on sexual capital. Such cultural invocation might in fact take

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<sup>56</sup> Linda Barlow and Jayne Ann Krentz, "Beneath the Surface: The Hidden Codes of Romance," in *Dangerous Men and Adventurous Women*, ed. Jayne Ann Krentz (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1992), pp. 15–29 (p. 17).

us closer to the goals of feminism.”<sup>57</sup> Tracy L. Bealer, a literary scholar interested in pop culture and genre fiction, also mentions, in harmony with Illouz, that one feminist goal is to “unhing[e] the social symbols of power from the male body, and imagin[e] new ways of inhabiting a masculine identity that do not reflect and encourage the emotional hardness and impenetrability associated with masculinist domination.”<sup>58</sup> Only when Mike is able to display his “emotional masculinity,” is he allowed to get his happy ending with the fat heroine. This reflects the author’s attempt to redefine the model of desirable masculinity in fat romance fiction into one that is not restricted to the traditional image of an emotionless, patriarchal man. In my revision of *Dumplin’*, below, I show how the emotionally unresponsive masculinity of the fat romance hero, such as Mike, can be substituted by “a more emotional” and “less oppressive means of being a man.”<sup>59</sup> This non-traditional representation of masculinity, I argue, is much more pleasurable to read in heterosexual fat romance fiction.

### **“Like a Bear in His Tutu”<sup>60</sup>: The Strong, Silent, and Good-Hearted Hero**

*Dumplin’*, a piece of adolescent romance fiction written by Julie Murphy, was considered by *Romantic Times*, a US genre magazine specializing in romance novels, to be the Best Book of the Year in 2015.<sup>61</sup> The novel was adapted into a film, released in December 2018 by Netflix.<sup>62</sup> The story is told from the first-person perspective of Willowdean, a fat sixteen-year-old girl who decides to compete in a beauty pageant run by her mother. She falls in love with Bo, the quiet boy she works with at a fast-food restaurant. Although she has always been relatively confident about her fat body, dating a conventionally good-looking boy makes her feel insecure at times. After breaking up with Bo due to miscommunication, Willowdean decides to go on a date with

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<sup>57</sup> Eva Illouz, *Why Love Hurts* (Cambridge, Oxford, and Boston, MA: Polity Press, 2012), p. 247.

<sup>58</sup> Tracy L. Bealer, “Of Monsters and Men: Toxic Masculinity and the Twenty-First Century Vampire in the Twilight Saga,” in *Bringing Light to Twilight: Perspectives on a Pop Culture Phenomenon*, ed. Giselle Liza Anatol (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), pp. 139–152 (p. 140).

<sup>59</sup> Al Thobaiti, “Afterlife of the Romance Hero,” p. 10.

<sup>60</sup> Murphy, *Dumplin’*, p. 7.

<sup>61</sup> See the awards *Dumplin’* has received on the blurb.

<sup>62</sup> The movie *Dumplin’* is directed by Anne Fletcher. The film stars Danielle Macdonald as Willowdean Dickson and Jennifer Aniston as her mother.



Mitch, a football athlete.<sup>63</sup> Willowdean later has to prepare for the pageant, while attempting to forget Bo. In the end, the fat heroine does not win the pageant, but she and Bo finally get back together.

As the novel straddles two literary genres – young adult and romance fiction – I first want to consider the general definition of what young adult literature is, since I have already engaged with the definition of romance novels in the introductory chapter. The genre of young adult literature is primarily written for an audience between “the ages of about eleven or twelve to about seventeen or eighteen.”<sup>64</sup> John H. Bushman and Kay Parks Haas argue that young adult literature “serves young people in their struggle with identity, with their relationships with adults, and with their choices.”<sup>65</sup> Therefore, it acts as “a guide through their journey into adulthood.”<sup>66</sup> In young adult literature, the young protagonists learn to “achiev[e] a proper masculine or feminine social role”<sup>67</sup> in order to “come of age.”<sup>68</sup> Although this idea of “achieving a proper masculine or feminine social role” appears in a publication from 1997 and could be deemed obsolete from today’s perspective, I contend that a contemporary young adult novel like *Dumplin’* still subtly teaches adolescent readers to perform ideal versions of masculinity and femininity. Although Bo, the hero of *Dumplin’*, is a sixteen-year-old boy, his masculine identity, I argue, mirrors the traditional version of masculinity that the adult hero in popular romance fiction often possesses; that is, being non-communicative, but good-hearted (*DCA*, 167; *D*, 281). While in *Dangerous Curves Ahead*, Ellis admits to Mike, after criticizing his inability to communicate his feelings out loud, that she knows he has a good heart (*DCA*, 167), Bo’s stepmom defines her stepson as “detached and brooding, but with a good heart” (*D*, 281). Resembling how Jamison constructs Mike’s masculinity, Murphy, I argue, also constructs Bo’s desirable masculinity by emphasizing both external and internal masculine qualities. Similarly to

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<sup>63</sup> As the movie attempts to focus more on the strained relationship with her mother and to expand more on Willowdean’s friendship with her misfit friends, her romantic relationship with Bo is reduced to a less significant plotline and her relationship with Mitch does not appear at all in the film, which is a significant difference as both Bo and Mitch are much more visible throughout the novel.

<sup>64</sup> Ted Hipple and Jennifer L. Claiborne, “Bold Books for Teenagers: The Best Young Adult Novels of All Time, or ‘The Chocolate War’ One More Time,” *The English Journal* 94, no. 3 (2005): 99–102 (100).

<sup>65</sup> John H. Bushman and Kay Parks Haas, *Using Young Adult Literature in the English Classroom* (Hoboken, NJ: Merrill Prentice Hall, 1997), p. 25.

<sup>66</sup> Khan and Wachholz, “Rough Flight: Boys Fleeing the Feminine,” p. 72.

<sup>67</sup> Bushman and Haas, *Using Young Adult Literature*, p. 8.

<sup>68</sup> Khan and Wachholz, “Rough Flight: Boys Fleeing the Feminine,” p. 66.

how Jamison constructs Mike's masculinity in contrast to Jack's (and the thief's), Murphy pits Bo against Mitch, in order to highlight that the hero possesses the most desirable and acceptable version of masculinity in the novel.

Narrated in the first person through the heroine's eyes, Bo and Mitch are depicted as possessing manly bodies, but not without differences. Willowdean describes Bo as "a bear in his tutu" when she sees him in a red-and-white food service uniform. Not only does Willowdean comment that Bo looks "ridiculous" in his restaurant uniform with an apron that doesn't match his manly physique (*D*, 7), but she also implies that there is an incongruity in a male working in a kitchen, a traditionally female space. The heroine continues to depict his outer appearance humorously in her head: his biceps and her hips "have a lot in common" except for "the ability to bench-press," which suggests that Willowdean perceives Bo's body as muscular, strong, and manly (*D*, 7). She comically stresses how perfect his physical appearance is by stating that the only flaw he has is his two overlapping front teeth, as though "the universe decided he was too perfect and had to give him one tiny flaw" (*D*, 151). Willowdean seems to be treating the hero as an "object of ridicule" in this scene.<sup>69</sup> In his study of popular romance heroes, Allan contends that "the lack of comedy" in the construction of male heroes is "a lack of an emasculating narrative."<sup>70</sup> Hence, if there is an implication of humor in the description of the hero, then there is the possibility of him being emasculated by the narrator. In this scene, I would argue that in this novel the fat heroine perhaps destabilizes the seemingly perfect "manly" façade of the hero and puts his masculinity at risk of becoming unstable, just for a second. I contend that the author is perhaps exploring how far she can stretch the limits of the heteronormative romance genre by destabilizing the hero's manliness. There is also another incident in the novel where the author clearly uses humor to depict Bo, to which I will return later in order to discuss how humor affects the hero's masculinity in that section of the novel.

While the heroine clearly admires Bo's masculine body, she describes Mitch's body with a hint of ambivalence. When the fat heroine sees Mitch sitting next to her in the classroom, she depicts

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<sup>69</sup> Northrop Frye, *Collected Works of Northrop Frye*, ed. Alvin A. Lee (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1996–2012), vol. 22, p. 331.

<sup>70</sup> Allan, *Men, Masculinities, and Popular Romance*, p. 60.

him as “big” and with “a bit of belly and shoulders wider than most door frames” (*D*, 99–100). She compares how female and male fat bodies are viewed differently: “but people don’t look at him and think fat. They think athletic. Which makes sense seeing he’s a defensive tackle [for a football team]” (*D*, 100). The fat male body in contemporary American fiction, Peter C. Kunze argues, is feminized and depicted as the type of body that has lost control over “one’s world, one’s life, and especially one’s body.”<sup>71</sup> When Mitch’s fat male body is repackaged as not fat, but athletic, in the eyes of the public, the football player is thus depicted to own his fat male body, which is far from being effeminate or out of control. He uses his body and size in a traditionally masculine way by playing American football, a stereotypically masculinized sport.<sup>72</sup> While Willowdean only seems to concentrate her attention on the differences in how fat female and male bodies are socially and culturally perceived, her friends immediately recognize his reputation as a “beast” in the game on the first day of school (*D*, 103). Therefore, Mitch’s male body is perceived as fit rather than fat (except for Willowdean, who sees him more as a fat man). This grants him the ability to become one of the most famous of the school’s athletes.

The heroine does not admire Mitch’s fat male body in the same way as she admires Bo’s body, but she does not reject it either. When Mitch invites the heroine to go on a date with him, she immediately asks whether he has ever asked a girl out before (*D*, 102). When Mitch replies that he has asked a few, Willowdean enquires whether any of them have ever said yes to him (*D*, 102). Although the heroine does not seem to perceive Mitch as appealing enough to attract interest from girls, she nevertheless agrees to go on a date with him, partly in order to forget about Bo (*D*, 102). Her ambivalence toward his fat body echoes that toward her own fat body. She admits that she cares about “the fat and the stretch marks,” despite how much she tells herself that it doesn’t matter. However, there are also days when she “really give[s] zero flying fucks” and is “totally satisfied with this body of [hers].” Willowdean asks herself in confusion: “How can I be both of those people at once?” (*D*, 174).

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<sup>71</sup> Peter C. Kunze, “Send in the Clowns: Extraordinary Male Protagonists in Contemporary American Fiction,” *Fat Studies* 2, no. 1 (2013): 17–29 (27).

<sup>72</sup> Joanna L. Grossman and Deborah L. Brake, “Playing ‘Too Womany’ and the Problem of Masculinity in Sport,” *Verdict*, 2013, accessed June 22, 2020, <https://verdict.justia.com/2013/09/17/playing-too-womany-and-the-problem-of-masculinity-in-sport>.

The way in which Willowdean experiences her fat body as ambivalent is congruous with what Murray attempts to call for in fat politics. She suggests that the way in which fat women live their bodies is “always multiple, contradictory and eminently ambiguous.”<sup>73</sup> Murray continues by arguing that fat people have “complicated and tacit investments” in dominant discourses that construct us as fat subjects, even as we seek to “resist” or “act against” these fat-phobic discourses and practices.<sup>74</sup> She proposes that fat politics should enable a space for fat people to recognize and accept an ambiguous identity, a significant move that acknowledges the “dynamic, unfinished and heterogenous” dimensions of selfhood and embodiment.<sup>75</sup> The heroine’s ambivalence toward her own fat body, I would argue, also has an effect on how she perceives Bo’s muscular male body as superior to Mitch’s fat/fit male body. Although Willowdean finds out later that Bo’s seemingly perfect male body is indeed inferior to Mitch’s, which is in peak physical condition, she nevertheless still regards Bo’s body as the most desirable for her.

Bo is a former basketball athlete who had to give up the sport due to knee injuries (*D*, 252), while Mitch is at the height of his high-school football career as “scouts have been all over him” (*D*, 103). Sport is considered “an institution that reinforces a hierarchy of masculinity.”<sup>76</sup> In US culture, football and basketball are generally considered to be extremely masculine domains, because these two sports involve “violence, aggression, or brute strength over aesthetics,” which contrasts with less masculinized sports, such as gymnastics or diving.<sup>77</sup> In *Dumplin*’s fictional Clover City, football is at the top of the hierarchy in terms of significance because it “make[s] the lifeblood of this place”; “pull[s] this little town out of itself and turn[s] it into something more” (*D*, 103). Mitch’s fit body, which is capable of playing football, the sport that receives greatest attention in the town, therefore embodies the highest level of masculinity. Not only does Bo play the less important type of sport, but his body is also injured and has been unable to play basketball for an unspecified amount of time (*D*, 252). Murray Drummond contends that: “Boys’ sport has been identified as a testing ground for uncomplicated admission into manhood.”<sup>78</sup>

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<sup>73</sup> Samantha Murray, *The “Fat” Female Body* (Hampshire and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), p. 90.

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>75</sup> Murray, “(Un/Be)Coming Out? Rethinking Fat Politics,” *Social Semiotics* 15, no. 2 (2005): 153–163 (162); Deborah Lupton, *Fat* (Abingdon and New York: Routledge, 2013), p. 92.

<sup>76</sup> Grossman and Brake, “Playing ‘Too Womany’.”

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>78</sup> Murray Drummond, “Sport, the Body and Boys’ Constructions of Masculinity,” in *Youth Sport in Australia*, eds. Steve Georgakis and Kate Russell (Sydney: Sydney University Press, 2011), pp. 85–96 (p. 86).

Although Bo's injured body can be perceived as inferior and feminized compared to Mitch's fat/fit body, the heroine is still sexually and romantically attracted only to Bo. Willowdean compares the feeling when her pinkie touches Bo's to "a spark on the verge of a flame" (*D*, 286). However, when she and Mitch kiss for the first time after talking about "the gap between the person [she is] and the one [she] wish[es] [she] could be," Willowdean feels nothing: "I know what I should be feeling and it's not there" (*D*, 240). Willowdean's ambivalence toward fatness is clearly connected to her romantic indifference to Mitch, but this is not the only aspect that Murphy utilizes to render Mitch's fat/fit body and masculinity undesirable.

Murphy also chooses to undermine Mitch's masculinity by assigning him internal qualities that are traditionally associated with femininity. Scholars focusing on the representations of boys and literary constructions of masculinity have concluded that manhood is defined by "one's toughness, individuality, strength, and emotional reserve."<sup>79</sup> Mitch's fit male body, which is repackaged as not fat, but athletic, grants him access to the dominant form of masculinity. However, he is depicted as being far from emotionally reserved. The football athlete is sensitive, caring, and able to articulate his emotions in words without relying on someone else to teach him, as Mike does in *Dangerous Curves Ahead*. When Willowdean has a fight with Ellen, her best friend, Mitch asks out of concern whether the heroine has reconciled with Ellen. Willowdean insists that she will never speak to Ellen again: "Nope...She's got new friends anyway. I guess I'm no match for Callie [Ellen's new friend]" (*D*, 203–204). Mitch has to provide Willowdean with a suggestion about friendship that the heroine cannot seem to come up with herself: "I obviously don't know the whole story here, but good friendships are durable. They're meant to survive the gaps and the growing pains" (*D*, 204). Relationships, friendships, and intimacy are conventionally perceived as something that women have greater understanding of and "investment" in.<sup>80</sup> But, in this scene, Willowdean seems to take the masculine role, unable to understand and unwilling to fix the friendship problem. Instead, she has to be encouraged by the feminized Mitch to talk to her friend.

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<sup>79</sup> John Stephens, *Ways of Being Male* (New York: Routledge, 2002); R.W. Connell, *The Men and the Boys* (St. Leonards: Allen & Unwin, 2000); Beverley Pennell, "Redeeming Masculinity at the End of the Second Millennium: Narrative Reconfigurations of Masculinity in Children's Fiction," in *Ways of Being Male*, ed. John Stephens (New York: Routledge, 2002), pp. 55–77; Khan and Wachholz, "Rough Flight: Boys Fleeing the Feminine," p. 66.

<sup>80</sup> Louisa Allen, "'Sensitive and Real Macho All at the Same Time': Young Heterosexual Men and Romance," *Men and Masculinities* 10, no. 2 (2007): 137–152 (137).

Throughout the novel, Mitch continues to show his feminized, sensitive side to Willowdean. He reveals to her that he struggles to live up to ideal manhood and fulfill gender roles for boys: “Being a guy in a town like this people expect things from you. You’re supposed to play football and hunt and fish.” He goes on to explain: “I never really like doing the things I’m supposed to like. I’m good at playing football. But the whole season feels like something I have to get through” (*D*, 182). Mitch recounts his memory of joining his Dad hunting while in seventh grade. He tells Willowdean that he “was choking” after he accidentally shot a deer (*D*, 183). The deer shooting is depicted as a kind of male rite of passage. His Dad finally approved of his masculinity by slapping him on the back after Mitch killed a deer for the first time (*D*, 183). The way in which Mitch was “choking” after completing his manhood mission reveals how he is suffocated by the ideal constructions of dominant masculinity, which require him to do things he does not like. He eventually confesses to Willowdean that he cried after he returned home that day: “I know guys aren’t supposed to cry, but I cried a bunch that night” (*D*, 183). Mitch is aware that tears are culturally constructed as feminine and thus it is unacceptable for boys to cry when experiencing “pain, hurt, or even joy.”<sup>81</sup> In the public sphere, Mitch would never express how he really feels after achieving this “manly” goal. In the space of his bedroom, he is allowed to cry in private. Being aware of what boys are expected to do and not do, Mitch seems to adopt two different selves. He chooses to “bifurcate” the private and emotive male from the publicly strong, skillful, and emotionless male.<sup>82</sup> Mitch eventually decides to blur the demarcation between his public persona as a tough footballer and his private sensitive self when he reveals the hunting story to the girl he likes while in his bedroom.

The author seems to be critiquing the constraints of dominant masculinity that result in young males having to struggle with split selves, but she nevertheless constructs the feminized and emotive male as unwanted and unsuccessful in romantic relationships. Kimmel remarks: “Masculine identity is born in the renunciation of the feminine.”<sup>83</sup> He argues that boys must

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<sup>81</sup> Heather J. MacArthur and Stephanie A. Shields, “There’s No Crying in Baseball, or Is There? Male Athletes, Tears, and Masculinity in North America,” *Emotion Review* 7, no. 1 (2015): 39–46 (40).

<sup>82</sup> Thomas W. Bean and Helen Harper, “Reading Men Differently: Alternative Portrayals of Masculinity in Contemporary Young Adult Fiction,” *Reading Psychology* 28, no. 1 (2007): 11–30 (20).

<sup>83</sup> Kimmel, “Masculinity as Homophobia,” p. 7.

renounce the feminine influences around them and within themselves in order to attain masculinity.<sup>84</sup> Despite having a strong, manly body capable of playing a highly masculinized sport, Mitch fails to secure his masculinity by associating himself with feminized characteristics, such as emotionality and vulnerability. The model of emotional masculinity that Illouz<sup>85</sup> calls for is used by this author to construct the fat/fit, emotive Mitch as undesirable, desexualized, and merely acceptable for a platonic relationship.

While the hero Bo's injured body, which is incapable of playing basketball, may risk him losing admission into manhood, his personality reassures us that his masculinity will remain intact. Bo is depicted as embodying characteristics that are conventionally associated with masculinity. The hero is repeatedly portrayed as being incapable of verbally explaining his thoughts clearly and is willing to use body language to communicate instead. When Willowdean asks him whether his parents are divorced, Bo "shakes his head, but says nothing" (*D*, 46). Willowdean quickly apologizes for intruding on his privacy.

This form of non-communicative masculinity leads to increased emotional labor for the woman. The hero eventually explains that he does not mind talking to her, but he "just [doesn't] do much talking" (*D*, 46). His silence and sullenness shape the construction of his masculinity so obviously that Marcus, their co-worker at the restaurant, nicknames Bo "Strong and Silent" (*D*, 37). The author seems to be gently poking fun at Bo's dominant masculinity by giving him such a nickname in this scene. Bo is also not allowed to have deeper conversations about conventionally feminine topics, such as the ones Mitch is having with Willowdean about friendship. When the heroine finally tells Bo that she has had a fight with her best friend, Bo's opinion is quickly summed up by the heroine in her narration: "He seemed to think we'd get past it" (*D*, 299). While Mitch is shown to have a proper dialogue with Willowdean about her broken friendship, Bo's dialogue is not even written down, as though the author is afraid of feminizing the hero.

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<sup>84</sup> Ibid.

<sup>85</sup> Illouz, *Why Love Hurts*, p. 247.

Khan and Wachholz contend that, although American definitions of ideal masculinity have never remained static, traditional constructions of masculinity are nevertheless “entrenched” in their country’s literature.<sup>86</sup> They further conclude in their study of the construction of male protagonists’ masculinity in young adult literature, echoing Kimmel<sup>87</sup>: “Men must flee from any feminine characteristics. This lifelong quest never ends; boys must prove they are men and men must continue to prove they are men.”<sup>88</sup> While Bo possesses an injured male body that could be read as *unmanly*, particularly compared to his competitor’s fat/fit male body, Murphy has to carefully make sure that Bo will be able to successfully “flee from the feminine.”<sup>89</sup> He has to embody internal qualities associated with traditional masculinity and must avoid participating in any “feminine” activities, while his competitor’s masculinity has to be diminished by the possession of internal attributes associated with femininity.

As well as being quiet and unable to communicate effectively, Bo is tacitly portrayed as having an issue with his temper. Willowdean notices that Bo’s lips are red with artificial dye due to his “endless supply of red suckers” on the first day that they work together at the burger restaurant (*D*, 7). Willowdean finds out a few months later why Bo likes to eat red suckers. The hero is revealed to have had anger issues as a kid; his mom would give him a red sucker and say: “If you’re still angry after you’ve licked this lollipop gone, you can scream and kick and shout all you want” (*D*, 75). Bo is shown putting this candy in his mouth all the time, implying that he is still attempting to control his temper, even though he is no longer a child. On one occasion, Marcus, the co-worker, comments about Bo’s personality when he chased schoolmates he did not like away from the restaurant: “He’s one crazy dude. I feel like he’s either going to murder everyone or be, like, a movie star. There is no in between for that guy” (*D*, 223). Anger is constructed in the novel as the only type of emotion that men can display whilst still being able to maintain their dominant masculinity.

Nevertheless, the author arguably undermines Bo’s anger as the ideal masculine emotion through her comical portrayal of his infantilization. The hero is continually shown sucking lollipops as

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<sup>86</sup> Khan and Wachholz, “Rough Flight: Boys Fleeing the Feminine,” p. 66.

<sup>87</sup> Kimmel, “Masculinity as Homophobia,” pp. 4–9.

<sup>88</sup> Khan and Wachholz, “Rough Flight: Boys Fleeing the Feminine,” p. 67.

<sup>89</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 72.



though he were a baby sucking a pacifier or a thumb. His childhood habit unambiguously infantilizes his adult self. The way in which Bo's lips are dyed red due to sucking lollipops can also be read as a form of feminization because it resembles the act of wearing lipstick. Willowdean ponders in private that she likes Bo's temperament after hearing what Marcus says: "I like that about Bo. You were either for him or against him" (*D*, 223). Heather J. MacArthur and Stephanie A. Shields contend that: "performing 'ideal' male emotion does not, as the prevailing view holds, involve a complete rejection of emotion, but is instead constructed as doing emotion in a way that can be defended as 'not feminine'."<sup>90</sup> The hero is portrayed as embodying the traditional version of masculinity: a man who is quiet and prone to become angry easily, if not exerting proper control. His "no in-between" masculinity, which stands in opposition to Mitch's split male persona, is approved of and appreciated by the heroine as the most desirable and acceptable form of masculinity. As I have already discussed with reference to the comical depiction of Bo's flawed front teeth, I would argue that the author is also trying to stretch the boundaries of romance fiction's masculinity by using infantilization to undermine Bo's masculinity. Nevertheless, Murphy is still trapped by the romance genre's limits, which require her to write the hero as possessing internal masculine qualities to set against Mitch's feminized emotive masculinity that Illouz endorses.<sup>91</sup>

When we examine what the hero permits the fat heroine to articulate about her fatness, we see that Bo does permit Willowdean to call herself fat, in contrast to how Mike forbids Ellis from calling herself fat, discussed above. The heroine recounts the first day she met Bo at the restaurant in which they work together. She introduced herself, we learn, as "Cashier, Dolly Parton enthusiast, and resident fat girl" (*D*, 8). She waited for his response, but Bo said "nothing" (*D*, 8). Willowdean likes it that Bo didn't "flinch" when she called herself fat (*D*, 9). The heroine embraces the word fat as the one that "best describes" her, but she realizes that this word makes "lips frown and cheeks lose their color," as can be seen in Mike's reaction of disapproval when he hears Ellis calling herself fat (*D*, 9). Willowdean admits appreciating that Bo does not treat fat as if it is "a cuss word" or "an insult" when he hears her describing her body as such; this particular moment perhaps lies at the root of her desire for him (*D*, 9).

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<sup>90</sup> MacArthur and Shields, "There's No Crying in Baseball, or Is There?," p. 40.

<sup>91</sup> Illouz, *Why Love Hurts*, p. 247.

Because the fat heroine constantly experiences ambivalence toward her fat body, she never really understands why the “perfect” hero is attracted to a fat girl like her. She asks the hero after hearing his love confession: “Why do you want to be with this?” while waving her “arm up and down the length of [her] body” (D, 317). Bo declares the mandatory sentence in response to the fat heroine’s suspicion about his romantic interest in her: “Willowdean Opal Dickson, you’re beautiful. Fuck anyone who’s ever made you feel anything less” (D, 318). The producers of the film also considered this particular sentence significant enough to be shown in the film’s trailer. The sentence is slightly edited from the original novel. The live-action Bo proclaims: “Willowdean Dickson, I think you’re beautiful. To hell with anyone else who’s ever made you feel less than that.” “Beautiful, he says. Fat, I think,” Willowdean ponders in her private thoughts. This suggests that she herself does not believe it possible for “fat” to be “beautiful” as she continues to ask herself: “But can’t I be both at the same time?” (D, 318). Bo is written as remaining completely silent about the heroine’s body size, just like the first day, when Willowdean introduced herself as “resident fat girl” (D, 8). Willowdean instead blames herself for being the only one “who mak[es] this about [her] body” (D, 317). However, I do not think that silencing the word “fat” as though it is an unspeakable term for the hero with a “good” heart to say to his heroine is any less problematic than the authoritative act of another good-hearted hero, Mike, who prohibits his heroine from claiming the term fat for herself. Murphy, despite being a fat-positive advocate on social media,<sup>92</sup> nevertheless still treats “fat” as a body category that her good-hearted hero should never assign to the heroine because it will not fulfil the “romantic” sentiment that this genre of novels should evoke in its readers.

Silencing “fat” is a writing strategy that nevertheless perpetuates the dominant discourse that fat is a denigrating label. Fat is still not written as just a neutral descriptive word in the way that many fat activists such as Marilyn Wann would like. Fat is actually the “least offensive and simplest word on the subject,” argues Wann in her manifesto *Fatso?: Because You Don’t Have*

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<sup>92</sup> Murphy often tweets fat-friendly messages on her Twitter account, @andimJULIE, such as her New Year tweet on December 31, 2018: “As the New Year rolls in, a reminder: Diet culture and diet resolutions normalize eating disorders. It’s possible to center your health without weight loss goals. Let 2019 be the year that you decide that you aren’t too much or too little. You’re just right.” Another tweet on January 1, 2019 read: “Happy 2019! One last time for the folks in back: Let this be the year we dump the before/after pictures in favor of now pictures. All bodies are good bodies. Even yours. Especially yours. Let’s do this.”

to *Apologize for Your Size!*<sup>93</sup> Murphy's strategy to let the hero neither confirm nor reject that the heroine is fat, but to only make him insist to her that she is "beautiful" in his eyes, constructs a softer version of traditional masculinity. The author creates a hero who does not authoritatively force the heroine to directly reject her fat body. He grants the heroine freedom to define herself in the way she likes, but indirectly undermines her decision to label herself as fat by not acknowledging her choice of word. The strong, silent, good-hearted Bo, who allows Willowdean to define herself as fat with his "silence," and the strong, sensitive, and good-hearted Mike, who demands that Ellis stops calling herself fat, both repeatedly reduce the fat heroines to merely a beautiful being, as though other traits (discursively viewed as good or bad) that they possess do not matter in forming their identities. "Simply trying to liberate fat from ugliness to beauty, without questioning the paradigm of beauty itself is quite dangerous," LeBesco warns.<sup>94</sup> The method of empowering the fat female body used by fat-positive advocates/fat liberationists, including the writer Murphy herself, insists that this type of body can and should be perceived as just as beautiful as the thin body; but this way of thinking is nevertheless still problematic. It continues to perpetuate the idea that beauty is a natural value and that all women should construct their identity around its discourse.<sup>95</sup>

## **Emotionalizing the Hero: Rewriting Desirable Masculinity in US Fat Romance**

In this part of the chapter, I intend to follow Illouz's invocation of emotional masculinity in rewriting my version of desirable masculinity in fat romance fiction.<sup>96</sup> I decided to select Mitch, the secondary male character in *Dumplin'*, as the hero in my revision. Whilst reading the novel, I constantly reflected that, if I were Willowdean, I would have fallen for Mitch and would certainly pick him over the emotionally distant Bo. I started my short story with the first scene in

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<sup>93</sup> Marilyn Wann, *Fatso?: Because You Don't Have to Apologize for Your Size!* (Berkeley: Ten Speed Press, 1998), p. 19.

<sup>94</sup> LeBesco, *Revolting Bodies*, pp. 50–51.

<sup>95</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 51.

<sup>96</sup> Illouz, *Why Love Hurts*, p. 247.

which Mitch appears in the novel: when he decides to sit next to Willowdean, his former classmate in the sixth grade, on the first day of a new semester (*D*, 99). I retain some of Mitch's dialogue from the novel, quoted and discussed above. As discussed, Mitch is depicted in the novel as emotional, sensitive, and caring, but his feminized version of masculinity is nevertheless dismissed by the protagonist (and by the author) as inferior to the traditional masculinity of the "detached and brooding" Bo (*D*, 281). In my short story, his feminized version of masculinity is teased out further. I attempt to validate his way of being male in my fat romance revision. Bo also appears in my short story, but his significance is greatly reduced. Willowdean in my story still finds Bo physically attractive and resists liking Mitch in a romantic way because she is struggling with her ambiguous relationship with her fat body. I wish to complicate my fat romance narrative with issues around desirable masculinity and ambivalence toward fat bodies, picking up on ideas from Chapter 1. Rewriting masculinity and ambivalence toward fatness as messily as possible is my aim. My revision is as follows:

Mitch Lewis is a fat guy. He's got a bit of a belly and shoulders wider than most door frames, but people don't look at him and think fat. They think athletic. Of course, I'm jealous of him. People look at me and think fat. If fat were just a descriptive adjective, I would have felt fine.

"Hey," Mitch sits next to me and whispers. He's sweating. I can smell his cologne...smoked wood or something that in my imagination a mature 30-year-old man with a big car would wear.

"Will, right?"

I casually nod like it's no big deal. But it is. Mitch Lewis remembers my name.

"We haven't shared a class since the sixth grade. Do you even remember my name?" The football player asks with a slight hope.

I pretend to think for twenty seconds and then call out his name with confidence. "Mitch, no one will ever forget the name of a football star."

Weirdly, he frowns for at least half a second when he hears me say "a football star." Isn't he a football star? Why would he show even a slight sign of unhappiness at hearing people describing him as what he is?

I mean, I'm unhappy when people call me "what I am," too. But that's different. Being a football player for a boy is a great achievement, isn't it? Being fat for a girl is far from being an achievement. I wouldn't say "disgrace" as my ex-pageant mom used to call it. Because being fat isn't a disgrace. But it isn't something to be proud of either.

I've been thinking about the first time I heard people calling me "fat." When was the first time that I knew what "fat" means in a fat-phobic society? Kindergarten? Elementary school? Middle school? How can I even remember that?

"Hey, fatty."

Patrick, the most popular guy in school and also a bully, calls me a fatty. He continues: "Move your fat ass. I want to sit next to my man." He looks at Mitch with admiration and looks at me with disdain. Mitch and I are both fat. This is not fair.

I wish I could answer back, but I can only do that inside my head. I put on a poker face and stand up. Patrick is too loud. He always has a lot of things to say. If you ever give him a chance to pick on you, he'll never shut up.

Mitch stands up, too. The way we stand up is totally opposite. I try to stand up as small and quiet as possible. But when Mitch stands up, it's loud and never small.

I shoot Mitch a questioning look. He shrugs and grins. "We're both fatties. Let's move our fat asses somewhere else. A bit more in the back or in the front?" Mitch waits for me to decide where we should sit.

This is weird.

He called me fat. He called himself fat, too.

Weirdly satisfying.

I like it when he calls me fat. Just fat and nothing else implied.

I still quietly try to walk as "small" as possible. I know Mitch never has to squeeze himself up. He's proud to take up space. His presence has to always be felt.

We move to sit further back. He's tall. I'm tall as well. It wouldn't be a good choice to sit too far to the front.

I can't seem to hide my curiosity, so I whisper close to his ear: "Are you really fat?"

Mitch looks at me with confusion. "What do you mean?"

"Do you really consider yourself fat?" I clarify my question and try to sound calm.

"I am fat. People call me big, but I'm fat," he replies frankly.

I bite my dry lips and nod with approval. “I’m fat, too. People always call me fat and I hate it.”

Mitch’s face immediately turns pale, “Did I offend you by calling us ‘fatties’? I’m sorry...I—”

I smile, shake my head, and firmly say, “I like it when you call me fat.”

A tint of red appears on his cheeks. He no longer looks me in the eyes.

That day, I didn’t tell him that I think he’s cute.

The first time I met Bo, all I remembered was his red lips and biceps. He’s handsome. He’s mysterious. He’s quiet. He doesn’t like to talk about himself. Sixty percent of the time he prefers to use body language to communicate his needs. He said he’s not good with words. I totally understand. I don’t need to know much about him. I already like what I see.

“Hey...” That’s the only word I hear from him. Bo gently puts a red sucker in my locker. Normally, he would put that in his mouth while working behind the grill. That’s why his lips are so red.

“Thanks.” I’m not in the mood to make long sentences as usual. I’m still mad at myself for not being able to clear the air with my best friend. I let her walk away with her new bestie. I should have known better. I should have done better.

Bo hurriedly returns to the kitchen without saying anything else. I don’t expect him to explain his action. I guess I don’t even care why he put his lollipop in my locker. All I can think about is Ellen. Yesterday, in PE, I was left with no partner when Miss Tomson told us to do volleyball drills. Ellen didn’t even look at me as she walked over to Cassie. I hate PE and Ellen was the only one who kept me sane.

“Need a partner?” Mitch asked. I started to wonder whether athletes were good at all sports.

“Nah. I don’t want to do any drills. I hate volleyball.” I honestly didn’t want to do any drills without Ellen. I spoke while still glancing at my ex-best friend.

Mitch laughed softly. He looked where my eyes were lingering. “Why don’t you talk to her? Still mad at each other?” Mitch knew that Ellen and I were friends even before the sixth grade when he first met us.

I stared at Mitch. He shouldn't have noticed it. I mean, boys aren't supposed to pay attention to relationships and tiny details, are they?

"I have nothing to say to her. We're cool."

Mitch looked like he didn't believe what I was saying. "Listen, I obviously don't know the whole story here, but good friendships are durable. They're meant to survive the gaps and the growing pains," he said.

I was trying not to listen, although his every word sounded quite convincing. I'd known Ellen before I even knew what "friendship" meant. But would we really be able to survive "the gaps and the growing pains"? What if we were really growing apart from each other? How many people on earth were still friends with someone they met in first grade?

Miss Tomson was walking toward us. Mitch quickly grabbed the ball and passed it to me. I tried to hit it with my arms, but missed. Mitch didn't laugh or look at me with amusement. Ellen never laughed at me when I couldn't hit the ball either. I sighed. I guess I missed her a little too much.

"Will, if you want to rant or vent about it, I'm always here to listen. Just to let you know there is a ninety-nine percent chance for me to take your side no matter who's actually right or wrong." He said this in such a serious tone of voice that I had to burst out laughing. It had been a while since I laughed this loudly. Mitch acted like he genuinely wanted to listen.

"Seriously, I mean it, Will."

I took a deep breath and decided to tell him what happened between Ellen and me. "Last Saturday at the clothing store, I told Ellen that a skinny gal like her would never..."

"Hey, Mitch!" Patrick was suddenly approaching us. I sighed even harder. PE plus Patrick was a horrible combination.

Patrick patted Mitch's broad shoulder and spoke really loudly like he wanted the whole school to hear: "I'm so happy for you, man! Finally, you've found a lady your own size!"

I would never like Mitch in that way. I would never make Patrick think he was right to assume that fatties should always date each other because no one else wanted them.

I dropped the ball and went to the rest room. I spent at least half an hour in there. I wished Ellen would care enough to wonder where I was. But she didn't. I finally opened the door and walked out of the bathroom. Mitch was standing there.

"Are you alright?" he asked.

I just nodded. “Yeah, volleyball is boring. I needed a break.”

“Volleyball and Patrick, huh?” Mitch gave me a smile. I nodded. Patrick often followed Mitch around. I hope they weren’t too close. If they were, I might want to stay away from Mitch.

“I told him not to mess with you. I also told him that we aren’t dating or anything like that.” There was a sign of relief on my face. Mitch could clearly see it. I could now see a bit of disappointment in his face.

“Good...thanks for doing that.” I gave him a gentle smile and waited for him to say something back. But he didn’t. Mitch only nodded and immediately headed back to the gym.

I told myself that Ellen was already a lot to think about.

Another week has passed. And there’s another red sucker in my locker today. Bo’s been giving me his lollipop every time we have the same shift.

I turn around and smile at Bo. “Thanks for this.”

This time Bo doesn’t hurry back inside. He actually watches me unwrapping the candy and putting it into my mouth.

“You come to work with a frown every day. What’s wrong?” This is probably the longest sentence Bo has ever spoken in the five months we’ve worked together.

I wish Bo went to the same school as me. Then I might feel less lonely. I suddenly think about Mitch. But he’s been sitting with Patrick lately. Or more like Patrick is occupying a seat next to him in all the classes. Of course, when I see Patrick, I run as fast as I can.

“I fought with my best friend. I was being mean...I said ‘A skinny gal like you would never understand a fat gal like me. You would never get what I’ve been going through...’” I told him the whole story, because I don’t think he’s able to share my private life with people from my school. And I do need to talk to someone.

Bo takes another candy out of his pocket and gives it to me. How many red suckers does this guy have? “You two will eventually get past it,” he says.

But how? Ellen hasn’t spoken to me in two weeks. She doesn’t even look my way. And I don’t have enough courage to talk to her. And I don’t even think it’s entirely my fault!

I’m about to ask for his advice. But the moment I open my mouth, Bo is already saying something else.



“You know...I had anger issues as a kid. My mom told me to lick this lollipop gone and then if I still wanted to scream and kick stuff around, that would be okay.”

I blink slowly. Totally confused. I mean, I do appreciate him telling me the reason why he always puts red suckers in his mouth. But red suckers won't solve my problem with Ellen.

“But...I –”

“You'll be fine. You two will get past it.” Bo repeats the same statement again. I'm scratching my head long enough to see him running back to the kitchen. I have to admit Bo is even sexier when he smells like grilled meat. But I just don't get him sometimes. I like his pretty face, his muscular body, his two imperfect front teeth, and his endless supply of red suckers. Isn't that enough?

Patrick is sick today.

That's why I dare to sit next to Mitch. He looks at me with surprise in his eyes.

“I can't sit next to you?” I don't like that he thinks it's a “surprise” that I decided to take a seat next to him.

“Of course, you can sit wherever you want.” Mitch speaks calmly and gives me a bit of his smile.

“Congrats! Yesterday was a good game!” I use my cheerful voice and pretend I watched the game when in fact all I did was work on my papers and think about Ellen. I heard that his team won again yesterday. I stopped and listened to other guys talking about his game on the way to the classroom. “Mitch played like a beast,” and “scouts are all over him,” they said. After high school, I really think this guy could get a scholarship and make it out of this small town.

Mitch nods and quietly does something on his phone. If Bo were this quiet, I wouldn't care. But Mitch isn't a quiet type. He often has quite a lot to say. Just the same type of person I am. The male version of me perhaps.

We're assigned more pair work. I think Mitch won't be okay if I ask whether he wants to work with me on a paper. But he says yes without hesitation and I know I have a broad smile on my face right now.

“Are you that happy that we get to work together?” Mitch asks and takes his eyes off his phone for a second.

I nod and almost shout. “YES! I thought you were angry at me or something. Ellen’s already giving me enough of a headache.”

Mitch puts his phone away and stares at me. Like he wants to read me, and I know I’m not always an open book.

“I’m not mad at you. I’m just a bit disappointed...”

“At what? Did I do something to disappoint you?” I remember that disappointed look on his face that day. But I can’t exactly pinpoint why.

Mitch blows warm air out of his mouth and sighs. I’ve never really heard the football star sigh this loudly before.

“I enjoy being around you. And I secretly hoped that you might feel the same, but...”

I don’t even let him finish his sentence, “There’s no but. Of course, I do!”

Mitch raises his eyebrow as though he’s not convinced by what I insist is true.

“Yeah...but not enough to go on a date with me?”

“Oh...”

Ellen walks past our desks and I’m sure she heard us. My head is about to explode. I want to look at Mitch and Ellen at the same time. But I can’t.

My cheeks are hot and surely have to be extremely red by now. Ellen finally walks back to her seat next to Cassie. And suddenly my phone buzzes. A message from Ellen pops up.

*“a jock, huh?”*

“So, you just said oh and nothing else...” Mitch is staring at me and trying to get me to speak more. So now it’s my turn to seriously look at the phone and pretend to do something with it, too.

“This Saturday, your house or my house?” I whisper, while still looking at my phone screen.

“Is this a date?” Mitch quickly returns the question.

I immediately look up and shout: “For our paper!”

Mitch laughs lightly as if he already knows what this meeting is for.

“And our date, too!”

I press record on WhatsApp to let Ellen know at the same time. Ellen and I have never had a secret. Whether she still considers me a friend or not, I want her to be the first one to know.

We agree to meet at his house on Saturday. His mom opens the front door when I knock. Her eyes widen with excitement and she throws her arms around me.

“Mitch can’t stop talking about you since you two met in geography. He’s like, ‘Mom, I met a girl from my sixth grade...she doesn’t like anyone to call her fat, but is okay when I did it...she seems to have a lot on her mind, but I want to get to know her better...’”

“Mom! You’re not supposed to tell her all that!”

Mitch’s mom steps back and I see her son there in the narrow hallway. He looks like he wants to disappear from the scene. I look at him and smile.

“Hey.”

“Hey, Will.” Mitch clears his throat. “Uh, Mom, we’re heading upstairs.”

His mom nods. “Leave the door open.”

“Mom, we’re fine! It’s not like we’re gonna have...” He censors himself and leaves the sentence incomplete like that. The football player waves for me to follow him up the stairs.

I decide to sit next to him on his bed. Mitch quickly distances himself from me. He is typing something on his laptop. So, I take my laptop out of my bag as well.

“I already invited you to a Google Doc.”

I nod and thank him. “Your Mom is really...”

“Sorry about that. She’s just too...”

I interrupt him because he cut me off before. “You can’t stop talking about me since that geography class?” Mitch immediately averts his gaze from me. I’m moving closer to him until he quickly jumps away to sit on the floor.

I can’t believe my eyes. I’ve never seen him getting this anxious during his games. Last night, I watched one of his games online. He seemed so confident, determined to win, and extremely focused when he was on the field. But now his entire body is literally shaking.

“I watched your game on YouTube last night. You were really amazing.” Mitch knows how to use his fat body in the most effective way for playing this highly masculinized sport. I’m jealous of him again. I can’t imagine how fat women will ever get a chance to use their fat bodies and receive recognition in sports like that, or in any other areas.

He frowns, just like the first day we met in geography class. I can’t hide my curiosity now. I just want to know why he’s acting as though being good at football is a curse rather than a blessing.

“What’s going on with you and football? You don’t seem to like it when I compliment you on being good at it.”

Mitch sighs and doesn’t respond for a while. “I guess I am good at it, but I don’t know that I like it. I just know that my Dad loves it when I’m good at it.”

“I guess I’m not the only one who has a lot on my mind, huh?” I take hold of Mitch’s hand and slowly rub my thumb across the back of it. Whenever I want to console Ellen, I will always do this.

Mitch freezes and I have to stop myself from smiling so hard. “You can tell me anything... I’m here to listen.” Mitch’s hands are really soft, and I can smell lavender hand cream. I find myself distracted by its smell for a minute. But I know it’s not the right time to ask where he bought it.

“Being a guy in a town like this, people expect things from you. You’re supposed to play football and do other manly things that you don’t always enjoy. Most of the time, I end up doing a lot of things my Dad expects me to do. When I’m good at it, he’ll be really good to me. But when I show signs of hesitation and resistance, he’s ready to make sure I stay on the right track.”

I don’t even want to know what his Dad has done to make sure Mitch stays on the “right” track. I can clearly hear pain in his shaky voice and that’s enough to know. His eyes turn red. He’s breathing heavily. I sigh. He looks so sad and miserable.

I’m still sitting on his bed while he’s sitting on the floor. We’re looking at each other in silence. I ask softly: “Are you okay?” Mitch can’t hold it in anymore. A stream of tears begins to roll down his face. The fat football player suddenly looks up to the ceiling as if he can make all the tears roll back in. He wipes them away with his shirtsleeve. But more tears are pouring down.

“I’m not man enough for you now...I guess...” Mitch laughs bitterly as if he’s disappointed in himself. “Whenever I won or lost a really tough game, I would cry right on the football field and that felt fine...” Mitch pauses to blow his nose with the tissue I just gave him. “I’ve cried in front of hundreds of people a few times before, but this is the first time I’ve been ashamed of myself for weeping...” His voice cuts out, his breathing seems uneven, and his chest is trembling from the rush of emotion. “You’re the last person that I want to see me like this...I bet you wanna tell me to man up and stop babbling right now.”

I saw Mitch cry in the game I watched last night. It wasn't exactly weeping. I only saw a single tear running down his cheek. It was not even that visible if you weren't paying attention to his facial expression and all his gestures, like me.

"Man enough? Man up? What the hell is that? I don't give a fuck about it. You know... what you just said is bullshit, Mitch."

"A six-foot-something dude crying because he wants his Dad to love him without conditions. You don't think I'm pathetic, Will?" Mitch abruptly runs out of words. He looks really embarrassed and avoids eye contact with me again.

I'm counting one to ten twice, trying to get inside Mitch's head. I want to say the right things, the things that he wants to hear. But maybe there is no such thing.

"I used to hate crying in front of other people," I admit. "No matter what happened, I wouldn't cry. I thought it made me look weak. I hated it even though I know girls can cry. But Ellen taught me that it's okay to cry whether you're a boy or a girl..." I'm mumbling long sentences that I didn't even know existed in my head. I brush the hair out of his face and caress his wet cheeks gently with my hands. I won't wipe away his tears. I don't need to. They're allowed to exist.

"I know it's even harder for boys to cry...especially when you're told not to so many times in your life."

Mitch finally looks at me again. He's sniffing, trying to stop himself from revealing more emotion.

"But you can always cry in front of me," I assure him. "It doesn't only have to be about your football games. It could be about anything. I won't tell anyone and you're still the same you that I've known since sixth grade. I mean, I didn't really know you in sixth grade. I guess what I mean is, you're still that person who deals with Patrick for me, who notices that I'm not speaking to my best friend, who is just so kind to me, who is ..."

Mitch looks so helpless, frustrated, and confused when his teary eyes lock onto mine. My thumb is brushing against his lips now and I know I just have to ask. "Can I?" His cheeks are a deep magenta as he nods. I'm leaning in to press my lips against his. His hand touches my upper back fat. I feel a little insecure, but I want to trust Mitch as much as I want him to trust me.

"It's okay for you to cry, whatever the reason you feel like crying. I'm telling you and myself, too," I whisper in his ear, and he nods. Patrick probably won't shut his mouth when he

sees us together. But fuck it, I no longer care. No matter what I do, or who I hang out with, that guy will always find ways to tease me.

My phone buzzes and a message from Bo pops up. Unless it's from Ellen, I won't read it. I toss my phone on the bed and continue to kiss Mitch.

In my rewriting, I am seeking to create my fat romance hero's masculinity by invoking the model of emotional masculinity that Illouz suggests. My intention is to construct my ideal version of fat romance heroes' masculinity, which will "take us closer to the goals of feminism."<sup>97</sup> In order to reach those goals, Mitch will not be written to "do" his emotion in a way that can still be justified as manly. His display of emotion will not be based on "sexual capital," as Illouz stresses.<sup>98</sup> Mitch in my story will also not be written to display masculine emotion in the form of anger, as Bo exhibits in *Dumplin'*, discussed above.

In my revision, my intention is to accentuate Mitch's emotional vulnerability by depicting him crying. Open expressions of emotion have always been associated with femininity, inferiority, and "weakened" masculinity.<sup>99</sup> Men are typically expected to be "consistently tough, calm, rational, and in control" in order to embody superiority and dominant masculinity.<sup>100</sup> But in my revision of the novel above, there are two distinct causes for Mitch's tears, which lead to distinct reactions by him after crying, as I have written it. Mitch is clearly embarrassed to cry in front of Willowdean and is repeatedly concerned that his tears, resulting from the tension he has with his Dad, will weaken his masculinity in her eyes. He admits to her that he has cried in public a few times before, but he has never felt ashamed of doing so in front of hundreds of people on the football field. Mitch in my rewriting does not exactly have split selves whereby he chooses to be inexpressive in public and vulnerable in his bedroom, as written in the original novel. The hero I have constructed is able to cry in both the public and private spheres, but he nevertheless still has

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<sup>97</sup> Illouz, *Why Love Hurts*, p. 247.

<sup>98</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>99</sup> Agneta H. Fischer, Marrie H. J. Bekker, Ad Vingerhoets, Marleen C. Becht, and Antony S. R. Manstead, "Femininity, Masculinity, and the Riddle of Crying," in *Emotional Expression and Health: Advances in Theory, Assessment and Clinical Applications*, eds. Ad Vingerhoets, Lydia Temoshok, Ivan Nyklíček (New York: Brunner-Routledge, 2004), pp. 289–302.

<sup>100</sup> Heather J. MacArthur and Stephanie A. Shields, "There's No Crying in Baseball, or Is There?: Male Athletes, Tears, and Masculinity in North America," *Emotion Review* 7, no.1 (2015): 39–46 (40).

to “perform” his emotion in “an acceptably manly way,” following the proposal by MacArthur and Shields:

actual norms of masculine emotion, contrary to culturally shared beliefs about the prevalence of masculine inexpressivity, do not deny the significance of emotion, but instead focus on when and how appropriate masculine emotion should be visible to others.<sup>101</sup>

“When and how” seem to be key for permitting men to exhibit their emotions in public without being evaluated as unmanly. Sport is certainly one context that allows “open emotional expression” to be considered normal and acceptable for men.<sup>102</sup> MacArthur and Shields argue that: “Men need to cry the ‘right way’ to be considered manly.”<sup>103</sup> I initially attempted to follow their suggestion; Mitch in my rewriting is able to justify his display of emotion in public only by crying in “the right masculine way.”<sup>104</sup>

The ways in which Mitch cries on the football field and in front of Willowdean in his bedroom are depicted differently. The heroine only sees “a single tear running down” Mitch’s cheek during the football game, but she sees a stream of tears rolling down his face after he talks about his emotionally distant Dad. The different reasons for his tears and his different kinds of crying play a crucial role in how I have constructed Mitch’s dual masculinity through his tears. Crying with only a single tear due to victory or defeat in sporting events does not feminize the hero because it reveals that he is able to display genuine emotion, but still keeps it under firm control in such a highly masculinized space. Therefore, the emotion, which is conventionally perceived as unmanly, that Mitch displays is permitted to “pass relatively unnoticed” in the competitive sports context.<sup>105</sup> While Willowdean ponders to herself that Mitch’s soft crying in the game is almost invisible to viewers who are not paying close attention, Mitch is also aware that his shedding of tears during the football games will possibly go uncensored and unnoticed. He

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<sup>101</sup> MacArthur and Shields, “There’s No Crying in Baseball, or Is There?,” p. 41.

<sup>102</sup> Ibid., p. 42.

<sup>103</sup> Ibid., p. 43.

<sup>104</sup> Ibid., p. 44.

<sup>105</sup> Ibid., p. 42.

clearly perceives his tears during the game as an acceptably manly emotion and is therefore not ashamed of repeatedly revealing his emotions in public.

One of the right ways for men to cry in order to be considered manly is in the competitive sports context, as I have previously discussed. In the popular romance context, tears from men are allowed to exist as well. Sarah S. G. Frantz contends: “Stereotypically in modern popular romance, the more masculine the hero, the more emotionless he is, and the larger the barrier that must be overcome to achieve access to his emotions.”<sup>106</sup> Tears are typically viewed as feminine, but the hero in popular romance is permitted to cry while still being able to maintain his dominant masculinity by doing so.<sup>107</sup> Masculine tears seem to be “an oxymoron” because men are taught from a young age that if they want to be “real” men, they should never cry.<sup>108</sup> However, manly tears are allowed to exist in popular romance; indeed, they constitute one of the scenes that female readers are looking forward to reading because they complicate “the social taboo” that men should not reveal deep emotions.<sup>109</sup> Frantz suggests: “The more alpha the hero, the more likely he is to cry to prove his love for the heroine.”<sup>110</sup> Once again, it is about constructing a careful balance between soft and hard masculinities. In other words, the manly hero in popular romance must break down the barrier of his “masculine emotionlessness” in order to reassure the heroine and the reader that he is really falling in love with her through the depiction of his tears.<sup>111</sup> Therefore, crying is acceptable for the hero in romance novels if he does it in order to express his love for the heroine.

This time, I do not want Mitch to exhibit idealized masculinity by following the convention of acceptable masculine tears in the context of popular romance novels. Nevertheless, I still want him to display his deep emotions by crying. But Mitch in my short story has to cry because of his own problem—the strained relationship with his father—not because he wants to prove his intense

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<sup>106</sup> Sarah S. G. Frantz, “Darcy’s Vampiric Descendants: Austen’s Perfect Romance Hero and J. R. Ward’s Black Dagger Brotherhood,” *Persuasions: The Jane Austen Journal Online* 30, no. 1 (Winter 2009).

<sup>107</sup> MacArthur and Shields, “There’s No Crying in Baseball, or Is There?,” p. 40; Sarah S. G. Frantz, “I’ve Tried My Entire Life to Be a Good Man”: Suzanne Brockmann’s Sam Starrett, Ideal Romance Hero,” in *Women Constructing Men: Female Novelists and Their Male Characters, 1750–2000*, eds. Sarah S. G. Frantz and Katharina Rennhak (Plymouth, UK: Lexington Books, 2011), pp. 227–247 (p. 237).

<sup>108</sup> Frantz, “I’ve Tried My Entire Life to Be a Good Man,” p. 237.

<sup>109</sup> Ibid.

<sup>110</sup> Frantz, “Darcy’s Vampiric Descendants: Austen’s Perfect Romance Hero.”

<sup>111</sup> Ibid.



romantic feelings for the heroine. Superficially, the Mitch in my revision seems to possess alpha masculinity through the portrayal of his manly physique, which is capable of excelling at playing highly masculinized sport, and his “football star” status in school. I have deliberately chosen to depict him crying due to a “feminized” family problem in order to make sure that his tears will be read as feminine. His feminized open weeping thus serves to destabilize his seemingly alpha/dominant masculinity, rather than strengthening or reaffirming it as typical romance heroes’ manly tears function in standard romance narratives. I decided to let the heroine justify Mitch’s feminized tears as a normal and appropriate emotion for men to show by insisting that he can always cry in front of her, for whatever reason. The way in which Willowdean gently touches his wet cheeks with no intention of wiping away his tears and is tempted to kiss him when she sees that he is “helpless, frustrated, and confused when his teary eyes lock onto [hers]” is my attempt to undermine the gender-emotional stereotype that men are allowed to cry only in a “correct” and “nonfeminine” way during competitive sports and in popular romance contexts.<sup>112</sup> The way in which Mitch visibly weeps for a reason unrelated to sports or romantic love is genuinely accepted by the heroine and is constructed as the crucial point in my story in which Willowdean finds herself irresistibly attracted to Mitch, and even more so despite her continuing ambivalence toward his fatness.

Moreover, I seek to subvert the ways in which Mike and Bo from *Dangerous Curves Ahead* and *Dumplin’* choose not to acknowledge their heroines as fat through the authoritative acts of prohibition and silence, respectively. I allow Mitch in my story to be able to directly label himself and the heroine as fat. But it was not an easy decision for me to write against this key convention in selected US fat romances. I am used to reading about the heroes in US fat romance novels prohibiting the fat heroines from referring to their bodies as fat and am well aware of how fat is still an unspeakable term in Anglo-American culture.<sup>113</sup> I felt anxious, wondering whether

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<sup>112</sup> MacArthur and Shields, “There’s No Crying in Baseball, or Is There?,” p. 44; Frantz, “Darcy’s Vampiric Descendants: Austen’s Perfect Romance Hero.”

<sup>113</sup> For example, Sam, the hero of Alison Bliss’s 2016 *Size Matters*, also has a similar reaction to the heroine labelling her body as “fat.” When Leah, the female protagonist, tells him that she does not sleep naked, because she is fat, the hero is quickly filled with rage: “Who the hell told you that you were fat?” (p. 27). One time, Sam even thinks to himself, “Whoever told this woman she’s fat should be shot and strung up by his testicles” (p. 22). Similarly to Mike, Sam also tells Leah that she is not fat, but “beautiful” (pp. 72, 191). Noah, the male protagonist in Sam Crescent’s 2016 *Fat*, follows the same formula. Elsa, the heroine, is forbidden by Noah from making jokes about her fat body, because he considers it an action to “put [her]self down” (there is no page number for the kindle version of *Fat*, just location 229, 234). After hearing Elsa stating that she is fat on several occasions, he eventually

the act of my Mitch straightforwardly calling my Willowdean fat would ruin the “romantic” sentiment of my story. Even though I am embracing fat politics with ambivalence, it is still nevertheless challenging for me to defamiliarize myself from this particular fat-phobic convention in heterosexual fat romances. In the end, I have been able to prove that it is possible to reshape the fat romance narrative such that the hero does not have to find ways to avoid referring to his heroine as fat. The way in which Jamison and Murphy decide not to allow their heroes to acknowledge the heroines as fat will only perpetuate fat hatred in romance novels that use fat female identity as a selling point.

In my revision, I attempt to construct the term fat as a neutral descriptive term that the hero can use freely to label his own and the heroine’s bodies. Willowdean in my rewriting approves of Mitch straightforwardly calling her fat. She admits to herself that it is “weirdly satisfying” and that she likes it that he calls her fat with “nothing else implied.” This scene is particularly written in conversation with the scene I wrote in the short story in Chapter 1. In that story, the fat heroine Muslin ponders in private that she “just want[s] to be a fatty, just a fatty with no negative words attached to it. No ‘ugly’...no ‘disgusting’...nothing whatsoever.” Willowdean in this story has the same desire as Muslin and I allow Mitch to fulfil this desire, as I have discussed. Also, I intended to write this specific scene to contradict how Ellis compliments Mike for being “so sweet” when he resists reading her body as fat and prohibits her from calling herself fat in *Dangerous Curves Ahead* (DCA, 270). Willowdean in my short story admits to Mitch that she likes it when he calls her fat and thinks to herself that he is “cute” for calling her fat with “nothing else implied.” This is my attempt to construct a fat romance narrative that subverts this convention in selected US fat romance novels which bothers me so much whilst reading.

Unlike Willowdean, Mitch does not seem to see the term fat in a denigrating sense. He seems to be able to accept his identity as a fat person, whilst Willowdean is still struggling with ambivalence toward her fat body, in both the novel and my short story. I repeatedly attempt to show and amplify the heroine’s ambivalence toward her fat body, as I already did in Chapter 1’s

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blurts out: “You’re not fat. You’re beautiful,” and asks Elsa whether she is blind, because he considers her “the most beautiful woman [he’s] ever seen...naked” (location 1407). Alison Bliss, *Size Matters* (New York: Forever, 2016); Sam Crescent, *Fat* (Evernight Publishing, 2016).

revision. My fat heroine does not perceive her fat body as a “disgrace,” as her ex-pageant mother used to call it, but she admits that being fat is not “something to be proud of either.” Willowdean feels “a little insecure” when Mitch touches her upper back fat. But she overcomes her insecurity just for this moment and decides to trust him to touch her body because she also wants him to trust her enough to reveal his true emotions. While my heroine has to “stand up as small and quiet,” my hero does not hesitate to move his body loudly and occupy space with no shame. Nirmal Puwar’s contention on the politics of the body and space can be usefully applied to this scene:

Social spaces are not blank and open for any body to occupy. While all can, in theory, enter [space], it is certain types of bodies that are tacitly designated as being the “natural” occupants of specific positions. Some bodies are deemed as having the right to belong, while others are marked out as trespassers, who are, in accordance with how both spaces and bodies are imagined (politically, historically, and conceptually), circumscribed as being “out of place.” Not being the somatic norm, they are space invaders.<sup>114</sup>

Mitch’s fat male body is clearly written as the type of body that is the “‘natural’ occupant”<sup>115</sup> of public space in my revision. This scene is written in conjunction with how Willowdean in the novel observes that Mitch’s fat body, which is capable of playing American football, is admired by the whole school as fit and athletic rather than fat. In contrast, Willowdean’s fat female body in my story is denigrated by a school bully Patrick, who idolizes Mitch’s fat/fit male body which is so excellent at playing a highly masculinized sport. My heroine notices that Patrick looks at Mitch’s fat body with admiration, but looks at hers with disdain. Willowdean’s fat female body, which transgresses body norm, fails to achieve ideal femininity, whilst Mitch’s fat male body is able to redeem itself through successfully performing athletic masculinity. If Mitch’s fat body, in both the novel and my story, could not perform masculinity through excelling at sports, it might possibly be perceived as a feminized male body that is out of control, as Kunze argues, or out of place, as Puwar suggests.<sup>116</sup> If Mitch were written as a fat man with no athletic ability, he too

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<sup>114</sup> Nirmal Puwar, *Space Invaders: Race, Gender and Bodies Out of Place* (New York, NY and Oxford, OX: Berg Publishers, 2004), p. 8.

<sup>115</sup> Ibid.

<sup>116</sup> Kunze, “Send in the Clowns,” 27; Puwar, *Space Invaders*, p. 8.

might possibly get to experience fat hatred and the ambivalent feelings toward fatness that a fat woman like Willowdean has to face every day.

## Conclusion

In *Dangerous Curves Ahead*, Mike embodies both of the dualistic hard and soft masculine identities. His hard, manly self is constructed in relation to other, inferior, forms of masculinity, while his “softer” side is anxiously presented in front of the heroine. Ellis, the fat heroine, has to teach him how to love and how to declare his love by first confessing her desire to marry him. Jamison constructs her hero’s masculinity by relying on masculinized characteristics that are both external (a “well-muscled” body)<sup>117</sup> and internal (bravery, aggression, and independence). The non-communicative masculinity of Bo from *Dumplin’* is also portrayed as desirable and acceptable, in opposition to the feminized and emotive masculinity that Mitch possesses. Although Bo’s injured body can be read as feminized and inferior to Mitch’s fat/fit body, he is able to “flee from the feminine”<sup>118</sup> by possessing internal masculine qualities (a tendency to be non-communicative and being prone to get angry easily). Willowdean’s ambivalence toward her own fat body also guarantees that Bo’s seemingly perfect manly body will be the kind of body that she desires, not the fat/fit body of Mitch.

I would argue that Jamison and Murphy are both interested in creating an ideal masculinity that contains the presence of emotion. Jamison only allows her hero to have his happy ending once he is taught by the fat heroine to declare his feelings for her. The author seems to be suggesting that the traditional masculinity that Mike displays can be replaced by Illouz’s invocation of the model of emotive masculinity. Murphy also decides to construct her secondary male character, Mitch, as possessing internal feminized characteristics (being caring, sensitive, and emotional), which I consider to be desirable masculinity. However, they are afraid of feminizing their heroes. The

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<sup>117</sup> Bordo, *Unbearable Weight*, p. 195.

<sup>118</sup> Khan and Wachholz, “Rough Flight: Boys Fleeing the Feminine,” p. 67.

US construction of masculinity is typically “defined by what it is not.”<sup>119</sup> This binary oppositional thinking perhaps instils fear in these two fat romance authors. They seem to be afraid that if they write heroes who are too feminized, those heroes will never be able to be seen or redeem themselves as manly ever again.

Hence, Jamison ends up writing a hero who has a difficult time bridging the gap between being manly and being emotionally available throughout the novel. She allows him to seriously declare his romantic feelings for the heroine only once, toward the very end of the novel. At the same time, Murphy only dares to create a feminized emotional man as an unsuccessful, desexualized male suitor who is rejected by the heroine. She takes a chance in comically depicting Bo’s flawed front teeth and his habit of sucking lollipops in order to undermine his dominant masculinity. Although Murphy is interested in stretching the boundaries of fat romance masculinity, she is still confined by the genre’s convention to portray Bo as a hero who exhibits a traditional form of masculinity similar to Mike’s.

In my revision, following Illouz’s suggestion, I attempt to show that it is possible to construct an emotionally available and feminized hero as an ideal, acceptable, and desirable form of masculinity in a US fat romance narrative through the portrayal of Mitch’s *unmasculine* tears. I have constructed this emotive fat romance hero in order to satisfy myself as an avid romance reader, while attempting to hold onto my feminist ideals. I also intended to prove that it is possible to construct a fat romance narrative in which a hero is able to freely treat fat as a neutral descriptive label for a heroine’s transgressive body. In the next chapter, I will examine the representations of selected Thai fat romance heroes’ masculinity.

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<sup>119</sup> Brown, “Comic Book Masculinity,” p. 26.

### Chapter 3: “How Am I Not a Gentleman?”<sup>1</sup>: Masculinities in Thai Heterosexual Fat Romance Novels

In this chapter, I will continue my examination of the construction of the romantic hero’s masculinity, turning now to two Thai fat romance novels: Sophee Pannarai’s *Palosongkrueng* (2003) and Pinyada’s *Rak Tem Lon*<sup>2</sup> (2014). Chapter 3 explores the same key questions that were asked in Chapter 2 with reference to the two US texts: What models of masculinity do the Thai fat romance heroes in these novels exhibit, and what do these models reveal about constructions of ideal, desirable, and acceptable masculinity in Thai culture? Finally, how are the heroes’ masculinities constructed in relation to the fat heroines and their transgressive bodies?

I seek to argue that the two heroes from *Palosongkrueng* and *Rak Tem Lon* share the Thai archetype of gentlemanly heroes. The analysis explores how the heroes’ “gentlemanly” masculinity is constructed in relation to how the fat heroines perform femininity through the use of feminine objects—high-heeled shoes and maternity dresses. I seek to contend that the two heroes in the selected novels will perform their “gentlemanly” masculinity when the fat heroines can establish themselves as the “good fatty.” In the creative section, I rewrite selected passages from *Palosongkrueng* with the aim of rejecting the model of gentlemanly masculinity that Pannarai constructs. I will turn the hero Akekasit into a “gentlemanly” suitor, who will eventually be rejected by the heroine Sophitnapa instead. Wattna, a fat suitor in the original novel, will be written as a feminized hero whose unconventional version of masculinity is approved of and desired by my fat heroine.

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<sup>1</sup> “ผมไม่เป็นสุภาพบุรุษตรงไหน” Sophee Pannarai, *Palosongkrueng* (Bangkok: Ruamsarn, 2003), p. 38 (the first book). Subsequent references to this text will take the form of *P1* for the first book and *P2* for the second book followed by the page reference and will appear in the main text. As the first and second book of *Palosongkrueng* both start with page 1, I need to distinguish each book as *P1* or *P2*. All translations from the selected novels used in this chapter are mine.

<sup>2</sup> Pinyada, *Rak Tem Lon* (Bangkok: Jamsai, 2014). Further references to this text will take the form of *RTL* followed by the page reference and will appear in the main text.

## “He’s So Gentlemanly, Philanthropic, and Handsomely Graceful”<sup>3</sup>: The Aristocratic “Gentlemanly” Hero

Sophee Pannarai’s *Palosongkrueng* consists of two books and is narrated by a third-person narrator who at times takes on the perspective of Sophitnapa, the fat heroine, and at other times the perspective of Akekasit, the hero. Pannarai is one of the most famous Thai romance authors of all time. Many of her novels have been adapted into *lakorn*, television dramas. However, *Palosongkrueng*, her only romance novel featuring a fat heroine, has never been adapted into *lakorn*. *Palosongkrueng* was the first Thai fat romance novel ever published, as far as I am aware. The novel’s title refers to a Thai dish, literally translated as “a five-spice stew full of extra ingredients” (such as pork belly, eggs, and tofu). It is also an outdated slang word used to refer to fat women. Sophitnapa is nicknamed “Palo” (a shortened name for this dish) by Supawan, her least favorite, thin cousin (*P2*, 295). In the novel, Sophitnapa is a fat young woman from an upper-class family who finds her happiness in eating. She has never cared about criticism or sneering remarks about her fat body (*P1*, 4). The heroine has been wooed by Wattana, a wealthy fat man. Despite the fact that they get along so well, Sophitnapa has always considered him merely as a friend who shares a keen interest in food.

When the fat heroine meets the conventionally good-looking and wealthy hero, Akekasit, for the first time, she trips over and lands in his lap on account of her four-inch heels. Conventionally attractive physical appearance in Thai culture mainly involves thinness and light skin for both women and men.<sup>4</sup> Akekasit possesses both a lean body and light skin (*P1*, 30). The hero is defined as a man who possesses “the perfect appearance, perfect attributes, and perfect wealth” (*P1*, 30).<sup>5</sup> Akekasit scolds the fat heroine for wearing heels *despite* being fat. Their relationship is one of aversion from this point on. Later in the novel, the protagonists have to work alongside one another on a fundraising project for poor kids. The heroine begins to see the hero as a

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<sup>3</sup> “เขาเป็นสุภาพบุรุษมาก แถมยังใจบุญสุนทาน สง่างาม” This is how Supawan, the female antagonist, describes Akekasit to her mother (*P1*, 88).

<sup>4</sup> Light skin in Thai culture connotes superior social class. There is a belief that rich people, who do not have to do manual labor or work outdoors, will have lighter skin than working-class people, whose skin is exposed to the sun all the time.

<sup>5</sup> คุณสมบัติครบถ้วนทั้งรูปสมบัติ คุณสมบัติ ทรัพย์สินสมบัติ

generous gentleman, while the hero recognizes her good heart, and they slowly fall for one another. But their relationship is prevented from developing by Nawaphorn, the hero's famous designer girlfriend, and Supawan, the heroine's model cousin, who both attempt to win the hero's heart. Toward the end of the novel, Sophitnapa decides to lose weight because the female antagonists keep insulting her fat body for being undesirable. Although the fat heroine persuades herself to go on a diet due to their insults, she eventually becomes determined to lose weight because she thinks the hero will choose the thinner her as his new girlfriend. In the end, she becomes conventionally thin in a month. Nawaphorn then sends her brother to shoot Sophitnapa at her house. The heroine is rushed to the hospital. After Sophitnapa fully recovers, Akekasit asks her to marry him because he has realized that he wants to spend the rest of his life with her. Sophitnapa agrees to marry him, but he has to wait for her to lose more weight. She wants to be "a beautiful bride who will not be an embarrassment to him" when they stand next to each other on their wedding day (*P2*, 319).<sup>6</sup>

Sophitnapa and Akekasit meet for the first time at a clinic specializing in dermatology and weight loss. The fat heroine comes to the clinic owned by Dr Yingyong, the hero's friend, on account of her pimples. Sophitnapa stumbles in front of Akekasit and accidentally sits on him (*P1*, 37). The fat heroine describes Akekasit as "a handsome man...so handsome that leading actors would be embarrassed" (*P1*, 37).<sup>7</sup> The narrator's perspective switches back to that of Akekasit who, through his pain, ponders: "She's so fat and still chooses to wear extremely high heeled shoes" (*P1*, 37).<sup>8</sup> Akekasit decides to verbalize his thoughts a minute later: "You wear shoes with heels that are far too high. How is it possible for them to handle your body weight? Your legs aren't broken. But mine are almost broken. I bet you fall over a lot" (*P1*, 37-38).<sup>9</sup> The hero shakes his head in disapproval and the narrator informs us: "He can't stand inappropriateness. Wearing high heels with no consideration of one's body is just inappropriate"

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<sup>6</sup> "คุณต้องรอไปก่อน ต้องรอจนลดความอ้วนลงอีก ฉันอยากลดลงอีกสักสามกิโล...อยากแต่งชุดเจ้าสาวที่สวยงาม ยืนเคียงข้างคุณ ไม่ทำให้อับอายค่ะ"

<sup>7</sup> ผู้ชายหน้าตาหล่อเหลาชนิดที่ว่าพระเอกยังอาย

<sup>8</sup> ใ้ไฮเฟิงจะเห็นสันสูง อ้วนขนาดนี้ ตัวใหญ่ขนาดนี้ยังสวมรองเท้าส้นสูงมาก

<sup>9</sup> "คุณใส่รองเท้าสูงขนาดนี้ จะรับน้ำหนักตัวคุณได้อย่างไร" เอกสิทธิตีาหนี "ขอบคุณไม่หัก แต่ขามผมจะหัก" เพราะถูกกระแทกอย่างแรง...ไฮโซไม่น่าเชื่อ รู้สึกปวดต้นขา "ล้มบ่อยสิท่า" [เขากลาม]



(PI, 39).<sup>10</sup> Akekasit clearly thinks that only women with “appropriate” weight and sexy femininity can wear high heels properly and will not trip over. The fat female body is clearly considered by the hero to be an “inappropriate,” desexualized female body that is incapable of balancing itself on high heels, and thus seemingly fails the test of femininity.

High-heeled shoes, Lilijana Burcar contends, play a crucial part in the construction of femininity.<sup>11</sup> Shoes are certainly gendered. Flat shoes with “sturdy and chunky heels”<sup>12</sup> are, according to Marie-Agnès Parmentier, conventionally perceived as being for men and “elevated shoes” with “thin, curvaceous, and decorative heels”<sup>13</sup> are thought to be for women. I argue that this is also true in Thai culture. Unfortunately, there has been no academic research conducted about footwear in Thai culture. Thus, I have to rely on my personal experience and observations to consider footwear in my culture. Although I do not wear high heels in my daily life, except once for a school prom, I always see my father wearing his black leather shoes with “sturdy and chunky heels” and my mother wearing her super-thin high heels during work and leisure time. While flat shoes are comfortable and allow their wearers to roam freely, high heels impede walking “with all the body weight concentrated on the toes,” making movement “painful” and “hazardous.”<sup>14</sup> The gendering of shoes, Burcar argues, “leads to the imposition of different modes of walking and movement for men and women.”<sup>15</sup> It clearly affects the ways in which space is “claimed and inhabited,”<sup>16</sup> she adds.

When Dr Yingyong, Akekasit’s friend, asks him whether he would be happy if “a beautiful woman with a model’s figure” wearing high heels were to trip over and fall into his lap instead (PI, 41),<sup>17</sup> the hero changes the subject, but does not reject his friend’s assumption (PI, 41). The “proper” size for the female body, combined with restricted mobility due to wearing high heels,

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<sup>10</sup> เขาโคลงศีรษะ หล่นข้างเป็นคนคือเหลือเกิน เขาอาจจะอารมณ์เสียก็จริง ก็เพราะทนเห็นความไม่เหมาะสมไม่ได้ ตี้อัน สวมรองเท้าส้นสูงเกินสังขารและรูปร่าง ไม่เหมาะสม

<sup>11</sup> Lilijana Burcar, “High Heels as a Disciplinary Practice of Femininity in Sandra Cisneros’s *The House on Mango Street*,” *Journal of Gender Studies* 28, no. 3 (2019): 353–362 (353).

<sup>12</sup> Marie-Agnès Parmentier, “High heels,” *Consumption Markets & Culture* 19, no. 6 (2016): 511–519 (513).

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> Burcar, “High Heels as a Disciplinary Practice of Femininity,” pp. 354–356.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., p. 354.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> “เพราะเธออ้วนนายเลยบ่น” ยิงยงแซว “ถ้าเป็นสาวสวยหุ่นนางแบบ นั่งบนตักนาย นายคงพอใจสิท่า”

connotes weakness, fragility, helplessness, and dependence and is thus perceived as beautiful, feminine, and desirable in the eyes of Akekasit. The female body becomes feminized, acceptable, and desirable when it “appropriately” shrinks in size and occupies public space in “minimal,” “unobtrusive” ways and is unthreatening to male authority and presence due to an unstable gait, shortened stride, and low speed in movement.<sup>18</sup>

Although high heels obstruct her movement, Sophitnapa insists on wearing them, telling her cousin: “Wearing high heels makes me look graceful.” She comments to herself: “Although I’m fat, I still want to be beautiful” (*PI*, 40).<sup>19</sup> Sophitnapa is aware that her defeminized fat body, described by the hero as “almost as large as a large man’s body,”<sup>20</sup> denies her access to conventional feminine beauty (*PI*, 43). Wearing high heels enables her to hope to approximate feminine beauty, serving as a clear visual marker of femininity that “every properly socialized woman” internalizes as “the essence of her feminine subjectivity.”<sup>21</sup>

In the same scene at the clinic, Sophitnapa chastises the hero for being “ungentlemanly”<sup>22</sup> in criticizing her preference for wearing high heels *despite* being fat (*PI*, 38). The hero quickly questions Sophitnapa’s judgement: “How am I not a gentleman? I just warned you with good intentions. You shouldn’t wear heels...[because] you’re fat and clumsy!”<sup>23</sup> (*PI*, 38–39). Sophitnapa repeats her reprimand, “You’re ungentlemanly”<sup>24</sup> and decides to walk away (*PI*, 39). When Sirinuch asks her whom she was chatting with, the heroine continues to censure Akekasit’s masculinity: “I was talking to an ungentlemanly guy” (*PI*, 40).<sup>25</sup> This keyword of “ungentlemanly” is repeated yet again by the heroine when she goes in for her appointment with Dr Yingyong. Sophitnapa sees the hero walking out of the doctor’s office as she is about to go inside. She asks the doctor whether Akekasit is his patient and comments: “Your patient is

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<sup>18</sup> Burcar, “High Heels as a Disciplinary Practice of Femininity,” p. 356.

<sup>19</sup> “ใส่รองเท้าส้นสูงจะรู้สึกสง่างาม” ถึงอ้วนอย่างไร ผู้หญิงก็ยังอยากจะสวย

<sup>20</sup> ผู้หญิงตัวใหญ่เกือบเท่าผู้ชายตัวใหญ่

<sup>21</sup> Burcar, “High Heels as a Disciplinary Practice of Femininity,” p. 357.

<sup>22</sup> “ก็คุณไม่เป็นสุภาพบุรุษ”

<sup>23</sup> “ผมไม่เป็นสุภาพบุรุษตรงไหน”; “ผมเตือนคุณด้วยความหวังดี ไม่ควรสวมรองเท้าส้นสูงขนาดนี้”; เอกสิทธิ์ตอบโสมิตินภา “เคยเห็น...แต่ไม่เคยเห็น อ้วนแล้วดี้อ้วน ชุ่มซำม!”

<sup>24</sup> “ไม่เป็นสุภาพบุรุษ” ว่าแล้วก็เดินหนี

<sup>25</sup> Sirinuch เห็น งามญาติสาว “เธอคุยกับใคร” “คุยกับผู้ชายที่ไม่เป็นสุภาพบุรุษ”

ungentlemanly. He's sharp-tongued" (*PI*, 44).<sup>26</sup> However, the doctor promptly defends his long-time friend: "He's actually my friend. He's always been very gentlemanly since I knew him at college" (*PI*, 44).<sup>27</sup> Throughout the scene at the clinic, Akekasit's masculinity is evaluated, reprimanded, and praised in terms of gentlemanliness.

Akekasit's masculinity is confirmed by the way in which he always walks into a space without falling, with his conventional male shoes featuring their "sturdy and chunky heels,"<sup>28</sup> in contrast to the fat heroine in her high heels, who falls over twice in the novel. Akekasit's masculinity is not only firmly established by how he inhabits space with confidence and stability, but also by his ability to be "an external aid" for the fat female body that lacks its own stability and power to reach a destination without falling.<sup>29</sup> His lap serves as a "soft cushion"<sup>30</sup> for the heroine to fall on and prevents her from breaking her legs as Sirinuch, her favorite cousin who also comes to the clinic, suggests (*PI*, 40).

The fat heroine re-evaluates the hero's masculinity when she is about to fall to the floor for the second time. After the protagonists have been working together on a fundraising project for a few months, the two start to develop feelings for one another. When Akekasit sees that Sophitnapa is about to trip over in front of him, this time, he does not hesitate to grab her body and voluntarily uses himself as a "soft cushion"<sup>31</sup> for her to fall on (*P2*, 49–51). The hero's knees are injured as he prevents the fat heroine in her high heels from falling on a greasy floor, but he insists to her that he is fine and is more concerned about whether she has been hurt (*P2*, 49–51). This time, Sophitnapa compliments Akekasit in her head as a "gentlemanly" man (*P2*, 53). Interestingly, this second "falling to the floor" scene takes place shortly after Akekasit has been pondering to himself that Sophitnapa is a "good-hearted" fat woman who is "generous and determined to help" poor people (*P2*, 49). When the hero considers the heroine to be just an "inappropriate" fat woman in high heels, he condemns her for wearing those heels *despite* being

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<sup>26</sup> เข้ามาแล้วโสภิตนาก็ถามหมอยังคงอย่างสนิทสนม "นั่นคนใช้หมอหรือคะ ไม่เป็นสุภาพบุรุษ ปากจัด" ปากจัดเพราะตำหนิหล่อน จำแม่น เชียว

<sup>27</sup> "เขาเป็นเพื่อนผม ปกติเป็นสุภาพบุรุษมาก ตั้งแต่ตอนเรียนหนังสือ"

<sup>28</sup> Parmentier, "High Heels," p. 513.

<sup>29</sup> Burcar, "High Heels as a Disciplinary Practice of Femininity," p. 356.

<sup>30</sup> "แต่โสภิตก็ไปกระแทกเขานะ ล้มบนตักเขามันนุ่ม ถ้าล้มบนพื้นอาจขาหัก"

<sup>31</sup> "แต่โสภิตก็ไปกระแทกเขานะ ล้มบนตักเขามันนุ่ม ถ้าล้มบนพื้นอาจขาหัก"

fat and blames her fat body in its heels for hurting him. But when Akekasit perceives the heroine as a generous and charitable fat woman, he does not make any sneering remarks about her habit of wearing heels and is willing to risk his life to prevent her from falling. Only when the fat heroine is acknowledged as a generous/good fatty is the hero willing to perform “gentlemanly” masculinity toward her. Later in the chapter, I will return to discuss the archetype of the “good fatty” that Pannarai uses to justify why her fat heroine deserves to be loved, accepted, and treated with respect and care by the fat-phobic hero.

The word *suphapburut* (gentleman) derives from *suphap* (polite) and *burut* (the formal word for men).<sup>32</sup> The meaning of “gentleman” has evolved over time in Thailand according to social and cultural contexts. Saharot Kittimahacharoen explores the concept of the “gentleman” in the literary works written by King Rama VI (1881–1925) and Sriburapha (1905–1974), one of Thailand’s most well-known authors.<sup>33</sup> From his exploration of King Rama VI’s selected literary works,<sup>34</sup> Kittimahacharoen contends that the term “gentleman” during the period of King Rama VI’s reign accords with the masculinity of male aristocrats, which was strongly influenced by what the king believed to be the Victorian model of gentlemanliness. Gentlemanliness only belongs to men of refined birth. The characteristics of a “gentleman” in King Rama VI’s literary works seek to identify a gentleman as a noble person who devotes himself to and sacrifices himself for his family, society, nation, and king. The gentleman in King Rama VI’s works must be brave, able to exert self-control, and know how to treat “ladies” properly. However, Sriburapha constructs the term “gentleman” in a different manner. Kittimahacharoen argues that Sriburapha constructs the heroes in his selected novels as gentlemen who do not have to be born into the noble class, but possess certain qualities that have been considered ideal since the abolition of the absolute monarchy and change to democracy in 1932. From this point on, all

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<sup>32</sup> *Poo-chai* is the casual everyday word for men.

<sup>33</sup> Saharot Kittimahacharoen, “Development of Masculinity and Social Change,” (paper presented at the Literature and Comparative Literature International Conference, Bangkok, August 18–19, 2010), pp. 2–3 (in Thai); Kittimahacharoen, “From Knights to Gentlemen: From Victorian England to Siam,” in *Study of History and Criticism of Thai and Foreign Literatures*, ed. Suradech Chotiudompan (Bangkok: Sangsan Books, 2012), pp. 233–256 (in Thai); Kittimahacharoen, “‘Gentleman’ in the literary works of King Rama VI and Sriburapha,” PhD thesis, (Chulalongkorn University, 2008) (in Thai).

<sup>34</sup> King Rama VI, *Huajai Nakrob*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. (Bangkok: Kurusapha, 1978); *Huajai Chainum* (Bangkok: Kow-Na, 1974); *Pukjai Seuapa* (Bangkok: Chuan-Pim, 1987).

people are supposedly regarded as equal.<sup>35</sup> Kittimahacharoen contends that in Sriburapha's selected novels,<sup>36</sup> a common man can become a "gentleman" if he sacrifices himself for other people (where the author stresses that "people" are civilians), puts other people's interests above his own, respects everyone as equal, and treats women appropriately.

The construction of a "gentleman" through the portrayal of Akekasit, I argue, seems to lean slightly toward King Rama VI's definition. The hero's gentlemanly masculinity is chiefly defined by his upper-class upbringing. Pilaipan, Akekasit's mother, was brought up in an old-rich noble family, in contrast to the fat heroine's new-rich merchant family. Throughout the novel, the hero is known to be a gentleman with a generous heart who was raised by a woman of refined birth. He is taught by *Khun-Ying*<sup>37</sup> Pilaipan to "endlessly give"<sup>38</sup> and to help poor people all the time (*PI*, 33).

Interestingly, Wattana, the suitor from a nouveau riche family, is never associated with the term *suphaphurut* (gentleman) in the text. His masculinity is never assessed, belittled, or complimented with reference to gentlemanliness. The fat heroine describes Wattana to Sirinuch as follows: "He's not *auan* [fat], but rather *auab* [chubby]. He's so weird...he lets me eat" (*PI*, 18).<sup>39</sup> During the first scene in which Wattana appears in the novel, he already produces a statement that fulfills my fantasy when consuming fat romance novels. He drives to see Sophitnapa in his fancy expensive car with a box of cake that the heroine likes. Despite the

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<sup>35</sup> On June 24, 1932, *Khana Ratsadon*, the People's Party, with Pridi Banomyong as the leader of the civilian faction, staged a lightning coup that abruptly ended 150 years of absolute monarchy under the Chakri Dynasty within a three-hour period. *Khana Ratsadon* carried out this bloodless coup against King Rama VII (who ruled from 1925–1935) with the help of like-minded military officers. They semi-successfully transformed the country's absolute monarchy into a constitutional monarchy. The idea that those of royal blood do not have any more rights than people of other social classes served as the central ideology behind the coup. However, the Chakri Dynasty has regained its power with funding from the USA to use in mass propaganda constructing the king as an untouchable god during the period of King Rama IX (ruling from 1946–2016) onward. See Chris Baker and Pasuk Phongpaichit, *A History of Thailand* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014).

<sup>36</sup> Sriburapha, *Lukpoochai* (Bangkok: Dok-Ya, 2002); *Huajai Pradtana* (Bangkok: Matichon, 2005); *Pa Nai Cheevit*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Bangkok: Dok-Ya, 1992).

<sup>37</sup> The title of *Khun-Ying* is more or less equivalent to Lady.

<sup>38</sup> คุณหญิงพิไลพรรณทุ่มเทกับงานสังคมเต็มที่ ทั้งความพร้อมทุกด้านทั้งเวลาโอกาสและเงิน คำว่า 'คุณหญิง' ที่ได้มา...ก็เพราะความดีนี้ละ จึงตั้งใจทำงานจนกว่าจะหมดแรงแรง ตอนนี้อะไรให้ท่านออกหน้า มักจะสำเร็จ; คุณหญิงมีแต่ 'ให้' จึงเป็นที่รักของทุกคน

<sup>39</sup> "คุณวัฒนาเป็นอะไรที่แปลกมาก เขาไม่ช้วนแต่ตัวมและสนับสนุนให้โสกินและกิน"

heroine's mother telling him to stop buying desserts for her fat daughter, Wattana simply replies: "If she likes to eat, let her eat" (*PI*, 29).<sup>40</sup>

I argue that the way in which Pannarai constructs Akekasit as a gentleman, and Wattana as not a gentleman, is related to the author's fat phobia. At a fundraising event run by the hero's mother, Sirinuch sees Wattana and Sophitnapa busily putting food on their plates at the buffet counter. She tells Tawat, the hero's brother, whom she will soon be dating: "Wattana loves the heroine in the *wrong* way. He encourages Sophitnapa to eat as she pleases. I'm so concerned about her health" (*PI*, 176; emphasis added).<sup>41</sup> Later, Akekasit meets the heroine in the buffet line while she is putting desserts on her plate. He ponders in private: "Oh gosh...I'm scared [for her health]. She only picks fatty food and doesn't choose any fruits."<sup>42</sup> The hero then warns Sophitnapa: "Watch your weight. You'll die young" (*PI*, 179).<sup>43</sup>

The fat woman is represented in this novel as – in Samantha Murray's terms – "a compulsive eater," "a physical[...] failure," and "not willing to commit to change or live up to the dictates of healthy living."<sup>44</sup> The fat female body of Sophitnapa needs to be scrutinized and controlled by a male figure of authority and reason, regardless of her consent. In this scene, the author is clearly pitting the two men and their approach to Sophitnapa against one another. The "chubby" secondary male character who allows the fat heroine to eat will never be granted the title of a gentleman. The "gentlemanly" hero in this Thai fat romance novel, I contend, is thus one who is able to love the fat heroine in the *right* way; he is the man who discourages her from reckless eating which, according to the narrator, can cause premature death.

Pannarai utilizes a very different strategy to how Jamison and Murphy construct their heroes' reaction toward the fat heroines' bodies. Unlike the selected US fat romance heroes, who cannot explicitly label the heroines as fat, the Thai hero directly speaks the word *auan* (the adjective that means fat in Thai), in the seemingly compulsory love declaration scene. In the novel, Akekasit

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<sup>40</sup> "ชอบก็ทานเถอะครับ ผมชอบคนอ้วน" เสี่ยววัฒนาพูดจากใจจริง

<sup>41</sup> "ฉันเป็นห่วงสุขภาพโต เสี่ยววัฒนาจับใส่แบบผิดๆ สนับสนุนให้กิน"

<sup>42</sup> เลยมองหล่อนคืบขนมหวานใส่จาน ไอ้โฮ...กลัวแทนเลย เลือกแต่ของอ้วน ไม่แตะต้องผลไม้และเย็นทานเลย

<sup>43</sup> "ระวังน้ำหนักนะครับ กลัวคุณอายุสั้น"

<sup>44</sup> Samantha Murray, *The "Fat" Female Body* (Hampshire and New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), pp. 4–5.

declares after Sophitnapa is close to becoming conventionally thin: “I love you just the way you are. You’re that cute fatty with a good personality” (P2, 317).<sup>45</sup> He goes on to repeat the same message, “No matter how fat you are, I will always love you”; “I love you...fat or thin. Some women are beautiful with a good figure, but their personalities are not nice,” and “You’re beautiful whether you’re fat or thin” (P2, 319).<sup>46</sup> The novel ends with a similar concluding statement, “No matter how fat or thin she is, he will always love her” (P2, 320).<sup>47</sup> Ironically and crucially, the hero only declares all of these feelings, which can be summed up in one sentence, “I love you despite your fatness/regardless of your size” when the fat heroine is already in the process of becoming conventionally thin through starvation and hardcore exercise. Here, I would contend that Akekasit is only able to love the fat heroine when she is no longer considered a “bad” fatty, who refuses to control her appetite, has no willpower to lose weight, and refuses to “live up to the dictates of healthy living.”<sup>48</sup>

### **“A Gentleman Who Admires the Beauty of Mothers-to-be”<sup>49</sup>: The “Monk-like” Gentlemanly Hero**

Pinyada’s *Rak Tem Lon*<sup>50</sup> is written in the third person, mainly from the heroine’s point of view. Piruna, the fat heroine from an upper-class family, is mistakenly understood to be pregnant by Peerakorn, the hero from a different wealthy family. The fat heroine has a sweet face, long lashes, perfect eyebrows without the need for an eyebrow pencil, and bright and flawless skin with no use of cosmetics (*RTL*, 7). Her beauty is recognized by men in her college who have seen her face as the type of beauty “granted by heaven,”<sup>51</sup> as though she were “an angel

<sup>45</sup> “ผมรักคุณที่คุณเป็นคน โสภิตนภา สาวอ้วนที่น่ารัก...นิสัยดี...”

<sup>46</sup> “จะอ้วนอย่างไรผมก็รัก”; “ผมรักคุณ...อ้วนหรือผอม ผมก็รัก...ถึงบางคนสวย หุ่นดี...แต่นิสัยไม่ดี ผมก็รับไม่ได้...ผมเลือกคุณเพราะเป็นคุณ คุณสวยมาก ไม่ว่าอ้วนผอมคุณก็เป็นคนสวย...”

<sup>47</sup> โสภิตนภา...พะไลทรงเครื่อง...หล่อหน้าจะเป็นสาวสวยของเอกสิทธิ์...ตราบลิ้นลมหายใจ... ไม่ว่าอ้วนหรือผอม...เขาก็รักหล่อหน้า

<sup>48</sup> Murray, *The “Fat” Female Body*, pp. 4–5.

<sup>49</sup> สุภาพบุรุษผู้มีรสนิยมชื่นชมผู้หญิงที่กำลังจะเป็นแม่คน (See the synopsis on the back cover.)

<sup>50</sup> Some Thai romance authors prefer to create pennames with no last name.

<sup>51</sup> ใบหน้าหวานๆ ที่สวรรค์ประทานมาให้

reincarnated in human form”<sup>52</sup> (*RTL*, 8). However, those men change their minds once they see her fat body. They think that she is indeed “a female giant”<sup>53</sup> reincarnated as human, not an angel after all (*RTL*, 8).

Piruna has attempted to lose weight several times, but does not want to starve herself or do intensive exercise (*RTL*, 14). She eventually vows to stay single rather than be with a man who only judges her worth based on physical appearance (*RTL*, 8). While at the shopping mall, the heroine crashes into the hero, who believes he has hurt a pregnant woman. Interestingly, there is an element of slapstick in the scene when the protagonists meet each other for the first time, similar to the scene in *Palosongkrueng*. As a result of the accident, the fat heroine cannot walk without extra help. The hero decides to move into the same apartment building with her to take care of her everyday life. The heroine eventually lies to him that she is pregnant and single as he starts to question where her husband is. They eventually end up dating because they share the same taste in food and movies, but break up when the hero discovers that she is not pregnant after all, just fat. The hero decides to take revenge on the heroine by demanding that she lose fifteen kilograms within three months if she still wants to be with him (*RTL*, 160).<sup>54</sup> The heroine agrees to this condition because of her love for him, and successfully becomes thinner. At the end of the novel, the two protagonists get married, and the heroine becomes pregnant a few months later.

Directly before their first meeting, Piruna walks past the maternity wear store and is captivated by the beauty of one particular maternity dress. The memory of her mother’s maternity dress, which she found in the storage room six years before, comes rushing back. That day she decided to put on her mother’s “light pinkish purple airy frilly lace”<sup>55</sup> pregnancy dress right away (*RTL*, 10). In the mirror, Piruna enjoyed gazing at the reflection of “a beautiful young mother” (*RTL*, 10).<sup>56</sup> She exclaimed inside her head that she was “finding it hard to believe that she could

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<sup>52</sup> รวมนางฟ้าจุติลงมาเกิด

<sup>53</sup> นางยักษ์ (ขมุขี)

<sup>54</sup> “ข้อสอง น้ำฝนต้องลดความอ้วนสิบห้ากิโลกรัมภายในเวลาสามเดือน” ถ้าข้อแรกคือการลงดาบ ข้อนี้ก็ไม่ต้องต่างจากการปิดฝาโดง ผึ้งเธอให้ตายทั้งเป็นไปพร้อมกับความเจ็บปวด

<sup>55</sup> เดรสสีม่วงอ่อนคอนไปทางชมพูแสนหวาน เดรสสีหวานเนื้อผ้าพลิ้วเพิ่มความหวานด้วยลูกไม้ระบายสองชั้นบริเวณหน้าอก

<sup>56</sup> กระจกเงาบานยาวในห้องนอนบัดนี้สะท้อนภาพคุณแม่ยังสาวและสวย



become this beautiful”<sup>57</sup>: “Oh my gosh! If I were really pregnant, I would have been the most beautiful mom-to-be in the world!” (*RTL*, 10).<sup>58</sup> When Piruna sees the cream maternity dress with “sweet lace” and “tiny, lovely flower hemline”<sup>59</sup> at the store, she is “hypnotized”<sup>60</sup> by its prettiness and wants to try it on (*RTL*, 23–24). The fat heroine then decides to buy the dress once she sees how she can immediately turn into “a beautiful young mother”<sup>61</sup> again (*RTL*, 10). Maternity clothes seem to possess the magical power of turning “an ugly fat woman”<sup>62</sup> (*RTL*, 37, 108) into a “beautiful mother”<sup>63</sup> (*RTL*, 10, 24) in a second.

Meredith Nash contends that maternity outfits are “central” to the construction of identity for women during pregnancy.<sup>64</sup> When the female store clerk initially sees Piruna in a T-shirt and jeans entering the shop, she regards her as “just a fat woman” (*RTL*, 25).<sup>65</sup> However, after the heroine puts the maternity dress on, the store clerk’s perception of her changes, and she sincerely compliments Piruna on being “a very beautiful mother”<sup>66</sup> (*RTL*, 25). The maternity clothes that the heroine and her mother have chosen to wear, I argue, reinforce traditional femininity as the central identity for their wearers to embody. The two maternity dresses mentioned above are pinkish purple and cream, respectively, with airy, frilly, light, lace patterns. Conventionally feminine colors and patterns such as these, Jennifer Musial contends, portray women as “juvenile” and “girlish.”<sup>67</sup> The designs of the maternity clothes that the heroine and her mother have chosen to wear construct seemingly or genuinely pregnant women as sweet, youthful, infantilized, and delicate. Both pregnant and fat bodies can be perceived as transgressing “spatial

<sup>57</sup> พิรุณามองตัวเองอย่างตกตะลึง แทบไม่เชื่อสายตาว่าเธอจะสามารถงามได้ปานนี้

<sup>58</sup> พระเจ้าช่วย! ถ้าฉันท้องแล้วเป็นแบบนี้ ฉันคงเป็นว่าคุณแม่ที่สวยงามที่สุดในโลก

<sup>59</sup> เดรสคลุมท้องสีครีมไหล่ลูกไม้สีหวาน เพิ่มความสดใสน่ารักที่การพันต์ลายดอกไม้กระจุมกระจิมตรงชายกระโปรง

<sup>60</sup> ราวกับถูกสะกดจิต พิรุณาเรียกหาพนักงานขายแสดงความต้องการที่จะซอลองใส่ชุดที่หมายตาตุ้กครั้ง

<sup>61</sup> คุณแม่ยังสาวและสวย

<sup>62</sup> ความอ้วนอันน่าเกลียด; แล้วถ้าเขาารู้ว่าเธออ้วน ภาพมายาที่เขาพึ่งทะนุถนอมเธอก็จะหายไป ภาพของผู้หญิงอ้วนๆ ที่แสนน่าเกลียดก็จะเข้ามาแทนที่

<sup>63</sup> คุณแม่ยังสาวและสวย; เธอกลายเป็นคุณแม่ยังสาวหน้าหวานได้ทันตาเมื่อได้สวมชุดนี้

<sup>64</sup> Meredith Nash, *Making “Postmodern” Mothers: Pregnant Embodiment, Baby Bumps and Body Image* (Basingstoke, New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), p. 90.

<sup>65</sup> แรกที่เห็นนั้นเข้าใจว่าคุณลูกค้าท่านนี้แค่สาวอวบอ้วนคนหนึ่ง เพราะใส่เสื้อยัดกางเกงยีนสบายๆ

<sup>66</sup> “พอดีเลยนะคะ คุณแม่ใส่แล้วดูสวยมากเลยคะ โชคดีจัง คอลเล็กชั่นนี้ไม่มีอีกแล้ว เหลือชุดนี้ชุดเดียว” เธอเอ่ยชมด้วยใจจริง ไม่ใช่สักแต่ว่าจะขายของให้ออกเพื่อทำผลงาน

<sup>67</sup> Jennifer Musial, “‘Pregnancy Chic’: The Marketing of Maternity Wear,” *Journal of the Motherhood Initiative for Research and Community Involvement* 5, no. 1 (2003): 159–171 (162).

and cultural boundaries.”<sup>68</sup> The large and protruding female body refuses to conform to “spatial standards” by taking up more physical space than the ideal female body is supposed to. Maternity dresses made in feminine patterns, colors, and designs are thus able to contain and regulate the transgressive female body within the “normalized” and acceptable version of femininity.<sup>69</sup>

The fat female body in a feminized maternity dress, once mistaken as pregnant, is not only admired by the store clerk, but also by the hero himself. The heroine eventually has to wear the dress outside the store when the zipper on her jeans breaks. When Peerakorn sees Piruna in a maternity dress, with her distended belly, he quickly takes her for pregnant. He exclaims to himself, “Oh My Buddha! I bumped into a pregnant woman!” (*RTL*, 27).<sup>70</sup> Once Peerakorn has gently helped Piruna to stand up and gets to see her face clearly, the hero cannot hide his facial expression, unveiling his appreciation of her beauty. Narrated in the third person through his eyes, the hero evaluates this mother-to-be as more beautiful than the “standard” that he sets for his dream woman (*RTL*, 28).<sup>71</sup> Peerakorn is described on the book’s back cover as “a gentleman who admires the beauty of mothers-to-be.”<sup>72</sup> The hero perceives his mother as having been most beautiful when she was pregnant: “Her skin was bright and not swollen at all. Her face looked bright and lively. The photo album of his pregnant mom has always impressed him. That’s why his beauty standard for women has derived from his own pregnant mom” (*RTL*, 18).<sup>73</sup> Maternity wear thus makes the fat female body acceptable and later desirable for the hero after the heroine lies by saying that she is a pregnant single mom (*RTL*, 36).<sup>74</sup> If this fat romance novel were published in the west, his aesthetic appreciation of pregnant women could certainly be viewed through the lens of a distinctly Oedipal attraction to his mother. However, this oedipal narrative

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<sup>68</sup> Ibid., p. 159.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid., p. 162.

<sup>70</sup> คุณพระช่วย! เราชนผู้หญิงท้อง!

<sup>71</sup> ชัดพอที่จะให้ใครบางคนได้ตะลึงในความงามของว่าคุณแม่คนสวย สวย! ใช่ว่า...เธอสวย พิรกรตกตะลึงกับความงามในระดับ ‘เกินค่ามาตรฐาน’ ที่เขาตั้งเอาไว้

<sup>72</sup> สุภาพบุรุษผู้มีรสนิยมชื่นชมผู้หญิงที่กำลังจะเป็นแม่คน

<sup>73</sup> มารดาของเขาสมัยที่ตั้งครรภ์เขาและพี่น้องรวมถึงสามท้องนั้นสวยวันสวยคืน สวยกว่ายามที่ไม่ได้ท้องเสียอีก ผิวผ่องผุดผาด ไม่มีหมอง ไม่บวมหน้า หน้าตาสดใส อัลบั้มรูปคอลเล็กชันของแม่แก่วายมที่ตั้งครรภ์ช่างประทับใจเขาเหลือเกิน ด้วยเหตุนี้มาตรฐานความสวยของผู้หญิงที่เขาตั้งไว้จึงมาจากแม่แก่วายของเขาล้วนๆ

<sup>74</sup> “ฝนเป็นซิงเกิลมัคคะ” พิรุณาเริ่มกังวล เธอไม่ชอบโกหกเพราะมันจะเป็นภาระภายหลัง เกรงจะจำไม่ได้ว่าไปปิดมดเท็จเอาไว้อย่างไรบ้าง

does not exist in a Thai context. The narrator casually calls the hero's aesthetic admiration of pregnant women "sort of bizarre" (*RTL*, 18).<sup>75</sup> The way in which Peerakorn "admires the beauty of mothers-to-be"<sup>76</sup> is considered acceptable in the novel because it serves as the main plot device to explain why the hero falls for/can fall for the fat heroine, whom he misreads as pregnant in the first place.

Piruna ponders to herself that Peerakorn is a "monk-like gentleman"<sup>77</sup> when the hero tells her that he wants to take care of her everyday life until she can walk properly again. As a "monk-like gentleman," the hero feels the need to take care of this single pregnant woman whom he has accidentally hurt because she has difficulty in walking. He not only moves to live in the same serviced apartment as her, but buys necessary items for the mother-to-be and her fetus, such as food that she's craving and maternity clothes. The first maternity dress that Peerakorn buys as a gift for the heroine has certain specific functions that are not used to describe the two maternity dresses Piruna has worn before. The pink dress that the hero buys has a bow that tightens under her breasts, "highlighting what is supposed to be highlighted"<sup>78</sup> while the flared skirt hides what is supposed to be hidden – her double belly (*RTL*, 54).<sup>79</sup> The "perfect" pregnant body in the eyes of the hero is a sexualized one that includes noticeably large breasts which are "the ultimate sign of feminine beauty"<sup>80</sup> and a tight, contained, big round belly due to the growing baby, not a double stomach due to excessive fat.<sup>81</sup>

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<sup>75</sup> พิภพมีทัศนคติเกี่ยวกับความงามของผู้หญิงแบบแปลกๆ: ลองมีมาตรฐานที่พิลึกพิลั่นอย่างนี้ ชาตินี้เขาคงไม่มีภรรยาเป็นแน่แท้ เพราะโอกาสที่เขาจะประทับใจสาวไหนคงจะยากเป็นพิเศษ แล้วเขาก็ไม่ได้ดูตริที่จะคิดไปจีบคนท้อง

<sup>76</sup> สุภาพบุรุษผู้มีรสนิยมชื่นชมผู้หญิงที่กำลังจะเป็นแม่คน (See the back cover)

<sup>77</sup> [สุภาพบุรุษ]ราวกับเป็น[พ่อ]พระผู้กรุณย์ต่อสรรพสัตว์

<sup>78</sup> เมื่อรัดโบได้ฐานอก เน้นส่วนที่ควรเน้น

<sup>79</sup> กระโปรงทรงบานช่วยบดบังหน้าท้องที่ยื่นออกมาเกินมาตรฐานและพาให้ไม่มีใครใส่ใจว่ามันจะยื่นมากหรือน้อย

<sup>80</sup> Nash, *Making "Postmodern" Mothers*, pp. 53–54.

<sup>81</sup> Jennifer Lee, "'You Will Face Discrimination': Fatness, Motherhood, and the Medical Profession," *Fat Studies* 9, no. 1 (2020): 1–16 (6). In her autoethnographic article, Jennifer Lee, a fat studies scholar, remarks that, despite her weight gain during pregnancy, nobody recognized that she was pregnant until the eighth month unless she informed them. She argues that this was because she did not "develop that traditionally seen pregnant stomach silhouette"; she still had a "'double' stomach" that "never became one big round shape," which is perceived as the ideal pregnant body for normative-sized women.

Fat and pregnant women are conventionally desexualized.<sup>82</sup> Musial further explains: “Female sexuality is denied to the pregnant woman as [she] must renounce her sexual desire while pregnant or risk social vilification as her own needs are to be secondary to that of the fetus.”<sup>83</sup> However, the maternity dress that the hero has bought sexualizes Piruna’s fat female body, which he has mistaken as pregnant. The maternity dress he buys for her does not make the heroine become “a youthful beautiful mother,”<sup>84</sup> but turns her into “a sweet and sexy mother-to-be”<sup>85</sup> instead (*RTL*, 10, 24, 54). In that moment, the pink dress chosen by the hero enables the “pseudo mother[-to-be]”<sup>86</sup> to regain her identity as a sexual female being (*RTL*, 26). The fat female body in this novel can be sexualized only when it is clothed in a sexualized maternity dress that enables it to be read as pregnant.

I would contend that Peerakorn embodies the combined version of both *pra* (monk) and upper-class *suphaphurut* (gentleman) masculinities. Initially, the heroine does not use the term “monk-like” gentleman to define the hero’s masculinity. When he softly touches her sprained ankle just to check if it is ok, the heroine is blown away by “a warm aura radiating out from this manly man”<sup>87</sup> and “the way he acts as though he doesn’t care how fat she is”<sup>88</sup> (*RTL*, 29). Piruna considers Peerakorn’s version of masculinity to be highly manly and desirable:

Oh! He’s super manly. He’s so gentle, unarrogant, kind, good looking, but not too handsome. Casually dressed in a T-shirt and jeans. Almost messy, but not really. I find him so arousing that I want to scream so loud that the whole world can hear right now! (*RTL*, 29).<sup>89</sup>

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<sup>82</sup> Murray, “Locating Aesthetics: Sexing the Fat Woman,” *Social Semiotics* 14, no. 3 (2004): 237–247 (239); Musial, “‘Pregnancy Chic’: The Marketing of Maternity Wear,” p. 164.

<sup>83</sup> Musial, “‘Pregnancy Chic’: The Marketing of Maternity Wear,” p. 164.

<sup>84</sup> คุณแม่ยังสาวและสวย; เธอกลายเป็นคุณแม่ยังสาวหน้าหวานได้ทันตาเมื่อได้สวมชุดนี้

<sup>85</sup> ไม่คิดเลยว่าเธอจะกลายเป็นว่าคุณแม่ที่ดูหวานปนเซ็กซี่

<sup>86</sup> คุณแม่แปลกปลอม

<sup>87</sup> ตะลึงกับความอบอุ่นที่แผ่รัศมีออกมาจากชายชาติตรี

<sup>88</sup> ตะลึงกับกิริยาที่ดูเหมือนจะไม่ใส่ใจว่าเธอจะอ้วนมากน้อยแค่ไหน

<sup>89</sup> โอว! แมนโคตร แมนโอเวอร์ ผู้ชายคนนี้ช่างอ่อนโยนเหลือเกิน ไม่ถือเนื้อถือตัว มีน้ำใจ หน้าตาทำทางก็ดี ไม่ใช่คนหล่อเนี้ยบ แต่เสี่ยวยืดที่เซ็กซี่ทางเก๋ๆ แต่งตัวง่ายๆ สบายๆ เหมือนจะชกมากแต่ก็ไม่ใช่ ไม่หล่อ แต่เริ่ใจ...กรี๊ด! อยากรจะกรี๊ดร้องให้ก้องโลก

After he has fed and cared for her continuously, the fat heroine deeply appreciates the hero's kindness and ponders in private: "This man has such a good heart, as though he were a monk. He's been helping her and concerned about her well-being all the time. He's such a monk-like gentleman."<sup>90</sup> (*RTL*, 89). Even the hero questions his new version of masculinity after meeting the heroine. Peerakorn asks himself: "When did he become a monk-like man? He's never been this kind before. Calling a woman [after a long tiresome day] just to ask whether she wants to eat something is not something he would normally do"<sup>91</sup> (*RTL*, 67). This scene is similar to how Mike learns to express himself through Ellis in *Dangerous Curves Ahead*. The way in which Peerakorn reflects on his new type of masculinity is constructed on the basis of the popular romance formula in which the heroine is capable of transforming her hero into a better man, regardless of cultural context.<sup>92</sup>

Peerakorn's performance of "gentlemanly" masculinity is depicted in a specific way in the novel. His gentlemanliness is still associated with upper-class wealth, leaning toward King Rama VI's definition, but without any explicit indication of "being high born" or "having royal links," as with Akekasit's gentlemanliness.<sup>93</sup> The keyword that is repeatedly used to describe Peerakorn's gentlemanly masculinity is *por pra*, which literally translates as a "monk-like" man, or the English equivalence of a saintly man. Pattana Kitiarsa contends that there are various male identities and versions of Thai masculinities. He explains: "The forms and practices of masculinity in modern Thailand are plural, fluid, highly contested, and contingent upon specific historical and cultural contexts."<sup>94</sup> Although Kitiarsa argues that there is "no singular, fixed, overgeneralized" Thai masculinity, he nevertheless suggests that various types of Thai

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<sup>90</sup> อยู่ๆ เธอก็รู้สึกซาบซึ้ง ผู้ชายอะไรจิตใจแสนดีราวกับสุภาพบุรุษพ่อพระ คอยช่วยเหลือเป็นห่วงเป็นใยสารพัด

<sup>91</sup> เอहनอเขากลายเป็นพ่อพระผู้เมตตาตั้งแต่เมื่อไร เรื่องหยุมหยิมอย่างนี้ปกติไม่เคยทำ ที่โทรหาเธอก็เพราะไม่แน่ใจว่าเธอจะถือสากับอาหารค้างคืนหรือเปล่า เพราะว่าเขาจะกลับนิคม กว่าเธอจะได้ทานก็น่าจะเป็นมื้อเย็นของอีกวัน

<sup>92</sup> Doreen Owens Malek, "Mad, Bad, and Dangerous to Know: The Hero as Challenge" in *Dangerous Men and Adventurous Women*, ed. Jayne Ann Krentz (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1992), pp. 73–80 (p. 75); Robyn Donald, "Mean, Moody, and Magnificent: The Hero in Romance Literature," in *Dangerous Men and Adventurous Women*, pp. 81–84 (pp. 82–83).

<sup>93</sup> Natawan Wongchalard, "Heroes and Representations of Masculinity in Thai Action Films," *Manusya* 22 (2019): 34–53 (40).

<sup>94</sup> Pattana Kitiarsa, "'Lives of Hunting Dogs': *Muai Thai* and the Politics of Thai Masculinities," *South East Asia Research* 13, no. 1 (2005): 57–90 (59).

masculinities are derived from *nakleng* (a ruffian, a rogue) and *pra* (a monk), “two contrasting extremes” that construct what it means to be male in the Theravadin Buddhist Thai society.<sup>95</sup> In this society, only men are allowed to gain admission to monkhood<sup>96</sup> and are able to accumulate *kuson* (“merit”). By entering monkhood and maintaining Buddhist precepts, he can perform good deeds to “tilt [his] karmic balance toward the positive”<sup>97</sup> and earn faster access to heaven than men who are not ordained and women, who cannot be ordained at all. Possessing the version of masculinity that resembles the ideal state of monkhood would seemingly be superior to having any other type of masculinity in a Buddhist Thai society.

Nidhi Eiewswiwong, another Thai masculinity scholar, suggests that there are two contrasting types of masculinity in Thai fiction: a *nakleng* (a ruffian, a rogue) and an aristocratic *suphapburut* (a gentleman).<sup>98</sup> Kitiarsa and Eiewswiwong consider that monkhood and aristocratic/upper-class gentlemanliness represent ideal Thai masculinity, in opposition to *nakleng*, the working-class masculinity with “an unofficial, vernacular way of life.”<sup>99</sup> Peerakorn’s masculinity is thus constructed by combining two versions of ideal Thai masculinity: an upper-class *suphapburut* and a good-hearted, monk-like man. Peerakorn’s economically superior status as an upper-class *suphapburut* and his good heart resembling a monk allow him to possess the most ideal form of masculinity in this Thai fat romance novel.

Peerakorn’s “monk-like” masculinity is also recognized, admired, and approved of by other male characters in the novel – the heroine’s father and his own father. When Piruna misunderstands and believes that Peerakorn is already dating Warintara, the thin female antagonist, she wraps up her work in Thailand earlier than expected and returns to the USA without informing Peerakorn. The hero decides to ask his parents for help to track her down by lying that she is pregnant with his baby (*RTL*, 121). The heroine eventually confesses to both her own and the hero’s family that

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<sup>95</sup> Kitiarsa, “Lives of Hunting Dogs,” p. 60.

<sup>96</sup> Women can be ordained as nuns, but never as monks. In Buddhist hierarchy, nuns are less significant and have lower status than monks in the temple.

<sup>97</sup> Nancy Eberhardt, “Rite of Passage or Ethnic Festival? Shan Buddhist Novice Ordinations in Northern Thailand,” *Contemporary Buddhism* 10, no. 1 (2009): 51–63 (56).

<sup>98</sup> Nidhi Eiewswiwong, “Gentleman vs. Ruffian, Characteristics of Thai Fictional Protagonists,” *Matichon Weekly* 30, no. 1575 (2010): 22–28 (in Thai). The author studies various genres of famous Thai novels, ranging from romance to drama, in order to make his claim.

<sup>99</sup> Wongchalard, “Heroes and Representations of Masculinity in Thai Action Films,” p. 40.

Peerakorn misunderstood the situation and came to believe that she was pregnant on the first day that they met. The fathers of the two protagonists are impressed that the hero is able to accept the role of father to the baby that he believes the woman he loves is having with another man (*RTL*, 153). The two fathers consider that the hero is truly *por pra* (a monk-like man), who “does not mind” being with “a woman who got impregnated by an unknown man” (*RTL*, 153, 156).<sup>100</sup> The heroine’s father thinks to himself that he needs to get this “monk-like” man as his son-in-law as soon as possible, while the hero’s father realizes that his son must really love the heroine because he is not normally a “monk-like” man, who is kind enough to accept another man’s baby as his own (*RTL*, 156).<sup>101</sup> Being able to be with a woman who was “impregnated by an unknown man” and being willing to raise another man’s child as his own are constructed as impressive virtues for a man to have. Not many men would be able to do the same, and the hero’s father calls his son’s action a “rare phenomenon”<sup>102</sup> (*RTL*, 153). When a man can behave in this way, he is thus considered to be a monk-like gentleman in the novel.

The hero’s monk-like gentlemanly masculinity is depicted as being susceptible to the heroine’s performance of femininity. When Peerakorn finds out that the heroine is not pregnant, he becomes extremely angry and acts coldly toward Piruna. He orders her to complete three tasks in order to regain his trust and his love. He tells the heroine to “immediately quit her job in the USA and permanently resettle in Thailand with him,” “lose 15 kilograms within three months,” and “cook for him whenever he wants” (*RTL*, 159, 160, 165).<sup>103</sup> His second and third requests are an attempt to restrict this transgressive fat female body from “unnecessarily” taking up too much space and reassure him that it will be securely locked up in the feminine domestic sphere. When Piruna hears the hero’s demands, she feels as though her heart were “crushed into tiny pieces in his hands.” She is yearning for “the old version of Peerakorn, who was gentle and

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<sup>100</sup> “ไม่ได้การแล้ว อย่งไรเราก็ต้องคว่าเจ้ากอล์ฟมาเป็นลูกเขยให้ได้ ดูลิดู! มันรักน้ำฝนถึงเพียงนี้ ท้องกับใครมาก็ไม่รู้ ก็ยังรับสมอ้างไม่จริงเกียจ; “ใช่แล้วพี่ชั้น ถ้าไอ้กอล์ฟไม่รักน้ำฝน มันจะยอมลงทุนถึงขนาดนี้หรือ ตั้งใจโกหกญาติโกโหติกาทั้งตระกูลรับสมอ้างเป็นพ่อของลูก มันโกหกทั้งพ่อและแม่ของมันของมันเสียวนะ ยอมมองข้ามไม่ถึงสร้างเกียจ มันเป็นพ่อพระขนาดนี้ นับว่าเป็นปรากฏการณ์ที่หายากในสามโลก”

<sup>101</sup> “ไอ้กอล์ฟ ลองถามใจตัวเองซิว่าถ้าเป็นผู้หญิงคนอื่น แกจะออกหน้ารับรองเด็กอย่างนี้ใหม่ ที่ทำไปเพราะอะไร แกไม่ใช่คนใจดีเป็นพ่อพระขนาดนั้น ถ้ายังเสือกคิดไม่ออกชั้นจะช่วยเอาไม้มาเคาะหัวแกให้ซีลื้อยมันหลุดออกมาเอง”

<sup>102</sup> “...นับว่าเป็นปรากฏการณ์ที่หายากในสามโลก”

<sup>103</sup> “ข้อหนึ่ง น้ำฝนต้องลาออกจากงานที่นี้แล้วกลับเมืองไทยพร้อมพี่ทันที; “ข้อสอง น้ำฝนต้องลดความอ้วนสิบห้ากิโลกรัมภายในเวลาสามเดือน; “ข้อสาม น้ำฝนต้องทำกับข้าวให้พี่ทานทุกมื้อที่พี่อยากจะทำ”

treated her with tenderness and care,” not the new version of him that she refers to as “an evil demon” (*RTL*, 161, 194).<sup>104</sup> Piruna later concludes that the hero only chooses to display his “monk-like” masculinity when he is with the “pregnant” Piruna, but not with the fat Piruna (*RTL*, 194).<sup>105</sup> The hero never once became irritated by the heroine’s fat body when he believed it contained a fetus. He never once told Piruna to lose weight during the time when he thought she was pregnant. He even permitted her to eat as much as she liked: “You’re fat out of necessity. You can’t compare them [being fat due to overeating with being fat due to feeding the baby]” (*RTL*, 50).<sup>106</sup> Piruna even feels “liberated” to devour food in front of the hero who has mistaken her fat body for pregnant: “Being perceived as pregnant permits her to be as voracious as she likes” (*RTL*, 68).<sup>107</sup> However, when Piruna is recognized as fat by the hero, she is embarrassed when her hungry stomach growls in front of him. She thinks to herself that, if she were still mistaken as pregnant, it would not be “ugly” for her body to make such a sound (*RTL*, 167).<sup>108</sup> Therefore, when the heroine’s fat body is mistaken as pregnant, she is excused from “the culturally accepted aesthetic norm of slimness” and is allowed to take “a break from the feminine ideal,”<sup>109</sup> as Musial explains:

While both bodies are large, the pregnant body is temporal [sic] and therefore accepted. As well, the end result of a pregnant body is a child, which reflects the biological imperative for women. So while pregnancy is sanctioned, fatness is not.<sup>110</sup>

Once the heroine is able to fulfil his three requests, which are associated with ideal femininity, the “monk-like” gentleman reappears to reward her with a wedding. Peerakorn is even kind enough to gain five more kilograms “for her sake” so that her thinner body, while not yet

<sup>104</sup> อสุรมาดร้าย; พิรุณาปวดแปลบ รู้สึกว่าหัวใจถูกบีบจนแหลกและคามือของเขา ทั้งน้อยใจ ทั้งเสียใจ โหยหาคุณพีคนเดิมผู้อ่อนโยน แต่ไม่มีอีกแล้ว...คุณพีผู้ปฏิบัติต่อคุณฝนอย่างนุ่มนวลทะนุถนอม

<sup>105</sup> เพียงแต่มันเป็นเพียงภาคของพ่อพระที่เขาเลือกใช้กับ ‘คุณฝน’

<sup>106</sup> “อย่างคุณฝนต้องเรียกว่าอ้วนเพราะจำเป็นครับ เามาเปรียบกันได้อย่างไร”

<sup>107</sup> อีกทั้งฐานะเธอเวลานี้คือสตรีมีครรภ์ ตะกละอย่างไรก็ไม่น่าเกลียด

<sup>108</sup> อยู่ๆ เสียงแปลกปลอมก็แทรกขึ้นมา เสียงทำนองร้องครี๊ดคราด จะเป็นของใครได้อีกถ้าไม่ใช่ของเธอ พิรุณาหน้าแดง รู้สึกอับอายจนไม่รู้ว่าจะเอาหน้ามุดหนีไปที่ไหนดี ครั้งก่อนอยู่ในควราบสตรีมีครรภ์ยอมไม่น่าเกลียด แต่นี้จะเอาเหตุผลอะไรมาสู้หน้าได้เล่า เธอเป็นแบบนี้แล้วเขายังรักเธอลงอยู่อีกหรือ

<sup>109</sup> Emma A. Harper and Geneviève Rail, “Contesting ‘Silhouettes of a Pregnant Belly’: Young Pregnant Women’s Discursive Constructions of the Body,” *Aporia* 3, no. 1 (2011): 5–14 (9).

<sup>110</sup> Musial, “‘Pregnancy Chic’: The Marketing of Maternity Wear,” p. 160.



conventionally thin, will be “compatible” with his body, which has always been in shape, on their wedding day (*RTL*, 199).<sup>111</sup> The heroine compliments the hero inside her head for no longer being “an evil demon”: “Awww! How sweet he is [for putting on weight for her]” (*RTL*, 199).<sup>112</sup> The novel ends with the heroine gazing at the reflection of a “very beautiful” four-month pregnant mother-to-be. She is now able to “rightfully”<sup>113</sup> wear the cream maternity dress with “sweet lace” and a “tiny, lovely flowery hemline” (*RTL*, 217). She thanks this maternity dress for bringing the “monk-like” gentleman into her life (*RTL*, 217).<sup>114</sup> As the heroine is able to eventually achieve and maintain an acceptable version of femininity, the hero will never have to exhibit his “demonic” masculinity to her again. He will only be a “monk-like” gentleman, the version of manhood that she has been yearning for since her lie was exposed. Hence, the hero’s masculinity, I argue, is malleable and selectively performed according to the heroine’s ability/inability to conform to traditional femininity. Only when the heroine is able to display ideal femininity and able to prove that she will not lose it through remaining on a perpetual diet, is she allowed to get the hero with his desirable masculinity as a life-long prize. However, if the heroine is unable to maintain this acceptable femininity in the future, she will surely be punished again with the “demonic” masculinity that she loathes.

It is interesting to observe how distinctly US and Thai hetero fat romance authors perceive what is “romantic” and “un-romantic” for the hero to speak to the heroine in terms of her fat body. While the US heroes in my selected novels will not acknowledge that the heroines are fat and insist that they are indeed beautiful, the Thai hero in *Palosongkrueng* directly calls the heroine fat and announces that he loves her *despite* how fat she is (*P2*, 319). As I have already pointed out, Akekasit ironically chooses to declare his love only when the heroine is in the process of becoming thin. I argue that this is merely lip service; he does not genuinely embrace the heroine’s body when it transgresses body norms. The US heroes choose to get rid of all the

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<sup>111</sup> “ห้ามดีอ เดี่ยวพี่ไม่มีเจ้าสาวเข้าพิธีกันพอดี ถ้ากังวลนักกว่าเราจะไม่สมกันล่ะก็ พี่จะเพิ่มน้ำหนักอีกหน่อยก็ได้ จะได้สมดุล”

<sup>112</sup> ตาย! พี่กอล์ฟช่างน่ารักอะไรเชื่อนี้

<sup>113</sup> พิรุณาหมუნกายอยู่น้ำกระจก อ่า...สวยจัง...สวยที่สุด หมุนซ้ายแล้วก็ยิ้ม หมุนขวาแล้วก็ยิ้ม เดรสคลุมท้องสีครีมไหลลู่กไม่แสนหวาน เห็นต์ลายดอกไม้ที่ชายกระโปรงกำลังอยู่บนตัวเธอ วันนี้เธอใส่มันได้อย่างขอบรรรม บัดนี้เธอท้องได้สี่เดือนแล้ว ยิ่งดูพิรุณาก็ยิ่งรู้สึกของตัวเองสวย..ไม่ใช่แค่สวยเฉยๆ แต่สวยมาก!

<sup>114</sup> พิรุณารู้สึกภูมิใจ เธอคิดถูกแล้ว เธอตัดสินใจไม่ผิดที่ซ้อมันมาตั้งแต่วันนั้น เพราะแบบสวยๆ อย่างนี้หาไม่ได้อีกแล้ว เธอรักชุดนี้ที่สุดแม้มันจะไม่ใช่อีที่โปรดปรานที่สุดก็ตาม รัก...เพราะมันเป็นชุดนำโชค ชุดที่นำพาผู้ชายคนหนึ่งี่แสนดีเข้ามาในชีวิต

complications that the term fat may bring by angrily forbidding the heroines from using the term fat, or by completely silencing the term when declaring their love. However, the Thai heroes have a more challenging task in continuing to utilize the term *auan* (fat) with caution. Akekasit can never say that he will love the heroine *despite* her fatness without specific “conditions” or extra “qualities” being demanded. The hero keeps adding extra adjectives and details to Sophitnapa’s fat body in order to justify why he loves/can love her. For him to love her, she can never be just a fatty. She needs to be a fatty with “cuteness,” “a good personality,” “generosity,” “confidence,” “activeness,” “a beautiful smile,” “a sweet face,” “a desire to help poor people,” and her family’s wealth from selling diamonds (P2, 192, 317, 318, 319).<sup>115</sup> And, even more crucially, she needs to be not fat by the end of the story in order to earn his love.

Similarly to Akekasit, Peerakorn, in the second selected Thai work, is only able to accept the fat female body when he mistakes it as pregnant. The hero only approves of the fat female body when it is in the process of fulfilling a “female biological duty” as a good fat body which he can still consider desirable. Interestingly, when Akekasit from the first Thai novel is asked by Sophitnapa whether he is afraid she will return to her former fat body in the future, the hero firmly replies: “Every pregnant woman has to be fat. We can let our babies call you Fat Mommy”<sup>116</sup> (P2, 319). This dialogue reveals that the Thai fat romance heroes in my two selected works can only accept the fat female bodies if they will only be fat as a temporary state or out of biologically reproductive necessity.

The pattern of the hero who announces that he loves the fat heroine *despite* her fatness, as in *Palosongkrueng*, also appears in Chakriya’s *My Fatty Girl*,<sup>117</sup> the Thai fat romance novel that I analyzed in Chapter 1. Pran, the hero whose fat phobia is described as a serious mental condition,<sup>118</sup> makes a similar declaration that he will love Muslin *despite* her fatness: “Although

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<sup>115</sup> หล่อนดูสุดใสน่ารัก เป็นสาวอ้วนที่มันใจกระฉับกระเฉง เป็นตัวของตัวเอง, ชอบเหลือเกินกับรอยยิ้มของหญิงสาวหน้าหวาน, สาวอ้วนที่น่ารักนี้เสียดี, “คุณทุ่มเทกับงานนี้ [งานบุญ], ‘ก็เป็นพะไลทรงเครื่องซะเลย... ลูกสาวเจ้าของร้านเพชร อ้วนด้วยรวยด้วย... ผมรับเลี้ยง’

<sup>116</sup> “คุณไม่กลัวฉันอ้วนหรือคะ” “พอคุณแต่งงานกับผม... มีลูก... ผู้หญิงตอนตั้งท้องต้องอ้วนทุกคน... คุณจะให้ลูกเราเรียกคุณว่าแม่อ้วนก็ได้...”

<sup>117</sup> Chakriya, *My Fatty Girl* (Bangkok: Pimkum Books, 2008), p. 427.

<sup>118</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 85. Pran’s fat phobia is described in the novel as a mental condition resulting from childhood trauma. As a small child, Pran was taken care of by an extremely fat nanny. One day, she accidentally sat on his puppy, given to him as a birthday gift from his maternal grandpa. The puppy died as a result. Later, the nanny also accidentally sat on him and inflicted much pain on him, both physically and mentally. การกลัวคนอ้วนของปราณมีที่มาจากตั้งแต่เด็กๆ หลังจากพี่

you weigh 100 kilograms, I'm still going to marry you,"<sup>119</sup> but with one condition. Muslin has to finish reading the book called *Mindless Eating* written by Brian Wansink and promise him that she will "build the environment and atmosphere that enable both of them to have good health together...for the rest of their lives."<sup>120</sup> Pran ultimately declares once again at the end of the novel that he is celebrating the fact that "[his] girlfriend is a *healthy* fat person and also, the most *charming* fat person in the entire world"<sup>121</sup> (emphasis added). Of course, Pran can never love just any fat woman; the fat woman that he is able to love has to be a good one, with a healthy body and charm.

This specific writing strategy of Thai hetero fat romance authors, I contend, is to create a "lovable" fat heroine whom the hero can easily accept. She is the archetype of a "good" fat woman, who can justify why she still deserves to be loved by the hero *despite* having an unconventional, fat female body. Kathleen LeBesco argues that fatness is rarely perceived as "an acceptable identity," but when it does happen, there will be clear-cut characteristics that separate "good" fat bodies from "bad" ones. She further explains that, even when fatness is accepted, it is acceptable "only to a certain degree, and not embraced without exception, as is the goal of many fat activists."<sup>122</sup> Thai fat romance authors construct the archetypal *good* and *loveable* fat female bodies as follows: those that are able to "prove their worth despite their fatness"<sup>123</sup> and those that have other, extra qualities that can compensate for their denigrated fat bodies. However, by focusing on the fat heroine's personal attributes "outside of [her] fatness,"<sup>124</sup> these Thai authors undermine the idea that the embodiment of fatness has its own value or worth in itself.

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เลี้ยงตัวอ้วนนั่งทับลูกสุนัขที่คุณตาซื้อให้เป็นของขวัญวันเกิดตาย พี่เลี้ยงคนนี้เผลอนอนหลับกิ้งตัวมาทับเขา จนหน้าเขียว หากปิ่นมณี [แม่ของปราวณ] ไม่เห็นเขาคงตายตามลูกสุนัขไปแล้ว

<sup>119</sup> Ibid., p. 427. "ไม่ว่าปานจะอ้วนเป็นร้อยกิโลผมก็ยังคงแต่งงานกับปาน"

<sup>120</sup> Ibid., pp. 424–27 "ผมอยากให้คุณอ่านหนังสือเล่มนี้ [*Mindless Eating*] ให้จบ แล้วรับปากกับผมว่าเราจะสร้างสิ่งแวดล้อมและบรรยากาศที่เอื้อต่อการมีสุขภาพดีร่วมกัน...แบบตลอดชีวิต...นะ"

<sup>121</sup> Ibid., p. 428. "คือว่า...เรากำลังฉลองความสำเร็จที่แฟนผมเป็นคนอ้วนที่สุขภาพดีและมีเสน่ห์ที่สุดในโลกครับ"

<sup>122</sup> LeBesco, *Revolting Bodies*, p. 62.

<sup>123</sup> Layla Cameron, "The 'Good Fatty' is a Dancing Fatty: Fat Archetypes in Reality Television," *Fat Studies* 8, no. 3 (2019): 259–278 (275).

<sup>124</sup> Ibid., p. 274.

The “good fatty” archetype,<sup>125</sup> argues Cameron, constructs and perpetuates “an oppressive hierarchy” that “continues to alienate specific groups of fat people.”<sup>126</sup> This clearly goes against the aims of the fat acceptance movement, in which “all” fat people should be liberated, not just those who meet the requirement of what counts as an acceptable fat body.<sup>127</sup> This assimilationist approach, as written by Thai hetero fat romance authors, attempts to find excuses or justifications for fatness (“fat, but with other loaded good qualities” and “fat as the result of something”). This approach is disapproved of by a radical fat activist/liberationist approach that aims to destigmatize all fat bodies.<sup>128</sup> LeBesco points out that the justification of fatness “drains pro-fatness rhetoric of its power.”<sup>129</sup> Fatness should not need to be “justified or explained,” just as other bodies do not need to be.<sup>130</sup>

## **Rejecting the Gentleman: Rewriting (Un)desirable Masculinity in Thai Fat Romance**

In this section, I am keen to subvert the construction of an aristocratic gentleman as a form of desirable masculinity in Thai fat romance narratives. I intend to reimagine Akekasit, the “aristocratic gentlemanly” hero from *Palosongkrueng* as a secondary male character in my revision instead. Although Wattana will be depicted as the person whom my fat heroine eventually falls for, I will focus more on constructing Akekasit as a conventionally handsome suitor who possesses undesirable gentlemanly masculinity in my revision. Some dialogues from the novel and his way of performing “gentlemanliness” will be utilized in turning him into an

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<sup>125</sup> See Stacy Bias’ comic blog post called “12 Good Fatty Archetypes” (2014): <http://stacybias.net/2014/06/12-good-fatty-archetypes/>.

<sup>126</sup> Cameron, “The ‘Good Fatty’ is a Dancing Fatty,” p. 260.

<sup>127</sup> Le’a Kent, “Fighting Abjection: Representing Fat Women,” in *Bodies Out of Bounds: Fatness and Transgression*, eds. Jana Evans Braziel and Kathleen LeBesco (Berkeley and Los Angeles, CA: University of California Press, 2001), pp. 130–150 (p. 137); Cameron, “The ‘Good Fatty’ is a Dancing Fatty,” p. 274.

<sup>128</sup> Charlotte Cooper, *Fat Activism: A Radical Social Movement* (Bristol: HammerOn Press, 2016); Kent, “Fighting Abjection”; LeBesco, *Revolting Bodies*.

<sup>129</sup> LeBesco, *Revolting Bodies*, p. 114.

<sup>130</sup> Cameron, “The ‘Good Fatty’ is a Dancing Fatty,” p. 274.

explicitly fat-phobic suitor who will be rejected by the fat heroine, as should have been the case – in my view – in the original novel. My rewriting is as follows:

“I – I’m so sorry. I didn’t mean to hurt you and sit on you like this.” Sophitnapa has stomped on this man’s feet by accident. These are her new four-inch heels that she just bought a couple of days ago. She should have worn them in her bedroom for at least a week. But these shoes are so pretty, and they make her feet look so nice being squeezed into such a tiny space.

Sophitnapa hopes that wearing the *right* heels will allow her to pass<sup>131</sup> as a thin(ner) woman. She usually spends at least an hour gazing at her own reflection while trying on heels at the shop before making her decision. Finding the right heels to make her look at least two to three kilograms lighter isn’t easy. The heel-hunting mission is something she considers vital to her fat existence.

The man is so handsome that leading actors would be embarrassed to stand next to him. He looks at her with rage. Apology not accepted, she clearly sees.

“You wear shoes with heels that are far too high. How is it possible for them to handle your fat body? Your legs aren’t broken. But mine are almost broken. I bet you fall over a lot,” he says.

Sophitnapa stares at him in disbelief and bites her lip hard. The man takes her silence as a sign of submission. He continues preaching. “Heels are reserved for women who are in shape! Do me a favor...go back home and burn all your heels.”

The fat woman sighs as loudly as she can and quickly stands up, despite feeling a sharp pain in her ankles. “You’re not a –”

Akekasit puts his finger on his lips and makes a shhh sound. He knows what she’s about to say. People just can’t handle him being honest and straightforward. “How am I not a gentleman? I just warned you with good intentions. You shouldn’t wear heels because you’re fat and clumsy!”

Sophitnapa rolls her eyes. She is not in the mood to wait for her dermatologist anymore. She calmly speaks while texting her personal driver to take her home. “Yes, I’m fat and a tad

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<sup>131</sup> I was introduced to the idea of “passing” as a thinner woman when reading Charlotte Cooper’s work. See Cooper, *Fat and Proud: Politics of Size* (London: The Women’s Press, 1998), pp. 41–44.

clumsy. And I wasn't going to say that you're not a gentleman. I just want to say that you're not a nice human being and that's it. It's 2021...who the hell still talks about a man needing to behave like a gentleman and a woman needing to act like a lady whatsoever..." Her driver calls back and tells her that he is already waiting for her in front of the clinic.

"Do you perhaps accept apologies in cash?" Sophitnapa murmurs while staring at her phone screen. Rich people lose their patience so quickly. And she is no exception.

Akekasit leaps up in a fury. He quickly takes out his ID card from his wallet. "Read my surname. My family is related to the royal family by blood! Not just some random nouveau riche people..."

Sophitnapa is already walking out the door. This man is so loud and never runs out of things to say. She changes her mind and decides not to head home. Shopping therapy is what she desperately needs.

More heels on the way. She can guarantee that.

There's a wide selection of heels to choose from, but none of them makes her look thinner today. Sophitnapa stares at her own reflection in a huge mirror for twenty minutes straight. Her head replays every single word of that dude she met at the clinic, over and over.

When he called her fat, her heart broke just a little. Sophitnapa thought that all her heels make her able to pass as a thinner person. But that guy had no hesitation in labelling her as fat. Her "passing as thin" fantasy has been completely ruined. Store clerks always compliment her that heels make her look so graceful and slim. Their words are all lies. She sits on a sofa stool and takes off these heels with a frown on her face.

These shoes hurt like hell. But the desire to pass is what makes her able to endure the pain. Realizing that wearing heels gives her no camouflage at all upsets her very much.

"I – I'm so sorry. I didn't mean to hurt you and sit on you like this."

That sounds so familiar. Sophitnapa snaps out of her own frustration. She feels an intense pain in her feet and upper thighs. She slowly blinks, staring at the back of the man who just landed in her lap. He attempts to stand up once more, but falls right back into her lap. The man, slightly smaller than her, repeatedly apologizes. His entire body is literally shaking. His round face is extremely red.

"I'm so embarrassed. I have no intention to hurt you –"

“Chill, man. I’m okay.” Sophitnapa gently helps, pushing the guy to stand up. She’s glad that she can be his “soft cushion” for a short while.

“You’ve saved my life!” The man looks at her as if she were his childhood hero walking out of the screen. She feels slightly proud of herself. All of a sudden, she seems not to give a shit about heels, camouflage, or fat. Sophitnapa tries to suppress her smile and nods in the direction of his feet.

“Nice choice. They look really good on you.” She is looking at the pair of black pointed toe ankle-strap stiletto heels that he’s wearing with admiration. That’s a bold attempt to walk in those thin heels. He probably knows it by now. But the heels suit his semi-sheer black lace blouse so well. All she needs is to give a sincere compliment to a fellow fatty.

“Yeah? You think so? They’re so pretty, but quite hard to wear.” He shows a slight sign of hesitation.

She quickly nods. “Maybe wear them at home a few more times...I’m sure you’ll be walking like a pro in no time. But who am I to suggest you do this? I just tripped over before I met you, too. The man I sat on told me to burn all my heels!”

He looks at her in shock at what he just heard. And they end up chatting on the pink sofa stool for a little longer.

That afternoon, she grabs a pair of random sandals and says farewell. Sophitnapa pays for his black heels and writes her number on the receipt. Wattana has no idea what she’s doing. He’s now looking at sneakers while holding the heels he has chosen close to his chest. The fat woman hopes he will call her back.

Three hours before midnight, she yawns. Her eyes are almost closing. But Sophitnapa doesn’t give up. She likes to wait for someone who’s worth her time.

Her phone finally rings.

“Hi. It’s Wattana here. The guy you met at the shoe shop.”

She smiles while lying on her bed with her fat calico cat. They talk about shoes, Burmese food, memory foam toppers, and cat toys until the sun rises.

Sophitnapa didn’t get to buy a new pairs of heels, but she certainly made a new friend tonight.

It’s a classic enemies-turned-friends kind of story.

One week after the clinic incident, Akekasit met the fat woman who offered to “apologize in cash” at a fundraising meeting organized by his mom and her other *Khun-Ying* friends. Sophitnapa and he have been in a *friendly* relationship for one month now. They are now working for his mom’s charity to raise money for the poor. The charity is a rich person’s hobby. Everyone in their circle does it. So do they.

To his surprise, this daughter of a diamond store owner is very smart, knows how to make good conversation, and loves helping poor people, just like his mother. Her nouveau riche family raised her well.

There is only one thing that she *lacks* – a thin body. Despite having such a beautiful face and an unforgettable smile, she is *downright* fat.

“I want you to be slim,” Akekasit states loudly at the dining table while gazing at her plump belly in disdain.

It only takes a second for her to reply, “That’s none of your business...” She doesn’t care to complete her sentence. Food is more interesting. A spoonful of steamed seabass in lemon sauce is in her mouth. It is way too spicy. Her eyes begin to water, her nose runs, she forgets his bullshit.

“Trust me, there’s the real you hidden inside.” Akekasit doesn’t give up. He points his index finger at her fat flesh. The body she has now is just a fat suit; her will power is the key to success, he firmly believes.

Sophitnapa shoots this man a warning glance. He talks too much. He is nosy. He likes to act as though he were her nutritionist and weight loss coach. He is just a man who has inherited assets of one trillion baht from his deceased dad. She is overwhelmed with jealousy. Her older brother will also take most of her family’s possessions after their dad dies.

“You know when food is this good, you should be devouring it instead of talking,” she says frankly.

“It’s such a pity...that you can’t see how a thin body can complete your perfect life...,” he says, continuing to be her life coach.

“Why do you care so much about me being fat or thin? So far, I can’t see how this concerns you.” Sophitnapa interrupts this man. They hated each other when they first met at the clinic. Now they’ve become closer. The upper-class makes up only 1% of the population in Thailand. She has no choice but to befriend him and a few more people.



But yes, the way he has talked about *HER* body is unnecessary. When will this charity event come to an end? She puts another spoonful of fish in her mouth for distraction.

Today is New Year's Eve.

What can he say?

New year, new him.

No, it's not what it sounds like. For him, there is no before and after photo or anything like that. He has always been in shape since birth.

What it means is, that after spending *half a year* working with a charity and gathering one hundred million baht together with Sophitnapa, he finally has a change of heart.

At a New Year's Eve dinner, Akekasit looks at So. He has stopped calling her by her full first name for a while now. Distance is the only thing he has been trying to get rid of for the last two months. He can't help but smile until his cheeks hurt when he looks at this sweet face.

*Beautiful*, he uses this adjective to describe her in his own head.

She looks so lively. Despite being fat, she is not ugly. She is the fat gal who is confident, energetic, and knows how to be herself at all times.

Yes, when a man falls in love, whatever he sees in the woman he falls for is always *good*.

To him now, she is *downright* perfection.

He pulls the chair out for Sophitnapa as a true gentleman is supposed to do.

"All bodies are good bodies," he loudly asserts, right after they finish ordering food.

Sophitnapa literally thinks she is having a hallucination when she hears Akekasit declare this sentence out of the blue. These days, this man never ceases to make her raise her eyebrows whenever he says something...

Something like what he just said to her a few seconds ago.

"Where did you read that from? Some body-positive posts on Instagram?" She asks out of curiosity.

"Why did you ask me that?" His confidence starts to fade. She doesn't seem to be that impressed. Perhaps he's reading her wrongly. She can be very shy and hides her true feelings from him sometimes.

“Well, that kind of sentence isn’t something...um...you can come up with by yourself.” She actually wants to say: “That kind of sentence isn’t something a sizeist dude like you can come up by yourself.”

Akekasit smiles proudly and asks: “Do you like what I said then? Be honest. Don’t be shy. We’re no strangers.”

Sophitnapa blinks her eyes slowly in complete confusion. When did this person start to care about what she likes or doesn’t like? Weird, she thinks.

They have been eating together for months. The *first* time she sat next to him in a restaurant, he would say: “You eat so little, why are you still fat?” When she answered with honesty, “I don’t know,” he would insist that she must know. So, in the end, she had to quickly make up something to get it over with. “Well, I eat small portions, but frequently throughout the day. That’s probably what’s made me fat.” He wouldn’t stop asking: “*Then why don’t you cut the frequency down?*”

For six and a half months, she has had to answer all of his questions, which all intrude into her personal life. If it gets too annoying, she will try to find ways to shut him up, but it is extremely difficult when he believes he has the right to interrogate a fat person’s choices at all times.

“Did you hear what I just asked? So?” Akekasit starts to panic. He expected more reaction from her.

“Yeah, I heard...um...what do you want me to say? Can’t we just enjoy these sauteed Shiitake mushrooms in silence?”

“But I just implied that I’m okay with you being fat. Doesn’t that make your heart flutter?”

“Pfft, when are you ever okay with me being fat?” Sophitnapa drops her spoon and fork onto the plate and looks him in the eyes.

“You’re really fat, but you have such a nice personality, confidence, a sweet face, cute little pinky fingers, and –”

“I don’t need your damn list. I don’t want to hear it. Can’t I just be fat and get the appreciation with no other added qualities, huh?” She wipes her mouth with a napkin as she has no more appetite to devour her mushrooms.

“I’m confused right now. Did I say something wrong?” the muscular millionaire hastily asks.

“Just don’t come up with things to compensate for me being fat, okay? It doesn’t make me feel good.”

Akekasit’s face turns extremely red. A moment of tension like this can be easily solved by him letting go of his true emotion. The handsome gentleman in the dark expensive suit touches her wrist gently. “Please don’t be mad.” He blows hot air out of his mouth and confesses: “I love you whether you’re fat or thin, So.” He almost wants to beg. “Please have my children.” But this heartfelt confession has already made him behave out of character. Cool, calm, and collected are the virtues he actually lives by.

Sophitnapa sighs. She can’t hide her frustration. Akekasit is surprised that she’s not in tears yet. “Look, I don’t think you really like me. I’m fat and I’ll always be fat. If you think I’m going to shed twenty kilograms in three months for you, I can guarantee that will never happen.”

Akekasit doesn’t give up. A true gentleman doesn’t let his woman misunderstand his character for too long. “I mean, all pregnant women end up being fat anyway. Your being fat now or later doesn’t matter to me anymore. We can let our babies call you ‘Fat Mommy’ if you like.”

“Our babies? Who told you I want to get pregnant? That’s even more painful than wearing heels! And I’ve never wanted to be someone’s mom.” The fat woman loses patience. She looks at him in disdain, stands up, and prepares to leave. Her stomach is growling begging her to fill it up. She softly rubs her belly to calm it down a bit and quickly puts her cash on the table, hoping to pay for both of them. Akekasit quickly buttons his suit, stands up, and puts her money back in her plump hand. He can’t let that happen. A gentleman always pays for his woman.

“A gentleman doesn’t let women pay for anything,” Akekasit says with confidence.

Sophitnapa rolls her eyes, sighs, and leaves her money on the table anyway. She walks closer to him and whispers, “Listen, I don’t want to ruin your New Year, but I don’t like you and never will. I’m already seeing someone. I met him on the day I met you.”

Her face blushes just thinking about Wattana. She waves Akekasit goodbye, not sure that she will ever see him again. She pushes the door open and leaves.

“Hey, wait! We need to talk!”

She can hear his footsteps close behind her. Those *manly* chunky heels allow him to run as fast as he wants. The rain starts pouring out of nowhere. Sophitnapa pretends not to hear him and tries to run as quickly as she can. But her block heels prevent her from moving freely. Akekasit takes his suit jacket off and uses it to cover her head as though it were an umbrella.

“We’ve talked enough! I think I’ve made myself very clear on what I want out of our friendship. Thanks for this. But I need to go now. Happy New Year and goodbye!” Sophitnapa doesn’t need his protection. She has no other option but to remove her heels in front of him. She quickly takes her sandals out of her bag. It doesn’t take her long to run to the parking lot in that type of comfortable flat footwear.

“Phew!” She gets inside the car and throws her nude heels onto the floor mat.

The fat woman drives to the mall where the shoes she ordered will be back in stock today. Shopping malls are always open in Thailand, regardless of whatever holiday it is. She arrives at her apartment an hour later. Her stomach is screaming louder. Sophitnapa knocks on her door twice before someone opens it for her.

“What are you hiding behind your back, babe?” Wattana asks with a curious smile. Sophitnapa tries to hide her transparent shopping bag behind her back. He is a few centimeters shorter than her, but still manages to catch a glimpse of the plastic bag.

“Hmmm...did my girlfriend just go to the mall on New Year’s Eve? I wonder what it could be...”

“Hey! Don’t look! This is not last-minute gift shopping whatsoever...it’s just that your shoes were sold out for months. They’re back in store today...arh...” Sophitnapa shouts out her frustration.

Wattana laughs. He looks so cute in a polka-dot apron. It’s so hard for her not to give in and tell him everything. Sophitnapa shakes her head, trying to stay calm. She smells green curry from the kitchen. He must have been cooking while he was waiting for her. Her cat meows from behind the door and rubs her head against his legs. Mali loves him more than her now.

“I’m so hungry. I only had some garlic mushrooms. Can we eat now please, Wat?” She pleads with her eyes and this trick always works on him. Wattana immediately returns to the kitchen to finish cooking.

Sophitnapa runs to her bedroom, locks the door, and quickly wraps the last gift she got for Wattana. She hides all the presents in her wardrobe, while her heart is beating fast.

It's a pair of apricot heels, gray sneakers, and a couple of books by his favorite thriller authors.

She hopes he likes them.

In this rewrite, I attempt to devalue the significance of gentlemanliness in Thai fat romance narratives. In *Palosongkrueng*, gentlemanliness is constructed as ideal behavior for men to enact toward women. Sophitnapa criticizes Akekasit for being an ungentlemanly man when he chides her for wearing high heels *despite* being fat. However, she compliments him as a gentleman when he voluntarily saves her from falling to the ground and waits for her to get into her car first, even though his knees are injured from assisting her (*P2*, 50–53; 181). Narupon Duangwises argues that the concept of gentlemanliness is used to construct Thai men's masculinity in opposition to femininity. Gentlemanliness, Duangwises further contends, is used to uphold heteronormativity in Thai culture.<sup>132</sup> Therefore, I wanted to disrupt Pannarai's reinforcement of gentlemanliness as a masculine characteristic that her hero should exhibit in his heterosexual romantic relationship with the heroine. I did so by making Sophitnapa in my revision indifferent toward Akekasit's "gentlemanly" actions. She does not evaluate his behavior in terms of gentlemanliness at all. In the first "heels accident" scene, my fat heroine perceives Akekasit's hostile reaction toward her fat body in heels as behavior by a "human being," who isn't nice. My fat heroine does not chastise Akekasit for behaving unkindly by calling him ungentlemanly, as Sophitnapa does in Pannarai's novel. Instead, in my short story Sophitnapa insists: "Who the hell still talks about a man needing to behave like a gentleman and a woman needing to act like a lady...?" This suggests that she does not align ideal manhood with gentlemanly traits and ideal womanhood with ladylike qualities. Although Akekasit is defined as a gentleman from his point of view, his "gentlemanly" behaviors, such as pulling out a chair, offering to pay, and shielding her from the rain, do not earn him success in securing a romantic relationship with the fat heroine. His "gentlemanly" manners do not compensate for him being overtly fat phobic toward

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<sup>132</sup> Narupon Duangwises, "Deconstructing Masculinity in Thai Society: Rethinking Masculinity in Siamese Society," (paper presented at SAC Conference, Bangkok, June 21–23, 2017) (in Thai).

my heroine at the clinic and covertly fat phobic during his love confession, when he keeps listing her good characteristics “outside”<sup>133</sup> her fatness.

I have also aimed to destabilize the binary opposition between masculinity and femininity that the notion of gentlemanliness seeks to perpetuate in my selected Thai fat romance novels. In the West, masculinity and femininity are typically organized as a binary, and have been normalized as “polarized and hierarchical opposites,”<sup>134</sup> and this, Duangwises argues, also applies to Thai culture.<sup>135</sup> Masculinity and femininity acquire meaning only in relation to each other – what is feminine is not masculine and what is masculine is not feminine, as R.W. Connell suggests:

Masculinity and femininity are inherently relational concepts, which have meaning in relation to each other, as a social demarcation and a cultural opposition. This holds regardless of the changing content of the demarcation in different societies and periods of history.<sup>136</sup>

I attempt to blur the demarcation between what it means to be masculine and feminine through the construction of my hero Wattana. Duangwises contends that Thai people often associate the “healthy and muscular”<sup>137</sup> heterosexual male body with masculinity – the bodies of “boxers, soldiers, warriors, and *nakleng* [a ruffian, a rogue]” in particular.<sup>138</sup> Wattana, the hero in my rewriting, is depicted as having a feminized fat male body and is assigned qualities traditionally associated with femininity, such as his wearing of conventional feminine footwear, his inability to inhabit space with stability, and his love of cooking. Although he possesses *unmanly* characteristics and participates in feminine activities without hesitation, his unorthodox version of feminized masculinity has been fully accepted, desired, and never questioned by the fat heroine, who is still nevertheless struggling with her desire to pass as a less fat woman in my short story.

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<sup>133</sup> Cameron, “The ‘Good Fatty’ is a Dancing Fatty,” pp. 259–278 (274).

<sup>134</sup> Thomas W. Bean and Helen Harper, “Reading Men Differently: Alternative Portrayals of Masculinity in Contemporary Young Adult Fiction,” *Reading Psychology* 28, no. 1 (2007): 11–30 (12).

<sup>135</sup> Duangwises, “Deconstructing Masculinity.”

<sup>136</sup> R.W. Connell, *Masculinities* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1995), p. 44.

<sup>137</sup> Kongsakon Kawinraweekun, “Constructing Thai Citizens’ Bodies in the era of Field Marshal Plaek Phibunsongkhram,” PhD thesis (Thammasart University, 2002).

<sup>138</sup> Duangwises, “Deconstructing Masculinity.”

Passing is another key idea that I seek to write about through my fat heroine's desire to look "smaller" by wearing the right heels. In my first year of doing my PhD research, I stumbled upon Cooper's work on the idea of passing as a less fat person. Her arguments enabled me to realize that my attempts to choose the right clothes to wear so that I can look smaller constitute just such a "futile"<sup>139</sup> effort. My fat heroine and I both want to pass. Sophitnapa ponders that "the heel-hunting mission is something she considers vital to her fat existence," because she believes that wearing the right heels will make her look smaller, "normal," and "presentable,"<sup>140</sup> even though she is still in the same fat body. I decided to reveal what Cooper revealed to me to Sophitnapa. It is worth quoting at length:

Passing will never be empowering; as individuals it will never make us look small enough to be granted acceptance and power as a thinner person, and as a social group there is no chance of achieving meaningful social change when we are caught up in self-denial.<sup>141</sup>

In my short story, my fat heroine is recognized as fat by Akekasit even when she is wearing high heels that she believes will make her look slimmer. Sophitnapa comes to the realization that no heels will ever make her look small enough to have access to "acceptance and power as a thinner person."<sup>142</sup> Nevertheless, I deliberately still allow my fat heroine to wear heels even after she has realized this "truth," because I want to portray the life of a fat woman as messy and full of contradictory ambivalent feelings. Even though I have been warned by Cooper to realize that my desire to pass as a thinner woman is futile and will never be successful, from time to time I still think about what clothes to buy to camouflage my fat flesh even just a tiny bit.

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<sup>139</sup> Cooper, *Fat and Proud: Politics of Size*, p. 44.

<sup>140</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 43.

<sup>141</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 44.

<sup>142</sup> *Ibid.*

## Conclusion

Pannarai and Pinyada, the authors of *Palosongkrueng* and *Rak Tem Lon*, share the Thai archetype of gentlemanly heroes, who can only accept “good” fat women who are loaded with other, compensatory desirable qualities and are able to fulfill their female biological destiny. Being gentlemanly for these two heroes relies heavily on upper-class wealth and how a man can treat a lady properly. However, they are “ungentlemanly” toward the heroines if they do not meet the condition of being “good” fat women. Akekasit is censured by the heroine as “ungentlemanly” because he scolds her for wearing high heels *despite* being fat at the beginning of the novel. After he finds out about her other, acceptable, qualities, then he is able to act in a “gentlemanly” way in front of her.

Peerakorn clearly perceives that “a belly that is ‘fat’ due to pregnancy is acceptable,” “but a belly that is just ‘fat’ is not.”<sup>143</sup> When he discovers that the fat body of Piruna is not a temporary state, as the pregnant body should be, his behavior toward the heroine changes completely. He performs the “monk-like” gentlemanly masculinity only to the “good” fat woman whose distended belly was believed to be a result of fulfilling her “female biological duty,” but becomes what the heroine calls “an evil demon”<sup>144</sup> (*RTL*, 194) to the “bad” fat woman whose bloated belly is a result of her failure to achieve a normative-sized, feminized female body. The hero selectively becomes gentlemanly and ungentlemanly when the heroine succeeds or fails at achieving – in his eyes – ideal femininity.

In my rewriting, I have attempted to devalue the significance of the gentlemanly masculinity of Thai fat romance heroes by making Akekasit unsuccessful in securing a romantic relationship with Sophitnapa. My fat heroine is indifferent to his exhibition of “gentlemanly” masculinity, but she accepts, desires, and never questions Wattana’s non-conventional version of feminized masculinity.

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<sup>143</sup> Nash, *Making “Postmodern” Mothers*, p. 41.

<sup>144</sup> อสูรมาดร้าย



I would argue that “fat” is still constructed as a stigmatized identity in both US and Thai fat romance novels, but not without differences. The US fat heroines do not have to lose weight, but their identity as fat women is never acknowledged by the heroes; the Thai fat heroines are acknowledged as fat, but only find approval when they can display other, compensatory, qualities and successfully lose weight at the end of the novel. Even though “fat” is a word that the Thai heroes are able to utter to their heroines in Thai fat romance novels, unlike their US counterparts, this doesn’t mean that “fat” is a neutral descriptor in Thai culture, as Anglo-American fat activists, such as Marilyn Wann, wish it would become in US culture.<sup>145</sup>

In my creative revisions of selected heterosexual fat romances in Chapters 1–3, I have explored implicit queerness through queering all my heroes’ masculinity. In Chapter 4, I will turn to explore the queer fat romance text itself.

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<sup>145</sup> Marilyn Wann, *Fatso?: Because You Don’t Have to Apologize for Your Size!* (Berkeley, CA: Ten Speed Press, 1998), p. 19.

## Chapter 4: Coming Out As Queer and Fat: The Coming Out Narrative in Queer Fat Romance

In Chapter 1, I examined the disgust evoked by the masculine fat female body in the novel *Yai Auan Chao Sanae*. In my creative section of the chapter, I explored how I could construct the “fat” female gaze narrative. I allowed both the fat heroine and myself to acknowledge and confront our disgust toward our own and someone else’s fat bodies and considered how the fat male body could perhaps also be considered “disgusting” by playing with femininity, similarly to the way in which the author Chakriya masculinizes Muslin’s body for the *disgusting* effect. In Chapters 2 and 3, I investigated the representation of masculinities in selected US and Thai heterosexual fat romance narratives. In my creative revision of Chapter 2, I constructed a softer version of masculinity inspired by the US young adult romance novel *Dumplin’*, while in Chapter 3, I rejected the “gentlemanly” masculinity of the hero of *Palosongkrueng* in favor of a femininized masculinity for the hero in my creative piece based on the same novel. Whereas, in the first three chapters, I have explored what we might term an implicit queerness in those heterosexual fat romance texts, in this chapter I interrogate the queer fat romance narrative itself.

In 1997, Kay Mussell called for scholars of popular romance to “incorporate analysis of lesbian and gay romances into our mostly heterosexual models.”<sup>1</sup> As recently as 2016, Andrea Wood and Jonathan A. Allan were insisting that queer romance fiction is still “peripheral” in the study of popular romance novels.<sup>2</sup> Chapter 4 therefore contributes to this neglected field by focusing squarely on the queer fat romance narrative.

Queer, according to Jack Halberstam, “refers to the nonnormative logics and organizations of community, sexual identity, embodiment, and activity in space and time.”<sup>3</sup> Thus, queer refers not only to non-normative sexualities, but also to non-normative ways of being, and the act of

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<sup>1</sup> Kay Mussell, “Where’s Love Gone? Transformations in Romance Fiction and Scholarship,” *Paradoxa* 3, nos. 1–2 (1997): 3–14 (12).

<sup>2</sup> Andrea Wood and Jonathan A. Allan, “Special Issue: Queering Popular Romance (Editors’ Introduction),” *Journal of Popular Romance Studies* 5, no. 2 (2016): 1–5 (1).

<sup>3</sup> Jack Halberstam, *A Queer Time & Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives* (New York, NY: New York University Press, 2005), p. 6.

disrupting normativity. Jami McFarland, Vanessa Slothouber, and Allison Taylor draw upon Halberstam's definition of what queer can potentially mean to argue that fatness and queerness have shared connections. "Fatness can be understood as queer, as the nonnormativity of fat embodiment has much in common with the nonnormativity of queerness," they contend.<sup>4</sup> Fat studies scholars have interrogated fatness through the lens of queer theory, such as theories of the closet,<sup>5</sup> performativity,<sup>6</sup> passing,<sup>7</sup> and shame.<sup>8</sup> Samantha Murray's discussion of coming out as fat will be one of the central ideas that I draw upon in order to build my arguments in the analysis of the selected novel for this chapter.

My focus for this chapter will be an exploration of the intersection of fatness and queerness through the coming-out narrative of Abby, the queer fat heroine in Amy Spalding's *The Summer of Jordi Perez (and the Best Burger in Los Angeles)*.<sup>9</sup> The website "Smart Bitches Trashy Books," which reviews romance novels, defines *The Summer of Jordi Perez* as "a body-positive f/f contemporary romance/romcom" with no mention of the other genre – adolescent literature – to which this novel also belongs.<sup>10</sup> Although the novel straddles two literary categories, I still insist that *The Summer of Jordi Perez* places greater emphasis on the romance between the two female protagonists – how they meet during an internship, fall in love, drift apart due to a misunderstanding, and eventually reunite at the end.

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<sup>4</sup> Jami McFarland, Vanessa Slothouber, and Allison Taylor, "Tempo-rarily Fat: A Queer Exploration of Fat Time," *Fat Studies* 7, no. 2 (2018): 135–146 (137).

<sup>5</sup> Samantha Murray, "(Un/Be)Coming Out? Rethinking Fat Politics," *Social Semiotics* 15, no. 2 (2005): 153–163.

<sup>6</sup> Robyn Longhurst, "Queering Body Size and Shape: Performativity, the Closet, Shame, and Orientation," in *Queering Fat Embodiment*, eds. Cat Pausé, Jackie Wykes, and Samantha Murray (London and New York: Routledge, 2016), pp. 13–25.

<sup>7</sup> Cat Pausé, "Live to Tell: Coming Out as Fat," *Somatechnics* 2, no. 1 (2012): 42–56; Charlotte Cooper, *Fat and Proud: Politics of Size* (London: The Women's Press, 1998).

<sup>8</sup> Vikki Chalklin, "Obstinate Fatties: Fat Activism, Queer Negativity, and the Celebration of 'Obesity'," *Subjectivity* vol. 9, no. 2 (2016): 107–125.

<sup>9</sup> Amy Spalding, *The Summer of Jordi Perez (and the Best Burger in Los Angeles)* (New York, NY: Sky Pony Press, 2018). Further references to this text will take the form of *TSOJP* followed by the page reference and will appear in the main text.

<sup>10</sup> "Book Review: *The Summer of Jordi Perez* by Amy Spalding," Smart Bitches Trashy Books, 2019, accessed January 14, 2021, <http://smartbitchestrashybooks.com/reviews/the-summer-of-jordi-perez-by-amy-spalding/>.

Although the literary genre of lesbian romance, or what Thai readers officially refer to as *ying rak ying*<sup>11</sup> has become more mainstream in Thailand in recent years, I have not been able to find any fat heroines in the genre of Thai *yuri*. Based on my research, Thai lesbian fat romances have never been published as physical copies or on popular online novel publishing sites such as Dek-D and Readawrite.<sup>12</sup> As Thai *yuri* fat romance novels do not yet exist, in the creative part of this chapter I attempt to create the kind of Thai queer fat romance text that I wish were available, and/or would have been available when I was growing up. My aim is to construct a Thai queer fat romance narrative that responds specifically to the two key issues raised in the selected US novel: the idea of coming out as fat and queer and the construction of a “good” queer fat body. In my analysis of *The Summer of Jordi Perez*, I argue that, while Abby is able to simultaneously come out as queer and fat, she is nevertheless unable to admit to other characters that, despite the fact that she doesn’t have gay shame, she still has fat shame. In my creative (re)writing element in this chapter, I allow my fat heroine to come out as fat and queer while explicitly discussing her fat and gay shame with her love interest. Although I regard Spalding’s novel as a progressive queer fat romance text, the author still relies on the archetype of a good fatty that I discussed previously in Chapter 3. In my revision, I aim to construct my fat heroine as a bad queer fatty, subverting how Spalding writes her heroine as a good queer fat woman.

## Reading a US “Queer, Fat Girl Rom-com” and Its Coming-out Narrative

Julie Murphy, the author of *Dumplin’*, praises *The Summer of Jordi Perez (and the Best Burger in Los Angeles)* as “the queer, fat girl rom-com of [her] dreams.”<sup>13</sup> The novel is narrated in the first person by Abby, a bubbly 17-year-old fat, queer white girl. In the novel, the fat heroine

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<sup>11</sup> *Ying rak ying* is literally translated as “women love women.” Thais also casually call this genre *yuri*—a term borrowed from the Japanese language, which refers to themes, content, and a genre that involves lesbian relationships.

<sup>12</sup> I asked the owner of Sapaan Publishing, the first *yuri* publisher established in Thailand, for a recommendation for *yuri* fat romance. She replied that all of the Thai *yuri* heroines that she has read are beautiful, wealthy, and smart and that she has never read any Thai *yuri* romance featuring fat heroines. I also received a similar response from the founders of Lilly House, another well-known *yuri* publisher in Thailand. The founders and all of the publishing staff have never once encountered Thai *yuri* novels with fat heroines. They recommended me a list of Japanese *yuri* manga featuring fat heroines to read instead.

<sup>13</sup> See Murphy’s endorsement in the book.

believes that she plays the role of sidekick in the life of her best friend, Maliah. She thinks that she will never have her own story or her own love life, like the trope of the heroine's best friend in all "modern love stories" (*TSOJP*, 3). During the summer, Abby gets a dream internship at her favorite local boutique, Lemonberry. Over time, she falls for a quiet Mexican-American fellow intern, Jordi. This puts her in a difficult situation, because she has to compete with the girl she is in love with to gain a paid job at the end of the internship. During the same period, Abby forms a new and surprising friendship with Jax, a popular lacrosse jock. He begs her to eat burgers around LA with him and rate them on his dad's mobile application that will soon be released. While confident most of the time in the public realm, Abby has to constantly deal with the feeling that she will never be fully accepted by her mother, a famous health-food guru in the city. One night at a party, Abby kisses Jordi while they are taking turns telling each other about their family dramas. They then start going on dates. Later on in the novel, Jordi finds out that Abby has been doubting her own worth as a result of her non-normative body. Abby's love interest decides to help her to see how "beautiful" she is: Jordi documents Abby's daily life in photos, going on to exhibit all of these images in her photography show without asking for Abby's consent. The couple proceed to break up at the show when Abby discovers what Jordi has done. However, the protagonists eventually reconcile at the end of the novel, and both land a paid job at Lemonberry in the fall by splitting the hours. The fat heroine eventually realizes that she has finally got to live in her own story in which she stars as the main protagonist.

The adolescent romance novel seems to be a literary genre which allows US fat-positive advocates such as Murphy and Spalding to construct the narrative of the young fat heroine falling in love and earning her happy ending. During the years 2016–2018, when I was searching for primary texts, I never came across any adult romance works written by US authors who identify as fat and clearly embrace fat politics in their novels. Adolescent fiction is perhaps a more flexible genre for the authors to assert their unconventional fat-positive messages within fat-phobic culture, in comparison to the more formulaic genre of popular romance.

Caroline E. Jones emphasizes that one of the main reasons why teenagers read adolescent literature is to see that people with whom they can identify exist. Jones believes that teens read this genre of literature, not to look for answers to their problems, but "to see themselves there, to

remember that they are not alone.”<sup>14</sup> As an avid reader of the genre herself, author Spalding recalls her past experience of reading queer young adult fiction, which ultimately motivated her to write her own, more progressive queer adolescent text:

A lot of the young adult fiction with queer characters was just really depressing. I think a lot of those books were aimed at straight kids to be like, “you should really think twice about bullying someone,” or for them to see how hard it is to come out, see how hard it is if your religion disagrees with you, and I just kept thinking if I was growing up now, I’d be, like, wait, are things better or not?<sup>15</sup>

Spalding elaborates to an interviewer during her book promotion about the kind of queer romance she has written: “There are so many swoony, heightened love stories for straight kids, so I wanted to write a queer romance. I wanted it to be swoony. I really wanted to write a book where a queer girl could rest assured the worst thing that would happen to the queer main character is she’d maybe say something very embarrassing in front of the girl she’s crushing on.”<sup>16</sup> I can confirm that Spalding has kept her word.

*The Summer of Jordi Perez* is what Jones would call a “progressive” queer text. Jones’ definition of what counts as “progressive” emphasizes the non-traumatic portrayal of a queer character’s coming-out experience.<sup>17</sup> According to Jones, Abby follows one of the major conventions of progressive queer literature: “The lesbian character does not hate herself as a result of her orientation. If she is out when the novel opens, she is at peace with her orientation.”<sup>18</sup>

Abby is already out when the novel starts and is comfortable with her queer sexuality. It is later revealed that the fat heroine decided to tell her parents that she is gay the previous year; she thought “it was weird keeping part of [her] identity a secret” (*TSOJP*, 108). The fat heroine is not ever written as confused or uncertain about her sexual identity. When Abby tells her mom that

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<sup>14</sup> Caroline E. Jones, “From Homoplot to Progressive Novel: Lesbian Experience and Identity in Contemporary Young Adult Novels,” *The Lion and the Unicorn* 37, no. 1 (2013): 74–93 (74).

<sup>15</sup> Amy Spalding, interview by Lacey Vorrasi-Banis, *Grilling YA Author Amy Spalding on the Summer’s Hottest Queer Teen Romance – and the Best Burger in America*, Entertainment Weekly, April 25, 2018.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>17</sup> Jones, “From Homoplot to Progressive Novel,” pp. 76, 80.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 80.

she is about to go on a date one night, her mom asks, “Is it with Jax?” hoping that her daughter’s “feelings” might have “change[d]” from last year (*TSOJP*, 108). Abby is irritated by her mom’s inability to fully accept who she is. She firmly informs her mom that her sexual identity remains unaltered: “It’s not a feeling...I could spend all the time in the world with Jax. It won’t make me straight” (*TSOJP*, 108).

The fat heroine can also be interpreted as queering heteronormativity on occasion through how she speaks and thinks about her queer identity. Even after being in a relationship with Jordi for some time, Abby still cannot believe how lucky she is to get to kiss a beautiful girl like Jordi whenever she wants: “how am I the only one to figure it out [how great Jordi is]? There should be a million girls fighting me for her” (*TSOJP*, 123). The way in which Abby imagines her rivals to be girls and not boys can be considered subversive because it demonstrates that she does not regard heterosexuality as the default sexuality of other girls. The fat heroine is comfortable with being a lesbian and is able to fully embrace her sexual identity as such.

Abby is what Jones terms “at peace”<sup>19</sup> with her non-normative sexuality, although not without rare moments of contradiction. The fat heroine at one point confesses to herself, “I’m into wearing almost nothing *but* dresses and I’m as gay as heck” (*TSOJP*, 86; emphasis in original). Here, it would seem that the fat heroine perceives being gay and being femme as mutually exclusive. Elizabeth Matelski contends that there was a “prevailing stereotype” in postwar lesbian fiction that “most lesbians idealized masculine bodies.”<sup>20</sup> Abby seems to understand that wearing feminine dresses does not make her “appear stereotypically lesbian,”<sup>21</sup> resulting in a need for her to assertively confirm to herself that her sexuality is indeed “gay as heck” (*TSOJP*, 86). There are also a few occasions in the text where the fat heroine imagines her queer identity and her relationship with a girl in somewhat heteronormative ways. On one occasion, after Abby realizes that she has a crush on her fellow intern, she begins to picture herself in a “stunning” wedding dress made by the owner of the boutique, with Jordi in “something white and fancy that

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> Elizabeth Matelski, “‘I’m Not the Only Lesbian Who Wears a Skirt’: Lesbian Romance Fiction and Identity in Post-World War II America,” in *Romance Fiction and American Culture: Love as the Practice of Freedom?* eds. William A. Gleason and Eric Murphy Selinger (London: Routledge, 2016), pp. 71–88 (p. 85).

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., p. 84.

isn't a dress" (*TSOJP*, 87–88). After fantasizing about her future wedding with Jordi, on one occasion the fat heroine even asks her best friend whether her and Jordi's baby will be cute as they are about to go on their first date (*TSOJP*, 111). Abby's whimsical thoughts arguably strengthen and perpetuate the dominant heterosexual social structures and institutions which "ask all of us to marry, to have children, and to assume sexually oppositional positions."<sup>22</sup>

The way in which Abby aspires to certain aspects of heteronormative lives is linked to the idea of homonormativity. The term homonormativity is defined by Lisa Duggan as "a politics that does not contest dominant heteronormative assumptions and institutions, but upholds and sustains them."<sup>23</sup> These heteronormative social expectations and cultural codes that Abby seems to be reinforcing here serve as the foundational ideology upon which the heterosexual romance novel constructs its narratives. Despite being a lesbian fat romance, *the Summer of Jordi Perez* still, to some degree, constructs its narrative within the heterosexual limits of the literary conventions of popular romance.

Interestingly, the reader learns that Abby's discovery of her sexuality and her growing girth took place "around the same time" (*TSOJP*, 15). Abby recalls: "it was like [her] body got swapped out with another one" (*TSOJP*, 15). She further explains the experience that she went through around the age of 11: "Nothing fit. I felt too big, and I literally was too big for my old clothes" (*TSOJP*, 15). The fat heroine admits that her new body, which could no longer fit into regular-sized garments, certainly "depressed" her (*TSOJP*, 15). At that time, Abby thought her fat body would make it hard for her to find new clothes and make her "future in fashion" impossible to realize (*TSOJP*, 15). That same "weird" year was also the year when Abby discovered that she wasn't dreaming about "kissing the boyband members," like her best friend Maliah. This was not because they shared different tastes in music, but because Abby was all of a sudden "dreaming about kissing girls" instead (*TSOJP*, 15). Whilst throughout the novel Abby constantly declares her dual identities as lesbian and fat, both to people around her and in her own head, I argue that she feels much more "at peace" with being out as queer than as fat in this novel.

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<sup>22</sup> Marilyn Farwell, *Heterosexual Plots and Lesbian Narratives* (New York, NY: New York University Press, 1996), p. 40.

<sup>23</sup> Lisa Duggan, *The Twilight of Equality? Neoliberalism, Cultural Politics, and the Attack on Democracy* (Boston, MA: Beacon, 2004), p. 50.



Whilst Abby has always been largely at ease with her sexuality, as I have demonstrated, she displays a more complicated and ambivalent attitude toward her fat body. Eve Sedgwick points out that there is a fundamental relationship between queerness and shame. Sedgwick argues: “There’s no way that any amount of affirmative reclamation is going to succeed in detaching the word [queer] from its associations with shame.”<sup>24</sup> However, the fat heroine exhibits no sign of gay shame. Rather, she is shown to be struggling with only fat shame in the novel. We might say that the fat heroine is both in and out of the closet with her identity as a fat girl.

Michael Brown considers the metaphor of the closet with regard to being queer, which can also be applied to being fat: “People can be in and out of the closet simultaneously...Its space can reveal and conceal at the same time, often dependent on one’s own location.”<sup>25</sup> Diana Fuss agrees with Brown, explaining that the rhetoric of the inside/outside connected with the closet disguises the idea that people are both inside and outside simultaneously.<sup>26</sup> When Abby’s mom tells her to stop calling herself fat, Abby comes out as fat in front of her mom: “Why not? It’s not an insult, just a thing. A thing I am” (*TSOJP*, 153). Similarly, when Jax denies that Abby is fat, the heroine declares herself fat to him: “I am. It’s fine. Being fat isn’t bad. Acting like fat’s an insult is, though” (*TSOJP*, 33). Here Abby is not “disclosing,” as much as “affirming,” her fatness to her mother and Jax.<sup>27</sup> Abigail C. Saguy and Anna Ward argue: “While coming out as fat...does not involve revealing a secret about one’s body size, it does reveal the surprising – and potentially subversive – attitude that being fat is acceptable.”<sup>28</sup> Abby seems keen to reclaim the term fat, which is often used as an insult, as a neutral or even positive descriptor for her non-normative body size.

Although Abby is able to come out as fat in front of her mom and her new friend, she nevertheless struggles with ambivalent feelings toward her fat body. She chooses to conceal the

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<sup>24</sup> Eve Sedgwick, “Queer Performativity: Henry James’s the Art of the Novel,” *A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 1, no. 1 (1993): 1–16 (4).

<sup>25</sup> Michael Brown, *Closet Space: Geographies of Metaphor from the Body to the Globe* (London: Routledge, 2000), p. 147.

<sup>26</sup> Diana Fuss, *Inside/Out: Lesbian Theories, Gay Theories* (New York, NY: Routledge, 1991), p. 5.

<sup>27</sup> Abigail C. Saguy and Anna Ward, “Coming Out as Fat: Rethinking Stigma,” *Social Psychology Quarterly* 74, no. 1 (2011): 53–75 (54).

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 66.

feelings of resentment, dissatisfaction, unhappiness, and anxiety that an internalization of society's understanding of her fat body provokes her into feeling. When the fat heroine and Jordi kiss in the car, Abby ponders to herself: "How did I think I could continue to make out with a girl without thinking about my size?" (*TSOJP*, 118). When Abby is in Jordi's bedroom for the first time, she admits to Jordi that she's not yet ready to take her clothes off. But she hides the fact that her anxiety about her fat body is the reason why she is not ready to become more intimate with Jordi. She asks herself in private, "I wonder if I was thin if I would be [ready to take my clothes off in front of Jordi]. I really hope not" (*TSOJP*, 149). The fat heroine is aware that she has internalized fat phobia despite insistently coming out as fat to her mother and Jax. When Abby asks her mom why she wants Abby to be thin, her mom admits that she just "want[s] [her] life to be easy." Abby responds by sort of coming out again as a fatso to her mom: "Can't I just be me? I feel like that's the easiest option" (*TSOJP*, 231).

Despite being able to come out as a fat person several times, when she cannot wear Maliah's pajamas on the night she breaks up with Jordi, Abby secretly admits to herself: "I can't fit into any of her pajamas, and yes, I know if I were thin then I could have and all my other life problems would be solved, too" (*TSOJP*, 221). Clearly, Abby is able to consistently come out as fat in front of her mother and her peers. However, she does "occupy the closet" at times, concealing the fact that she wants to blame her fat body for obstructing her from achieving happiness, confidence, and an easier life.<sup>29</sup> I contend that, being unable to frankly admit that she is at times ashamed and anxious about having a fat body in a fat-phobic society, means that Abby has remained closeted due to veiling her fat shame in this specific context.

The notion of the closet, as I have been demonstrating, can be used to think about both non-normative sexualities and non-normative body size. Samantha Murray draws a parallel between the fat body and the gay body, via Eve Sedgwick's *Epistemology of the Closet*, to explore how the meanings of these two bodies are constructed within heteronormative discourses.<sup>30</sup> In

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<sup>29</sup> Robyn Longhurst, "Queering Body Size and Shape: Performativity, the Closet, Shame, and Orientation," in *Queering Fat Embodiment*, eds. Cat Pausé, Jackie Wykes, and Samantha Murray (London and New York, NY: Routledge, 2016), pp. 13–25 (p. 18).

<sup>30</sup> Samantha Murray, "(Un/Be)Coming Out? Rethinking Fat Politics," *Social Semiotics* 15, no. 2 (2005): 153–163; Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1990).

Sedgwick's influential text, she attempts to denaturalize the understandings we assume we have of homosexuality and its associated presumptions. Sedgwick points out that there is a "dangerous consensus of knowingness about the unknown" when we think about the gay body.<sup>31</sup> Murray applies this argument to the fat body as well.<sup>32</sup> When one thinks of the fat body, the stereotypical images of being "sloppy," "lazy," "asexual," "socially unattractive," "sexually inactive," "undisciplined," "less productive," and "out of control" tend to be provoked in one's mind, regardless of the actual characteristics that the owner of the fat body may possess.<sup>33</sup>

Abby, for instance, is encouraged by her mom to lose weight. Her mother wants her to be "happy and healthy," which implies that she perceives her daughter's fat body as being miserable and unhealthy. The way in which Abby's mother reads her daughter's fat body negatively sits in contrast to the fact that Abby's doctor evaluates it as "very healthy" (*TSOJP*, 153). Author Spalding continues to further debunk the denigrating image of fat bodies as lazy, inactive, and prone to early death. She repeatedly writes that Abby often eats "healthy" food full of vegetables and few carbs and that Abby is the only character in the novel who loves to walk everywhere (*TSOJP*, 153). However, despite all of Abby's "healthy" habits, she is the only fat character in the novel.

The way in which Spalding constructs Abby's fat body can be considered part of fat acceptance activist work, which seeks to humanize and redeem the fat body.<sup>34</sup> By writing Abby as having a healthy fat body, the author is attempting to "debunk medical myths around fat and health," "uncouple fat from negative perceptions, and reduce stigma and prejudice."<sup>35</sup> This is an attempt to create the archetype of a good fatty that I have discussed in Chapter 3, and I will respond to Spalding's efforts to construct a good fatty as her fat romance heroine in my revision later.

As discussed above, Spalding attempts to expose and dismantle the degrading perception of Abby's fat female body. She seems to suggest that one cannot assume the absolute "truth" about

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<sup>31</sup> Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet*, p. 45.

<sup>32</sup> Murray, "(Un/Be)Coming Out?" p. 157.

<sup>33</sup> Pause, "Live to Tell: Coming Out as Fat," *Somatechnics* 2, no. 1 (2012): 42–56 (45).

<sup>34</sup> Chalklin, "Obstinate fatties," p. 107.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*

the hypervisible fat body exemplified by Abby's mom, who incorrectly reads her daughter's fat body due to her negative assumptions about fatness. Abby echoes this concern about people assuming knowledge about her fat body and tending to associate it with all these negative characteristics: "I like how I look, usually, but people – especially people on the internet – can be so mean when you're fat. As if fat makes you stupid or dirty or irresponsible. As if fat makes you anything other than...fat" (*TSOJP*, 204). Abby is fully aware that the label fat has never been just a word to describe a particular type of body, but comes with a baggage of many more denigrating traits associated with the term.

The fat body is always already "out."<sup>36</sup> As Michael Moon points out, the fat body reveals "a stigma that could never be hidden because it simply is the stigma of visibility." Moon goes on to pose a question: "What kind of secret can the body of the fat woman keep?"<sup>37</sup> Moon seems to be suggesting that, when one sees a fat body, s/he will be able to recognize it as fat immediately. However, I would like to argue that each person's definition of what counts as "fat" varies, depending on individual experiences and cultural contexts; even those looking at the same fat body are very likely to have different labels to define that body. For example, I see myself as a fat woman regardless of how many kilograms I have gained or lost through different stages of life. Thai people always perceive my body as fat. Some western friends who are larger than me consider me not fat and some perceive my body as being "in between," not thin and not fat enough to be called so. Although the fat body seems to be hypervisible, Sedgwick explicitly suggests that "there is such a process as coming out as a fat woman."<sup>38</sup> Her suggestion seems to contradict the idea above that the fat body is always already out. Despite one's fat hypervisibility, being able to bravely declare the "truth" about one's body allows one to construct new, distinct, and possibly positive ways of being "seen."<sup>39</sup> Sedgwick further argues that coming out "is a way of staking one's claim to insist on, and participate actively in, a renegotiation of the representational contract between one's body and one's world."<sup>40</sup> By insisting that we can "speak" our fatness even where our fat bodies are self-evident, Sedgwick

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<sup>36</sup> Murray, "(Un/Be)Coming Out?" p. 157.

<sup>37</sup> Michael Moon and Sedgwick, "Divinity: A Dossier, A Performance Piece, A Little-Understood Emotion," in *Tendencies*, ed. Sedgwick (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1993), pp. 215–251 (p. 229).

<sup>38</sup> Sedgwick, *Tendencies*, p. 230.

<sup>39</sup> Murray, "(Un/Be)Coming Out?" p. 157.

<sup>40</sup> Sedgwick, *Tendencies*, p. 230.

thus believes that we can “come out” as fat.<sup>41</sup> This is a notion that has also been embraced by the Size Acceptance Movement, particularly in the USA and the UK.<sup>42</sup>

Murray would certainly endorse how Abby would seem to function both in and out of the closet as a fat girl. This fat studies scholar perceives the act of coming out as a fat woman to be problematic. She argues that, when one decides to “out” oneself as a fat woman, one seems to construct an unambiguous identity.<sup>43</sup> For Murray, the act of coming out demands absolute acceptance and comfort with one’s fatness (Pausé, another fat studies scholar, disagrees with her idea and I will return to address this in my conclusion). This is where she has a problem with fully accepting or embracing the fat politics or the central philosophy of most size-acceptance organizations. She argues in her book *The Fat Female Body* and her article “(Un/Be)Coming Out? Rethinking Fat Politics” that fat politics seems to reinforce the unitary self, which does not allow space for us to think and feel different things at the same time. Ambivalence about fat pride, she contends, is not really accepted in fat activist discourse.<sup>44</sup> There is no space in fat politics permitting “occasional questioning, dissonance, or feeling[s] of uncertainty” in Murray’s opinion.<sup>45</sup> Murray repeatedly confesses that she has always experienced and lived her fat body in multiple, ambiguous, and contradictory ways.<sup>46</sup> Her critique of the act of “coming out” as a fat woman with full pride, which seems to allow “no grey areas, no contradictions, no questions, no ambivalence,”<sup>47</sup> has pacified me when I have been overwhelmed by fat politics, constantly doubting myself and thinking that I was not “good” enough to even be part of the sphere of fat studies or fat activism.

The people around Abby, it would seem, are able to acknowledge and accept it when Abby comes out as queer rather than as fat (except her mother, who does not want Abby to be either queer or fat). In the first scene where Jax appears, he assumes that Abby likes eating burgers. Abby quickly shoots him a question: “What? Burgers? Because I’m fat?” (*TSOJP*, 33). Jax

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<sup>41</sup> Murray, “(Un/Be)Coming Out?” p. 153; Sedgwick, *Tendencies*, p. 230.

<sup>42</sup> Murray, “(Un/Be)Coming Out?” p. 157.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 160.

<sup>44</sup> Murray, *The “Fat” Female Body* (Hampshire, MA and New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), pp. 169–180; “(Un/Be)Coming Out?” p. 160.

<sup>45</sup> Pausé, “Live to Tell: Coming Out as Fat,” p. 43.

<sup>46</sup> Murray, “(Un/Be)Coming Out?” p. 153.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 160.

immediately shouts: “No! You’re not! –” (*TSOJP*, 33). The way in which Jax resists reading Abby’s body as fat recalls how Mike, the hero in *Dangerous Curves Ahead* discussed in Chapter 2, also rejects Ellis’s decision to label her body as fat. Abby has to firmly come out to Jax again by stating that she identifies as fat (*TSOJP*, 33). This scenario resembles what another key fat studies scholar, Pausé, experiences in her life with her friends, who keep telling her that she is not fat. Pausé interprets the implication behind her friends’ efforts in repeatedly rejecting her body as fat as follows: “What my friends are trying to say is that I do not match the stereotype of fat. I am not ugly, smelly, lazy, undisciplined, unlovable, unfashionable, asexual, or unattractive.”<sup>48</sup> Like Pausé’s friends, Jax chooses to insist that Abby, whom he wants to befriend, is not fat, because he also holds the negative assumed knowledge about the fat body. In contrast to his denigrating understanding of the fat body, Jax seems to possess positive assumed knowledge about Abby’s queer sexuality, which I will now discuss in detail.

While Jax will not identify Abby’s body as fat, he is able to acknowledge her queer sexuality right away, even though Abby has never come out to him about her sexual identity. He reveals another reason why he wants to hang out with her. Apart from his desire to invite her on a burger-hunting mission, Jax hopes to get her “girl advice.” A boy like Jax “with all the confidence in the world as far as girls are concerned” considers her to be his “best possible source” for consulting about the girl he has a crush on. Jax explains why he believes so: “You’re a girl and you date girls. You have all the girl knowledge someone could possess” (*TSOJP*, 39). But in reality, Abby has only ever liked “one real girl,” who “turned out to be straight,” at the time when they hold this conversation (*TSOJP*, 39). She has zero experience of dating girls and has had no success in romantic relationships before falling for Jordi. This scene can also be read as challenging heteronormativity: there is something profoundly subversive about a heterosexual man seeking dating advice about girls from a lesbian, potentially modeling his own romantic behavior on that of a lesbian.

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<sup>48</sup> Pausé, “Live to Tell: Coming Out as Fat,” p. 45.

Spalding here seems to be taking up Judith Butler's challenge to the idea that lesbianism is "a fake or a bad copy" of heterosexuality by making Jax imitate Abby's queerness instead.<sup>49</sup> Setting lesbianism as a model for a straight man to emulate disrupts the construction of heterosexuality as the "origin," in opposition to homosexuality, which is seen as its "copy."<sup>50</sup> This particular scene supports Butler's argument that: "all gendering is a kind of impersonation and approximation," and that "gender is a kind of imitation for which there is no original."<sup>51</sup> Butler further explains that heterosexuality is an imitation of an idealized concept of what heterosexuality is, or what she calls "an imitation of itself."<sup>52</sup> Hence, even if homosexuality is a copy, it is only "an imitation of an imitation, a copy of a copy, for which there is no original."<sup>53</sup> While Abby may fantasize about the heteronormative model of marriage and having babies, Jax is also written as having the desire to mimic the lesbian model, hoping to achieve a successful romantic relationship.

Clearly, Abby's sexuality is obvious to Jax, despite it not being a visible characteristic. But he refuses to acknowledge her fat body, which is already "out" by itself. Spalding therefore perpetuates the denigration of fat as a label that "nice" men in romance fiction should never use with reference to women, while attempting to normalize queer sexuality. Abby's queer sexuality is intelligible to Jax in the same way that Jordi's sexuality is also assumed by Maliah to be "definitely gay" (*TSOJP*, 95). Spalding seems to construct queer sexuality as a more or less possible default sexuality in this novel, subverting how heterosexuality has always been written as such, both in romance novels and in society more generally. The genre of adolescent fat romance surely allows the author to create a progressive queer text that disrupts heteronormativity. However, it would seem that there is still a limit to what this genre will permit its authors to write and publish in relation to fat bodies. Spalding still chooses to publish a fat romance narrative that perpetuates the assumed knowledge about fat as a bad and undesirable trait for women to have. She therefore repeats the same US fat romance trope that I discussed in

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<sup>49</sup> Judith Butler, "Imitation and Gender Insubordination," in *Lesbian and Gay Studies Reader*, eds. Henry Abelove, Michele Aina Barale, and David M. Halperin (New York, NY: Routledge, 1993), pp. 307–320 (p. 310).

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 313.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 314.

Chapter 2: that “good-hearted” heterosexual men such as Mike, Bo, and Jax should never assign the term fat to women.

Certainly, Jordi is able to completely accept Abby’s sexual identity as a lesbian because she is sexually attracted to the heroine herself, with no display of gay shame or internalized homophobia. Nevertheless, she is still unable to utter out loud that Abby is a fat girl. Spalding utilizes the same strategy as author Murphy, who makes the hero neither confirm nor reject that the heroine is fat, but rather makes him insist that she is “beautiful” in his eyes. Abby recalls a bitter memory of her mother telling her to lose weight so that she can finally become “happy and pretty”. “Being pretty...it’s not my goal anyway. And it’s not about *my size*,” she tells Jordi while crying out of frustration (*italics in original*). Jordi tells her to “shut up” and smiles before declaring the compulsory sentence: “You’re beautiful.” The two then proceed to kiss for the first time (*TSOJP*, 102).

Spalding has written a scene in which the fat heroine’s love interest implicitly refers to the size of the fat heroine’s body. Nevertheless, she is still not allowed to straightforwardly utter the word fat. When Abby and Jordi kiss in the car, Abby is worried that Jordi will discover “exactly how much space [she] take[s] up” when Jordi’s hands grasp her waist” (*TSOJP*, 118). Jordi replies after understanding Abby’s concern with what is probably my favorite sentence that I have ever read in fat romance: “You take up the right amount of space,” before continuing to prohibit her from “say[ing] things like that” (*TSOJP*, 118).

Although I consider this sentence to be a romantic gesture that comes closest to accepting the fat heroine’s body as it is, Jordi nevertheless follows the convention of the love interest of the fat heroine in my selected US fat romance novels. Despite the fact that Abby can come out as fat in front of her girlfriend, Jordi will not acknowledge that the fat heroine is fat, but will not deny that she is fat either. She will only repeat the same message that Bo does to Willowdean; for Jordi, the fat heroine is and will always be “beautiful” in her eyes, with no direct reference to her non-normative body size.



## Writing the Thai Bad Queer Fatty and Her Coming Out Narrative

In *the Summer of Jordi Perez*, Abby is able to constantly come out as both queer and fat. Interestingly, Spalding portrays her fat heroine as owning zero queer shame, while occasionally displaying covert fat shame. Robyn Longhurst points out: “Thinking about closets (both metaphorical and material) inevitably provokes thinking about shame and pride, which are also deeply entangled in the politics of body size and shape.”<sup>54</sup> In this short story, I intend to allow Pim, my fat heroine, to be able to come out as both queer and fat whilst simultaneously being able to explore her queer and fat shame. I also seek to follow the way in which Spalding subverts heteronormativity in her novel by attempting to construct queer sexuality as a default mode of sexuality as well. Regardless of how progressive this queer fat romance is, I argue that Spalding still constructs Abby as a “good” queer fatty, who deserves to be loved by Jordi. I seek to subvert this archetype of the good fatty that Spalding uses to create her heroine by exploring how I can construct my fat heroine as a bad queer fatty instead.

As there is a lack of Thai queer romances featuring a fat heroine, I have sought to write my own queer fat romance that responds specifically to one aspect of Thai *yuri*. Nutnicha Premdecha, a bisexual *yuri* author who has not come out to her family yet, states in her interview with *Time Out Bangkok* magazine that her friends only enjoy reading *yuri* novels that feature two “beautiful” thin femme women.<sup>55</sup> “Whenever my friends saw *yuri* texts featuring *tom* [butches] as protagonists, they found it weird, despite the fact that *tom* are part of our community,” Premdecha adds. From my personal experience of reading Thai *yuri*, although their plots may vary, I have only encountered thin female protagonists with bright complexions and long hair, which probably reflects the popularity of heroines who conform perfectly to the conventional norm of Thai feminine beauty among *yuri* readers and writers. Therefore, I seek to subvert the typical Thai *yuri* novels by featuring both thin and fat masculine women as the main protagonists in my short story. My creation of Thai *yuri* featuring a fat heroine is as follows:

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<sup>54</sup> Longhurst, “Queering Body Size and Shape,” p. 19.

<sup>55</sup> Nutnicha Premdecha, interview by Kenika Ruaytanapanich, “Getting to Know the Yuri World,” *Time Out Bangkok*, June 26, 2020 (in Thai).

It was already six thirty-five in the morning. I quickly jumped into the shower and then dressed my fat body in the hideous school uniform. It consisted of a white blouse and blue pleated skirt. We were forced to also wear an undershirt so that no one could see our bra under the thin white blouse. I always wore short leggings under my skirt, too. My fat body felt like it was about to explode due to the multiple layers of clothing in a 40-degree Celsius Thai summer.

A reflection of a grumpy fat girl with a super-short pixie cut looked back at me from the mirror. I was kind of content with what I saw and grabbed my backpack ready to leave for school.

“Hey! Eat something before you go to school!” My dad in his favorite black cat apron shouted from the kitchen as he made breakfast for us. My mom worked in a different city and only came home at the weekends. She said she missed his home-cooked food on our phone call every day. I decided to go into the kitchen. Two plates full of stir-fried noodles with jumbo king prawns were on the table. I smelt tamarind, fish sauce, and fresh chilies. And that was enough for me to sit down and devour it all.

Dad sat next to me watching me eat his food with a broad smile. He was proud of the food he made. Sometimes I wondered whether he had ever regretted the decision to let Mom advance in her career. They were both government officers. The rule for gaining a promotion was to move around the country as much as you could. My parents had decided that only one of them could do that so that I would be given proper care and support. Dad’s salary had never really gone up in half a decade, while Mom’s income was almost triple his. Sometimes I felt bad for him. But why? My mom rightfully deserved what she earned, and I felt grateful for what my dad had done for me. I wondered, if Mom had been the one who earned less income, would I feel bad for her?

At my all-girls’ school, we were put into four categories, mostly based on how we looked and whom we dated. There were *tom*,<sup>56</sup> *dee*,<sup>57</sup> *bi*, and straight. I was always referred to as “that fat *tom* who has no friends.” Students made assumptions about my sexuality purely based on how I

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<sup>56</sup> Butch.

<sup>57</sup> Femme.

looked. So did the teachers. They kept telling me: “It’s just a phase...you’ll get over it when you’re older. You will eventually find a man, marry him, and raise children with him.”

Romances between females were often taken as something less serious. Just a temporary phase that would quickly fade. Things were quite different at all-boys’ schools though. My cousin told me his teachers would take immediate action if they saw any *deviant* boys. Parents would get a phone call and they had to cooperate with the teachers in finding ways to make their boys become *normal* again.

“Your hair is way too short!” A teacher who was standing in front of the school gate greeting students that morning shouted, while grabbing my hair without my permission. Her other hand was still holding scissors. Students’ hair was one of their major concerns. Our hair was always too long or too short for them. The scene of the morning haircut was typical. Schoolteachers transformed into hairdressers as if it were their second job. Girls with long, colored, or layered hair would be punished the moment they stepped inside the gate.

“Yeah? Should I wear a wig to school tomorrow then?” This was not even me being sarcastic. Unbelievably, they had asked a few students with extremely short hair to wear wigs to school. Teachers said they looked too manly and that was unacceptable. But when some of the girls looked too femininely seductive, the teachers didn’t like that either. The level of absurdity in Thai public schools was beyond my imagination. I had kept a private Twitter account since I was thirteen documenting how unreasonably cruel they were in disciplining us and our bodies. Four years with a total of over ten thousand tweets, only on this one subject. I could publish a book out of it.

The teacher looked extremely annoyed and was about to say something harsh. But she closed her mouth when another student greeted her. That student was Mon, a class leader in my year. We had been in the same class for a few years now. I’d never really “talked” to her, despite doing group work with her all the time. She was a student with perfect grades, the perfect demeanor, and perfect hair. She had always been assumed to be straight. A *perfect* label for her sexuality, I guessed.

But to my surprise, this semester she had returned to school with short hair...even shorter than mine and nobody had said a word. Teachers didn’t touch her hair and still gave her the same admiring looks. To them, Mon remained the school pride, as always. I heard a rumor that Mon had been dating a perfect petite *dee* from a different school during the summer break. And that

was enough to stop people questioning why Mon had had her hair cut extremely short all of a sudden.

I quickly ran to the classroom, reserving a desk by putting my backpack on it. At eight o'clock every morning, students had to gather in front of the national flag and sing our national anthem. School made us spend energy on senseless things all the time. But if your family was rich enough to send you to British or American schools in Bangkok, you would never have to do all this shit. And no one would ever dare to touch your hair, either.

The last day of school finally arrived. I couldn't wait for this semester to be over. Tomorrow would be my first day of an internship at a local boutique, Manow. It was my favorite brand. I remembered the moment of excitement when I went to this shop for the first time. I liked the fact that Manow didn't stop at size 18 and said "we make clothes for everyone." Since that day, I knew that I had to do my internship here and hoped to get a job after that.

Today I wore a black pineapple linen shirt and brown culotte pants from Manow for my first day of internship. I was so excited that I left really early, even before my dad could finish his cooking. Srinuan, the owner and designer of the boutique, told me that there would be another intern starting on the same day as me. I would work on social media marketing plans. The other person would work as a photographer. Srinuan told me that one of us would be chosen to work at the store after the internship ended. I hadn't really been able to sleep for a few days now. Thinking of how to impress people wasn't my strong suit.

I hated walking. I got out of the train station and had to walk for at least twenty minutes. Everyone looked at my body and assumed that I wouldn't enjoy walking. And they were right.

If thin people could be lazy, a fatty like me could be lazy, too. Even if thin people wouldn't be too lazy to walk, I would still choose to be lazy if I wanted to.

I even walked with a bag of chips in my hands. I licked my greasy, sour-onion-flavored lips. I was losing patience. Five minutes of walking was already too much for me.

I raised my hand in the air, calling for a motorcycle taxi driver to pick me up. I got on the back of the motorcycle. I heard the driver whine that I was too fat, and he felt like he was being squashed. I felt bad, but not for long. I was so anxious and was only thinking about the internship the whole ride. I wanted the owner to pick me, not the other intern. I had to impress her with my fashion knowledge.

Finally, I arrived. I even tipped the driver.

I took a deep breath and put my game face on.

I didn't come here to make friends. I came here to win. Those sentences were from my fave drag race contestant. I kept reciting those two sentences over and over.

I stood in front of the store and was ready to open the door. But someone inside the shop was already pulling it open for me.

"Hey, Pim."

My mouth dropped open. I didn't know that the other intern was Mon. I didn't know she was interested in photography. I only knew that she was really good at taking exams. I thought people with good grades would do an internship at a big company, not a small boutique close to school. This super skinny girl with a smile brighter than Bangkok's sun asked whether I had eaten breakfast. I pressed my lips tightly together and nodded. Potato chips were my breakfast.

"That's great. I haven't had breakfast yet. Too excited to eat," Mon said.

I swallowed my saliva and anxiously took out my chip bag. "You want some?"

A fat gal with fatty food in her hand. I was contributing to the perfect stereotyped vision of us.

I knew I was a bad fatty. And I had never wanted to be a good one.

"Oh, thank you." She nodded and took the chip bag from me. "That's my favorite flavor!" Her voice was so cheerful and full of life as always. Her hair was shinier than my cat's hair. What should I do? I already knew I couldn't hate her even if she ended up taking the job.

"Is Srinuan here now?" I asked.

"Yeah, she arrived ten minutes ago. She's in her office right now." Mon put a handful of chips in her mouth and chewed them quickly and loudly. She must have been really hungry.

"I didn't know you're into photography," I murmured.

Mon grinned and put her hand into the chip bag again. "I join a photography club every year. I even helped our school take photos on the annual sports day. The photos from that day that they put on the school website are all mine." I could clearly see how proud Mon was. When our teachers announced that she got the highest marks on all the exams last semester, she didn't look this happy.

“Really? They’re all yours? I thought they hired someone professional to do it...I mean ...I didn’t expect a high school student can do that...” I stumbled over my words. I didn’t know where I was going with this conversation.

Mon smiled, “I’ll take that as a compliment.”

I knew I hadn’t hidden my astonishment very well. I had no memory of seeing this person holding a camera at school before. I mumbled, “I-I’m sor –”

“We don’t really talk that much at school. It’s okay for you not to know what I do apart from studying.” Not even her explanation could redeem me. I was already filled with too much guilt. And I rarely felt guilty. Even when I watched TV all day with a chip bag in my hands and a fat cat on my lap, I didn’t feel guilty at all. I didn’t even know what people meant when they said something was their guilty pleasure. I only knew pleasure.

“Come on in, guys,” Srinuan opened her office door and beckoned us inside.

Mon was responsible for taking photos of all the new items that would be sold online. I was assigned the task of putting ironed dresses on the racks. I saw Mon doing really well with her professional camera in another room. She was so good working with the model. She even came up with new poses and directed the model how to move her body to get more lighting. I saw Srinuan looking utterly pleased with her new intern.

Thinking that I could impress Srinuan with my sense of fashion was such a rubbish plan. I felt useless. My job was so simple. Anyone could do it.

Someone pushed open the door and came into the store. I immediately greeted this customer before even looking up.

“Hey. Working hard, huh? No doubt you’ve had no time to return my texts.”

A super tall jock who liked to flex his muscles all the time was grinning at me. His name was Jira. He was persistent in trying to get me to try Padthai at different restaurants and rate them on his dad’s new food review app.

“Why are you here? I’m working. Don’t even think of doing anything silly here.”

“When will you say yes? Just join me to eat Padthai for free! Isn’t that a great idea?”

“I know you think I’m fat and I love to eat. That’s true. But I don’t need to do what you want.” I didn’t even look at him anymore. I was busily putting all the clothes on the rack and trying to not mess up the sizes.

Jira sighed and took a dress from my hand. “I told you I’ve watched you eating in our school cafeteria for months! Whenever you ate something you liked, your eyes were filled with sparkles. But when you hated something, I could see that from your eyes right away, too! That’s the person I need to work with! Your passion for food would really help my dad’s app!”

“Go away. I’m working. I won’t say yes. I don’t like to eat Padthai every two days.”

I grabbed the dress from his hand and put it on the rack. I heard Mon, Srinuan, and the model laughing as if they were having so much fun in the other room. And I was stuck with piles of clothes and a boy who wouldn’t take no for answer.

“How about twice a week? And I buy you whatever clothes you like every week?”

“Are you trying to use money to get me to do what you want? A rich kid like you is just—” I saw Jira walking toward a rack full of colorful mangosteen shirts. I pressed my lips together tightly. I’d been eyeing that shirt for a while. I just didn’t have enough money to buy it yet.

Jira was reaching for the shirts at the back of the rack. I smiled.

I liked that he saw me as fat.

He was hesitant about whether to pick the largest or the second largest size. I saw him grabbing them both. He’d never had such a serious look on his face before.

“It’s 28,” I told him.

He took it and looked at me as if he wanted to hear my approval one last time. “This shirt? You like it?”

“Pay for it and I’ll see you at whatever Padthai places you want me to be at.”

Jira shouted his thanks so loudly I had to tell him to stop. He walked to the cashier right away with his wallet.

A few weeks passed, and I lost count of how many times Mon drove me home after work. We didn’t get to talk much during work, because there was so much stuff for us to do. She was always busily taking photos of all the new items. I was assigned with writing social media posts for those new clothes.

I learned a few more things about Mon on the way home. Being stuck in Bangkok traffic gave us two more hours to talk every day. This evening, we talked so much that I thought we

would run out of topics. Suddenly, my phone buzzed. Jira had sent me a photo of a girl he liked. When I didn't reply, he called me right away.

"Yeah...I saw your text. She seems like a nice person...Of course I like her...what kind of question is that? Stop nagging me." I ended the call with Jira. He kept asking me whether the girl in the photo was cute enough or not.

"Your Padthai-eating buddy called?" Mon asked. She might have heard his voice through the phone. Jira loved to shout whenever he couldn't contain his excitement.

I nodded and was about to complain about Jira, but Mon muttered her question: "You two were talking about a girl?" She paused as if she needed time to rephrase her question, "You've got a crush on someone?"

"What? No—" I wasn't sure what this conversation was all about.

"You like that girl who you said seemed like a nice person?" Mon blurted out.

"No. I don't even know her. It's someone Jira likes." My cheeks went hot. Mon had never asked whether I liked Jira romantically. Even though she knew Jira and I met so many times in one week. But when she heard me complimenting a girl, she just had to ask me whether I had a crush on this girl I'd never met?

"Okay. Good," Mon smiled. I dug my nails into my palm and chewed chips loudly. My heart was beating like a very fast drum. Mon was still smiling, but she didn't say anything else. Finally, her car arrived at my house. I quickly said thank you and went inside the gate trying to hide my blushing face.

Today, the traffic was particularly bad. The rain was pouring really hard. Mon and I had been sitting in the car for at least an hour now. I'd shown Mon all the cat photos I had on my phone, but her car still hadn't moved. I was eating my second bag of chips when Mon told me that she came out<sup>58</sup> to her mom months ago.

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<sup>58</sup> In the Thai language, we do not use the metaphor of coming out of the closet to refer to the act of revealing one's sexuality. The term in Thai is *perd-tua*, which literally translates as "open (my/your)self." There is also another term used to refer to the act of coming out in Thailand; we borrow the phrase from English and re-adjust its meaning for this particular usage. It is the term "grand opening." We use this noun as a verb in the Thai language to refer to the act of male actors coming out. (For example, *Dara chai kon nun grand opening lung jak yoo nai wongkan ma sip phee*/ That actor finally "grand-opening(s)" after working in show biz for ten years.) I examined the language that the media uses to refer to gay actresses' act of coming out and observed that they only use the phrase *perd-tua*, not the phrase "grand-opening" for females. I speculate that male actors' non-normative sexuality is depicted as more of a spectacle in Thai media discourses.



“I just told my mom that I could be anything, but not straight. That’s all I know for now. There are so many labels for me to choose from, but at least I’m glad I could cross one out.”

I took a deep breath before telling her about what I did last year, too. “I sort of came out to my dad as well. I didn’t exactly tell him what I wanted to come out as. I just, you know...told him I wasn’t so sure I liked boys or something like that.” I couldn’t stop myself from smiling when the memory of that day came rushing back.

“My dad hugged me so tight,” I continued. “He said I could be whoever I wanted to be. He told me I need no one’s approval...not even his or Mom’s.” If it was possible, I wanted to tell the whole world how cool my dad was every day. How could I become this lucky?

I could clearly see Mon’s shoulders drooping. She sighed heavily. The smile on my face faded. Did I say something wrong? Did I brag too much? The only time in my life that I was about to have one friend and I just ruined it by being insensitive.

“I—just sometimes talk too much about myself. I’m sorry—”

Mon shook her head. “No need to say sorry...I’m just being really jealous. My mom told me that I could be gay or whatever I want as long as I’m still making good grades in school...” Mon paused all of a sudden as if there was something stuck in her throat that she found it hard to swallow.

“My big sister is straight. And she doesn’t even need to come out to my parents as that. My mom’s never told her that she’s allowed to be straight as long as she’s doing well in school. Why do I have to achieve something so I can be queer? Why do I have to meet her condition so I can be gay? That’s just not fair. It’s never been fair. Just tell me to my face that she can’t accept me the way I am...that might be less hurtful, Pim.”

Mon’s voice was shaky. Her breathing was shuddering. She stopped talking as if all the sentences streaming out of her mouth had taken all of her energy. In her silence, I could clearly hear her pain. I slowly patted her back, not knowing what else to do. We were only sixteen. Would it get even harder when we were older? If so, could the world come to an end tomorrow?

“Is cutting your hair short part of your coming out to your mom and to the whole school?” I knew why I had cut my hair short and wanted to take on a more masculine look. I had just never found the courage to tell anyone. I guessed I didn’t owe anyone an explanation of why I did what I did, not even my parents.

Mon smiled lightly and nodded. “I just needed to feel more queer...whatever that might mean. And at that time cutting my hair really short seemed to be the easiest thing for me to do. You probably think I’m dumb for doing that just to declare to the world that I’m no longer straight.”

I quickly shook my head, took a deep breath, and thought I had to take my turn sharing an episode of me being “dumb” so that Mon would know it was okay to be anything – dumb or not – in front of me.

“Is that what you call dumb? I’ve done things way dumber than that. Although I know that I don’t fancy boys, I’m still not sure whether I want to be more feminine or masculine or something in between. I used to be a bit more feminine in middle school... keeping long hair, putting on lipstick, and having tons of cute scrunchies, but people couldn’t stop condemning me for being fat. I hated it when they said: ‘You’re a girl, you shouldn’t be fat. You should control how you eat and lose all the extra weight.’ But when I decided to cut my hair short and act more masculine in ninth grade, nobody said a thing about my fat body anymore. They just called me a fat *tom*, but they didn’t tell me to lose weight. And I love that.”

“I think if you want to be feminine and fat, be it. Fuck those people who have a problem with it. I don’t have a problem with you being *dee* and fat.”

I didn’t know why I had to divert my eyes from Mon and pretend to look at my shoes instead after hearing that from her, “I don’t want to be *dee*...I mean I haven’t made up my mind yet...” I paused, because I knew I was lying. I suddenly felt ashamed of letting Mon know I was using the identity of *tom* just to have an easier life at school.

The way Mon stared at me and nodded as if she believed whatever I said made me feel guilty of lying, “I’m really embarrassed about telling you all this. I guess I want to be *dee* if I can, but I just don’t want people to keep telling me to shrink my body. I mean, I don’t want you to think that I’m faking myself as *tom*. Argh...it’s just not easy to be who I want to be, Mon. I did try to have long hair again when I was in tenth grade. People who knew me from ninth grade kept asking: ‘Have you changed your mind? You want to like boys again? You know that you have to lose weight now, don’t you?’ What the fuck was that? The length of my hair has nothing to do with me liking boys, who I’ve never thought of liking anyway. I then decided that having a masculine appearance is more convenient for me. These nosy people would finally let me be queer and fat in peace. See how my life is so fucked up and complicated?”

“Tell me about it...it’s not easy for me to even be gay in front of my mom if I don’t get straight As. At least your dad is fine with you being you. I secretly wish that we could switch our parents sometime.” Mon laughed bitterly. She still looked really sad when talking about her mom.

“If your mom can’t take it, that’s her problem...not yours...it’s not something you have to deal with at all in the first place. But I know you still need her money to survive, so it’s not as simple as what I just said...”

Mon suddenly fell silent. Her eyes were red. She was biting her lips really hard, trying not to cry. But I saw tears rolling down her cheeks. I sighed and thought about different ways to console her. Being queer is hard. Being fat is hard. Being financially dependent in a country where the average hourly part-time wage is less than £1 is hard. Trust me, the list could go on endlessly in a country like mine.

I took a deep breath before taking her hand and squeezing it gently, hoping to reassure her that there was at least one person who understood her. We became lost in our own thoughts while our fingers intertwined.

Tonight, Jira’s friend threw a party at his house while his parents were away on a business trip. I told him that I wouldn’t go to the party. But this morning, I saw on Mon’s Instagram that she would be at the party with her friends. So, I thought: why not?

“Heyyy! You told me yesterday when we were out eating Padthai that you wouldn’t come to Ton’s party!” Jira waved at me when he saw me at his best friend’s place.

“I–I just happen to have so much free time tonight,” I murmured, something that didn’t quite make sense even to myself.

Luckily, Jira believed it. He smiled and whispered, as though he didn’t want anyone to hear: “She’s here.”

“What?”

Jira blushed and whispered again, “That girl I told you about! She’s here now! Turn left and look to your right. She’s in a red dress holding a beer bottle in her hand.”

“And?” I looked at Goy, the girl who Jira couldn’t stop talking about every time we went to eat together.

“I really need to get her number. Do you have any plans?”

“We don’t need plans. You go and ask her yourself,” I replied while still looking at the roses printed on her red dress. I knew where the dress was from. It was a brand that I wanted to get a couple of dresses from, but they didn’t even make anything larger than 14.

Jira pouted. “Don’t abandon your friend like that. I need girl advice and you’re my best possible source.”

I looked at Jira and laughed. “How am I your best possible source on that?”

Jira winked and that gave me a touch of goosebumps. “You’re a girl and you date girls. You have all the girl knowledge someone could possess,” he said with a huge level of confidence.

I shook my head and corrected him. “You’re wrong. I’m straight.”

Jira’s mouth fell open. “No way. You look gay to me. I can’t be wrong about that. I can feel it.”

I chuckled and felt already drunk without even drinking. “Why do you think I’m gay? Are there any visible signs that make you feel like that?”

“I–I’m just feeling it!”

“What? Before you told me you like Goy, I looked at you and didn’t even know whether you liked girls or boys, or both. I mean I didn’t even care.”

Jira paused and thought for a second, “You looked annoyed whenever I waved at you in the cafeteria. You told me to stop nagging you for months! Any straight girls would be flattered to have my attention. And maybe because of your hair...”

“You think I’m gay because of my short hair?”

“Erm...one of the things...yeah, maybe that...”

“I’ve got a crush on one of your jock friends. I’m actually the one who needs your advice right now,” I lied with my poker face.

Jira’s mouth opened even wider. He looked more confused than ever.

I laughed. “I’m just messing with you. Yeah, I’m gay. And just so you know...in seventh grade, my hair was so long that it hit my butt. Me liking girls has absolutely nothing to do with hair. Plus, even if it was a girl nagging me to eat Padthai for her dad’s app, I would still turn her down...” I paused, thinking about if it were Mon asking me instead of Jira. Would I say yes then? I was sure she wouldn’t keep nagging me for months to do something that I initially didn’t want to.

“Why are you blushing? You haven’t even begun to drink! Have you got a headache? Are you dizzy? Want to sit down?” Jira looked concerned all the time when we hung out. If I walked and sighed heavily, he would interpret that as a sign of a possible heart attack and suggest that we should take a seat somewhere right away.

I couldn’t blame him for thinking that. My fat body looked sick all the time. And I was okay with that. He could read my body with any stereotypes he wanted to. It wasn’t my job to make everyone in the world read my body the “right” way. Whatever the right way was supposed to mean.

I turned around to look at Goy again. “Go and talk to her about the dress. Ask where she got it from. Tell her that you’re looking for your sister’s birthday present and that she looks stunning in this dress.”

I drank beer quietly in a corner that people rarely walked past. I felt so sleepy that I could barely keep my eyes open. Not even loud music could excite me.

“Shit!” I shouted. Someone had just literally puked on me. That person said sorry and vomited some more on the sofa where I was sitting. I stood up and wanted to say something bad to her. But she looked so wasted that I didn’t even want to bother. Her friends came and carried her to the bathroom and left me in my puke-stained shirt. Everything had happened in less than five minutes. I slowly blinked my eyes, trying to calm myself down.

“What happened? I heard the noise...” Mon ran toward me. I couldn’t believe how fast that was. Before the accident, I’d seen Mon talking to her friends at the opposite side of the room. I didn’t know she even knew where I was. Had she been keeping her eye on me? That thought made my heart race.

“Someone just threw up on me. My shirt stinks so bad right now. She must have been pretty drunk. I think I should go home. But I don’t want my dad to see me like this. I don’t want him to think that I can’t take care of myself. My dad trusts me so much. He’s never said no to me about anything. I don’t want to look bad in his eyes...” I thought I was talking too much. Mon didn’t have to listen to me blabbering nonsense.

But Mon seemed to see through me. She smiled and said: “I’ll get you home—” She paused and pressed her lips tightly together. I saw her cheeks turning kind of red.

“If you want, you can take a shower at my dorm, and if it’s okay with you, I can lend you something to wear.”

I finished taking a shower. I took a look at all the products Mon was using in her tidy bathroom. I didn’t know why I felt even closer to her now. I wrapped myself up in the towel Mon had given me. Then I took a deep breath and went out of the bathroom.

“Hey. Do you have a T-shirt I can borrow?” I felt a bit awkward to be standing in front of her in a towel like this.

Mon didn’t even look at me. Her cheeks became rosy again. She quickly jumped up from the sofa and hastily searched her wardrobe without saying a word. A few minutes later, she showed me some of her dark-colored T-shirts. After just a quick glance, I knew I couldn’t wear any of them. I sighed a little and asked whether she had anything larger than the ones in her hands. Mon ended up putting all of her clothes out on her bed. She was really trying to help, but I knew that nothing in her size would fit me. It was me trying to hold on to the slightest hope that I would magically fit into the clothes made for a size 8 body.

Perhaps there was too much happening in one day. I felt so vulnerable and wanted to cry. I was sniffing and trying my best to suppress my emotion.

“Are you okay-?”

“Y-Yeah. I’m fine. I’m just really exhausted today.” I turned away from Mon as I didn’t want her to see my watering eyes.

“Are you sure? If you’re really okay, can I at least see your face, Pim?”

I refused to turn around before muttering: “It’s just one of those days. I really hate my body right now. I mean, who wants to be fat? All the people around me are thin. I wish I could be as skinny as you and everyone else...” I laughed bitterly and didn’t let Mon speak, “I know I can’t fit into any of your clothes, and yes, I know if I were thin then I could have and all my other life problems would be solved, too.”

Mon appeared right in front of me and took my wrist gently, “Your being fat isn’t a problem.”

I bit my lips really hard, trying not to cry in front of her now. She placed her warm finger softly on my lips and whispered close to my ear: “Don’t bite your lip. I did that in the car that day and it was bleeding afterward. Trust me, blood doesn’t taste that good.”

I laughed and stopped biting my lips. Mon gradually moved her face closer to me and our lips touched. Hers were moist, hot, and super soft. My heart raced faster than the first day I discovered Manow offered clothes in my size. I was so embarrassed that Mon might have heard my heartbeats. And I told her so. Mon put my hand on her chest, and I could feel her heart dancing. My cheeks flushed. My whole body felt electrified as we continued to kiss.

Mon suddenly drew back from my lips, but I still wanted more. I looked at her with confusion.

“Sorry for kissing you. I should have asked first—” She paused as though she wasn’t sure that she should continue to say what was on her mind, “You like Goy?”

“What?” I had to look utterly confused right now. How did “Goy” become our topic? I didn’t think Mon knew Goy. They hung out with a totally different group of people. Mon was staring at me with so much intensity. She demanded an answer just by looking at me like that.

“Of course, I do. I don’t hate her—” I was trying to figure out why she asked me that question.

“Yeah, I saw you looking at her the whole night.”

It was more like I was looking at her dress the whole night. I wish I could have the same dress in my size. I was about to tell her about Jira’s crush on Goy and the dress she was wearing that I liked.

“Wait. Don’t tell me you’re jealous?”

Mon averted her gaze away from me. Her ears were turning as red as her cheeks right now. I had a broad smile on my face as I realized how much effect I had on her.

“No. I don’t like Goy that way. I already like someone else...” I didn’t want to keep talking anymore. I touched Mon’s warm cheeks and leaned in to kiss her again.

I lost sense of time. I didn’t know how long we’d been kissing. Mon waited until I eventually drew back from her lips and said: “I’ll go and ask the guy next door for some of his clothes. He always wears baggy stuff. Would you be okay with that?”

I nodded and didn’t even look her in the eyes. I suddenly felt embarrassed that I had taken the liberty of kissing her. Mon grabbed my waist and whispered: “Am I such a bad kisser that you can’t even look at me now, Pim?”

I wrinkled my nose and shook my head. “That dude might already have gone to bed if you’re still here talking to me like this.”

Mon laughed and ran to the door. I couldn't stop smiling after she left and took the chance to dry my body quickly.

In this short story, I wanted to construct a queer fat romance narrative that does not seek to resist the negative assumed knowledge about the *deviant* fat body. As I have already argued, Spalding aims to debunk the stereotypical image of the fat body as unhealthy and inactive in the scene where Abby's mother reads her fat daughter's body incorrectly. I appreciate that she intends to challenge the stereotypes about the fat body. But I also came to the realization that Spalding tries to justify her assertion that Abby deserves to be a heroine in a queer fat romance by depicting her as owning a fat body that is perfectly healthy and even more active than all the thin characters in the novel. Cooper argues against the archetype of the "good fatty" that Spalding perpetuates in her novel: "Fat people have as much right to be greedy, lazy, unfit or smelly as thinner people. By wanting to present only what we feel is positive and acceptable, we deny our human limitations as though they were a terrible affliction."<sup>59</sup> In my story, Pim prefers a sedentary lifestyle. She hates walking and is only prepared to walk for five minutes before calling a motorcycle taxi to take her to her destination. She does not feel ashamed about eating fatty food while walking, and even offers her chips to Mon with no hesitancy or attempt to hide her fondness of such food. When she realizes that Jira reads her fat body as sickly and prone to premature death, she does not feel the urge to make him reread her fat body in a positive light. My fat heroine does not attempt to "create compensatory personalities 'in spite of being fat,' in the hope that it will be [her] qualities that are noticed instead of her fat body."<sup>60</sup> She firmly declares to herself: "I knew I was a bad fatty. And I'd never wanted to be a good one." Pim is a bad fatty who does not have to find any compensatory characteristics to justify why she deserves to be loved by her love interest *despite* being fat.

Chalklin contends that the positive models of fat subjecthood can "potentially invite even more virulent fatphobia toward those who are unwilling or unable to be redeemed as 'good fatties'."<sup>61</sup>

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<sup>59</sup> Charlotte Cooper, *Fat and Proud*, p. 43.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>61</sup> Chalklin, "Obstinate fatties," p. 122.



In this short story, I seek to queer Spalding's construction of the good fatty archetype by invoking the negative assumed knowledge about fat people. I have to admit it was quite challenging for me not to debunk the stereotypes of the fat body after I had constructed the bad fatty heroine. I deleted some scenes in which I intended to prove that Pim's bad fat body has some other compensatory qualities. In the end, I still kept one justification scene in which I wrote that the thin love interest enjoys eating chips as much as my fat heroine does.

I also attempt to disrupt heteronormativity by not setting heterosexuality as the only default sexuality, as in the popular romance genre. As in the original novel, Jira assumes that Pim is queer without her having to come out to him. Mon also assumes that Pim's sexuality is queer even before the scene in which they take turns in telling their coming-out stories. Mon never asks the fat heroine whether she has a romantic interest in Jira, even though she knows how often they meet to eat Padthai. However, when Mon hears Pim complimenting a girl on the phone with Jira, she feels the urge to ask Pim whether she likes that girl romantically or not. The thin love interest gets jealous again when Pim pays attention to Goy at the party. Mon asks the fat heroine twice in my revision whether Pim likes the girl she is complimenting on the phone and whether she likes Goy. Obviously, the thin love interest never sees Jira as one of her potential romantic rivals throughout the story. Queerness is written into my revision as another default mode of sexuality, just as Spalding does in her novel.

In my short story, I allow Mon and Pim to have the "openness" to talk about fat and queer shame, unlike Abby's inability to be honest about her fat shame.<sup>62</sup> Feelings of shame, according to Elspeth Probyn, should not be ignored, but taken into serious consideration, because "whatever it is that shames you will be something that is important to you, an essential part of yourself."<sup>63</sup> Pim, the fat heroine, admits both her fat and queer shame to Mon as I seek to emphasize that being fat and queer are equally central to her identity. In the scene when Pim declares her fat shame to Mon after being unable to wear the thin heroine's clothes, I borrow the whole dialogue from Abby when she admits to herself that, if she were thin, she could have fit

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<sup>62</sup> Dina Georgis, "Thinking Past Pride: Queer Arab Shame In 'Bareed Mista3jil'," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 45, no. 2 (2013): 233–251 (234).

<sup>63</sup> Elspeth Probyn, *Blush: Faces of Shame* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2005), p. x.

into any clothes and all of her life's problems would be solved as well. But here I deliberately subvert the fat romance trope in the selected US fat romance novels that most bothers me; it is the compulsory scene where the love interest declares that the fat heroine is beautiful. I decide not to have the love interest tell my fat heroine that she is indeed beautiful in her eyes, with no direct mention of her fat body. Instead, I allow Mon to clearly acknowledge that Pim is fat and reaffirm to the fat heroine that "[her] being fat isn't a problem." It has always been my fantasy that I will read that line in the love confession scene in a fat romance novel, but that desire had never been fulfilled until I wrote it myself. I have attempted to write a scene in which the fat heroine is freely allowed to share her shame about having a fat body in a fat-phobic society without the thin love interest trying to patronize her by erasing her identity as fat by using the term "beautiful" instead. However, all the selected US fat romance novels have perpetuated that formulaic line.

Longhurst rightly contends that "[o]ne cannot just step outside of these structural relations that constitute the 'beautiful' body, nor can one simply decide to step away from shame and turn it into pride, because subjects are *subject to* the judgments of others. The self does not exist in isolation" (emphasis in original).<sup>64</sup> I imagine that Pim might want to hear that she is considered beautiful in her girlfriend's eyes, but hearing the term "beautiful" with no mention of the word fat, or even in a sentence such as "you're fat and beautiful," might still upset and frustrate my fat heroine, who has been pressured to conform to aesthetic ideals all her life. In the final scene, Pim admits that she is well aware of how much effect she has on the thin heroine even though there is no scene in which Mon declares that Pim is beautiful in my short story. This is my attempt to subvert the way in which popular romance narratives perpetuate the idea that one has to be praised or accepted as beautiful in the eyes of the love interest in order to justify to the readers why one can be loved and is able to find a potentially lifelong partnership with another protagonist.

Abby in *The Summer of Jordi Perez* surprisingly displays no queer shame at all. She is ideally able to "step away from shame and turn it into pride."<sup>65</sup> In my short story, however, I write my

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<sup>64</sup> Longhurst, "Queering Body Size and Shape," p. 20.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid.

fat heroine as experiencing some queer shame. Although Pim is able to come out as queer, she is still struggling with her desire to become a more feminine lesbian. Here is where I attempt to write a scene where fat and queer would clearly intersect. When the fat heroine decided to take on a more feminine identity, hoping to come out as *dee* in middle school, her fat body was severely policed because it transgressed the female body norm. However, when she decided to dress and act in a more masculine way, no one scrutinized her fat body as harshly as when she presented herself as more feminine. Pim is aware that she is utilizing a fat *tom* identity in school in order to be allowed to be “queer and fat in peace.” She is initially ashamed of admitting to Mon that she yearns to be both femme and fat and finds it hard to have to confess to Mon that she has exploited the identity of *tom* so that she can have an easier life as fat and queer at school. I was partially inspired in writing this scene by my personal experience of being jealous of my best friend, who is a fat *tom*. When I was in my early twenties, I often went clothes shopping with her. I would go to female clothing stores and she would go to male ones. I would have difficulty in finding clothes my size in the female garment stores and would constantly receive comments from store clerks that I should lose weight. However, my best friend would fit into whatever clothes she wanted to wear in the male clothing stores. She has never once received any comments from the sellers about her weight. I vividly remember that I was so jealous of her experience that I once considered taking on a more masculine appearance myself so that I could have an “easier” life, too.

In response to Murray’s contention that the act of coming out as fat or queer demands absolute acceptance and allows no space for confusion or contradiction, I seek to argue that it is still possible for one to be able to come out as fat and queer by owning one’s feelings.<sup>66</sup> In my short story, Pim is able to constantly declare that she is fat and queer while simultaneously revealing that she still possesses fat and queer shame. This is in harmony with what Pausé argues about fat politics, which can also be applied to thinking about queerness:

...embracing a fat identity does not preclude the occasional questioning, dissonance, or feeling of uncertainty. These negative feelings and doubt seem sane in the face of fat phobic cultures in which most fat people exist. Being out as a fat person, as with any

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<sup>66</sup> Murray, “(Un/Be)Coming Out?” p. 160.

stigmatized identity, requires continued commitment, regular reassertion, and may even vary by circumstance.<sup>67</sup>

Pausé disagrees with Murray that the act of coming out as fat or queer requires full acceptance and grants no room for confusion or contradiction. I would like to suggest that being able to admit that one is anxious or ashamed of having any stigmatized identity, as in my short story – being fat and queer – might still be considered as being out of the closet. Feeling negative about one’s identity as fat and queer does not take away the chance of coming out of the closet. I seek to make a case from writing this short story that being able to own one’s shame and speak about it frankly to whatever degree still allows one to be out. We should in no way be forced to constantly display pride in our marginalized identities when we do not always feel proud in a society that has generally told us that there is something *wrong* with the ways we are. Probyn contends that “something about shame is terribly important. By denying or denigrating it or trying to eradicate it (as in countless self-help books against various strains of shame), we impoverish ourselves and our attempts to understand human life.”<sup>68</sup>

## Conclusion

In this chapter, I contend that in *The Summer of Jordi Perez* Abby is able to come out as both queer and fat. While she does not possess any queer shame, she is closeting her fat shame. Author Spalding attempts to disrupt heteronormativity by constructing queerness as a default mode of sexuality and as an ideal model for a romantic relationship. Abby ponders that “there should be a million girls fighting [her] for [Jordi]” (*TSOJP*, 123). The way in which Abby imagines her rivals to be girls and not boys can be considered subversive because it demonstrates that she does not regard heterosexuality as the default sexuality of other girls. Jax also does not treat heterosexuality as a default mode of sexuality. He assumes that Abby dates girls even before she comes out to him as queer (*TSOJP*, 39). Jax even seeks to get dating advice about

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<sup>67</sup> Pausé, “Live to Tell,” p. 43.

<sup>68</sup> Probyn, *Blush: Faces of Shame*, p. 3.

girls from Abby, potentially modeling his own romantic behavior on a lesbian (*TSOJP*, 39). Lesbianism is depicted in the novel as a model of romance for a heterosexual boy such as Jax to emulate. Nevertheless, even in a US progressive queer fat romance novel like *The Summer of Jordi Perez*, the author still constructs the fat heroine as a “good” queer fatty, who is able to come out as queer with no shame but has to possess a beautiful, healthy, and active fat body to compensate for her fatness. In my short story, written in response to *The Summer of Jordi Perez*, I seek to bring myself into conversation with Murray’s contention that the act of coming out as fat or queer demands absolute acceptance and allows no space for confusion or contradiction. In my revision, I contend that it is possible to be out of the closet by owning our feeling of shame regarding whatever marginalized identities we may have.

## Conclusion: “Invite the Fat Woman in [for Romance]”<sup>1</sup>

In this thesis, I have explored how selected twenty-first century Thai and US fat romance novels construct, perpetuate, and – in some cases – challenge understandings of gender, fatness, and relationships in two different cultural contexts. Romance fiction, I argue, is a popular cultural form that has “invite[d] the fat woman in”<sup>2</sup> and allows her to look for “love” and become at “peace with her body”<sup>3</sup> to varying degrees in the fat-hating societies of Thailand and the USA. Fat, I have been arguing, is treated as a problem in romance novels that allow fat women to be at the center of the narrative. One of the key conclusions in this thesis is that transgressive fat female bodies have to be managed in certain ways, particularly in heterosexual fat romance, in order for the union between the fat heroine and her love interest to take place. Furthermore, as fat romances have often disappointed and dissatisfied a reader like me, I sought to rewrite certain passages from selected Thai and US fat romances from the perspective of a fat woman and in line with my fat politics and feminist ideologies.

In Chapter 1, using Mary Douglas’s concept of purity and pollution as a lens through which to view Chakriya’s *Yai Auan Chao Sanae*, I argued that the masculinized fat female body of Muslim is culturally constructed as disgusting.<sup>4</sup> Only when Muslim’s fat female body performs ideal femininity, through wearing sexy feminine clothes, and when she promises to lose weight, is she allowed to earn love and acceptance from Pran, the hero. In my revision, I constructed a short story in which Muslim and I were able to acknowledge and confront our disgust toward our own fat bodies and those of others. Twisting Chakriya’s use of a masculinized female body, I constructed a feminized fat man to explore the affect of disgust evoked by ambiguously gendered fat bodies.

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<sup>1</sup> Elana Dykewomon, “In Search of the Fabled Fat Woman,” *Fat Studies* 3, no. 1 (2014): 1–5 (5).

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Lara Frater, “Fat Heroines in Chick-Lit: Gateway to Acceptance in the Mainstream?” in *The Fat Studies Reader*, eds. Esther Rothblum and Sondra Solovay (New York, NY: New York University Press, 2009), pp. 235–240 (p. 235).

<sup>4</sup> Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger* (Oxford and New York: Routledge, 1966).

In Chapters 2 and 3, I examined the representation of the heroes' masculinities in selected US and Thai fat romances, respectively. I argue from my own experience of reading that the hero is one of the most significant elements in the heterosexual romance novel because, in the words of Wendy Larcombe, he provides "the tension, the excitement, the danger, and the satisfaction"<sup>5</sup> in the story. Hence, I sought to consider how the heroes and their masculinities are depicted – particularly in relation to the transgressive fat female bodies of the heroines in heterosexual fat romances. In Chapter 2, I argued that Mike in *Dangerous Curves Ahead* and Bo in *Dumplin'* share common masculine qualities around being strong and good-hearted. These "good-hearted" heroes are constructed to justify the convention that heroes are not permitted to directly acknowledge that the heroines are fat. To Mike and Bo, their heroines, Ellis and Willowdean, would always be beautiful, but not fat; or merely beautiful (with no mention of fat). I argued that the books' authors, Sugar Jamison and Julie Murphy, are interested in stretching the representation of masculinity in romance fiction toward the model of emotive masculinity endorsed by sociologist Eva Illouz.<sup>6</sup> Nevertheless, the two authors are still trapped into constructing their heroes as possessing the most dominant form of masculinity, which is set against the "softer" masculinity possessed by other, secondary, male characters in the novels. In my revision for Chapter 2, I invoked the model of emotional masculinity that Illouz suggests could "take us closer to the goals of feminism."<sup>7</sup> I allowed Mitch, a fat/fit emotional secondary male character in *Dumplin'*, to be my hero instead of Bo, not least through a depiction of his *unmasculine* tears. Most importantly, I subverted the convention of US fat romance that the hero cannot acknowledge the heroine as fat. In my short story, I permitted Mitch to use fat as a neutral descriptive term for Willowdean's body. Willowdean, in my revision, responded to Mitch calling her fat with positivity, not taking it as an offence or an insult. I also wrote my Willowdean as struggling with ambivalent feelings about her fatness, similar to my portrayal of Muslin in Chapter 1's revision.

In Chapter 3, I argued that Akekasit from *Palosongkreung* and Peerakorn from *Rak Tem Lon* share the Thai archetype of gentlemanly heroes. Their masculinity is evaluated, complimented,

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<sup>5</sup> Wendy Larcombe, *Compelling Engagements: Feminism, Rape Law, and Romance Fiction* (Alexandria, NSW: Federation Press, 2005), p. 42.

<sup>6</sup> Eva Illouz, *Why Love Hurts* (Cambridge, Oxford, and Boston, MA: Polity Press, 2012), p. 247.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*

and chastised in terms of their exhibition of gentlemanliness and/or ungentlemanliness. Akekasit embodies aristocratic gentlemanly masculinity, whilst Peerakorn represents monk-like gentlemanly masculinity. These gentlemanly masculinities are connected to the ways in which their fat heroines are able to perform ideal femininity through the act of wearing heels and maternity dresses. The two heroes will perform gentlemanly masculinity toward the heroines if they meet the condition of being the “good fatty” – “good” fat women, who possess compensatory qualities “in spite of being fat.”<sup>8</sup> In contrast to how the US fat romance heroes cannot directly acknowledge their heroines as fat, these two Thai heroes straightforwardly call their heroines fat and declare that they will love them *despite* how fat they are. Ironically, these heroes are only able to announce their love when the fat heroines are in the process of becoming conventionally thin toward the end of the novels. In my rewriting for Chapter 3, I rejected the gentlemanly masculinity exhibited by Akekasit and allowed the feminized fat Wattana to be the hero instead.

While I used my creative revisions in Chapters 1–3 to explore implicit queerness through constructing feminized fat men as my heroes, in Chapter 4 I chose to examine the queer fat romance text itself. I explored the intersection of fat and queer through interrogating the coming-out narrative of Abby, the fat heroine in *The Summer of Jordi Perez (and the Best Burger in Los Angeles)*. Here, I drew on Samantha Murray’s discussion of coming out as fat, Eve Sedgwick’s theory of coming out as queer, and Judith Butler’s theory of gender and impersonation to build my arguments in the analysis of *The Summer of Jordi Perez*.<sup>9</sup> I contended that Abby is able to come out as both queer and fat, but while she does not possess any queer shame, she is in fact closeting her fat shame. In the creative section of the chapter, I wrote my own Thai queer fat romance in response to specific scenes in the US novel. I also intended to subvert how Thai *yuri* novels usually feature two thin femme women in love by writing my short story as featuring a romance between two masculine women instead. Here, I sought to suggest that it is possible to

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<sup>8</sup> Cooper, *Fat and Proud: Politics of Size* (London: The Women’s Press, 1998), p. 43.

<sup>9</sup> Murray, “(Un/Be)Coming Out? Rethinking Fat Politics,” *Social Semiotics* 15, no. 2 (2005): 153–163; Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1990); Butler, “Imitation and Gender Insubordination,” in *Lesbian and Gay Studies Reader*, eds. Henry Abelove, Michele Aina Barale, and David M. Halperin (New York: Routledge, 1993), pp. 307–320 (p. 310).ars



be out of the closet by owning our feelings of shame regarding whatever marginalized identities we might have.

On the basis of my method of rewriting, I would argue that it is indeed possible to construct fat romance narratives where pleasure can “co-exist with feminist beliefs”<sup>10</sup> and fat politics. I, as a fat feminist romance reader and scholar, do not need to “have one” by “reject[ing] the other.”<sup>11</sup> (Re)writing my own fat romances has brought back my pleasure in reading this genre and aligns with my fat feminist politics.

As I stated in the introduction to this thesis, I disagree with Pamela Regis’s conclusion in her chapter on the definition of the romance genre that the heroine goes from being “encumbered” to “free” by the end of the book.<sup>12</sup> My examination of selected fat romance novels reveals that the pattern is quite different, especially in the Thai fat romance novel. Even though all of the Thai fat heroines in my selected novels are experiencing tensions between their fat body acceptance and fat hatred, they somehow make their statement clear to readers at the beginning of the novels that losing weight is too painful and being fat in a fat-hating society still grants them more happiness than enduring a lifetime diet in order to maintain a thin and acceptable body. Muslin, the fat heroine in *Yai Auan Chao Sanae* (Chapter 1) declares that she will never go on a diet for men and will continue to eat non-stop as she pleases (*YACS*, 17). Sophitnapa, the fat heroine in *Palosongkrueng* (Chapter 3) admits to herself that she is a happy fatty who enjoys eating (*PI*, 4). She used to go on diets but stopped doing so, because the whole process tortured her to the point where she thought she would die if she continued to engage in dieting (*PI*, 8–9). Piruna, the fat heroine in *Rak Tem Lon* (also Chapter 3) prefers to live a happy life by eating what she likes rather than going on a diet. Although she wants to achieve conventional beauty and increase her chances in dating, she would rather not engage in painful starvation or sweaty hardcore exercise (*RTL*, 12). Then, from the middle section of the novel onward, or almost at the end in certain narratives, all of the Thai heroines change their perspective on losing weight due to their desire

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<sup>10</sup> Eirini Arvanitaki, “Postmillennial Femininities in the Popular Romance Novel,” *Journal of Gender Studies* 28, no. 1 (2019): 18–28 (25).

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>12</sup> Pamela Regis, *A Natural History of the Romance Novel* (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2003), p. 30.

to capture the heroes' hearts and/or an insult from the thin female antagonists. Thus, I would argue that Thai heroines in fat romance novels go from being "sort of free" (experiencing the contradiction of feeling comfortable with their fat bodies and simultaneously struggling with fat hatred, while still managing to refrain from trying to achieve the ideal body) to "encumbered" or unfree by losing weight at the end. According to Regis, "...the female protagonist achieves freedom at the end of the work...she rejects various encumbrances imposed by the old society to arrive at a place where society stops hindering her."<sup>13</sup> In the Thai fat romance novel, a fat heroine always has to change her body size (to different degrees and for varying reasons in each book) in order to fit with the societal norm. The "old" society has remained; nothing has changed, except herself.

Returning to one of my central arguments, the fat female body in fat romances has to be managed in certain ways in order for the fat heroine to deserve to be loved by their love interest. I have sought to argue that the archetype of a good fatty plays a crucial role in allowing the fat heroines in my selected Thai and US romances to achieve their happy endings. In Thai heterosexual fat romances, the heroines have to lose weight and perform hyperfemininity in order to be accepted and loved by their fat-phobic heroes. In heterosexual US fat romances, the heroines do not have to lose weight, but they do have to disconnect themselves from their fat identity and embrace a new identity as merely a beautiful being. The fat heroines in my selected US romances embody the archetype of a beautiful fatty, whereby the heroes are able to justify why they can love the heroines *despite* how fat they are. Even in a progressive US queer fat romance novel, the author still constructs the good queer fatty as a fat heroine, who is able to come out as queer with no shame, but has to possess a beautiful, healthy, and active fat body to compensate for her fatness.

So, what next for the study of fat romance? This thesis is the first of its kind to bring Thai and US fat romances together. While there are a few studies conducted on US romance featuring fat heroines, no work had been done on Thai fat romance prior to this study. There is certainly room to develop and expand the study of fat romances in both countries. With more time, I would have liked to extend my discussion of fat romance in two further directions, which could be promising

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid., p. 30.

areas for further study. Firstly, I would have been interested to engage with the readership, authorship, and production of fat romance through conducting interviews, surveys, and focus groups with readers, authors, and even publishers of fat romance. Secondly, I would have liked to also explore US fat romances that do not situate fat at the forefront or as the main conflict of the narrative. I discussed in the introduction chapter how I had to narrow down a massive list of potential US heterosexual fat romances by looking for a clear keyword in synopses pointing to the non-normative sized bodies of the heroines in order to identify fat romances. By choosing my primary texts in that way, I will have missed the US fat romances written by authors who do not wish to emphasize fat as a significant attribute of their heroines or as a selling point in the synopses. Olivia Dade, a US romance author who has published novels featuring fat heroines since 2019, stated on her Twitter feed that she wishes “there were more romances with fat MCs where fatness isn’t actually a significant part of the story.” On that same Twitter thread, Dade insists that “that’s what [she does] for most of [her fat romance] books.” I really wish that Dade had started to publish her fat romances before 2018, the last year in which I searched for primary texts, so that I could have used her fat romances as part of my data sample. Elana Dykewomon reflects the same desire as Dade in wanting to read fiction featuring fat women as the main protagonists: “[I] want[...] to see fat women...whose weight is not an issue.”<sup>14</sup> She continues: “When we read or write ‘average size’ characters, their size is one part of who they are. But when we change something dramatic about the body, something that challenges hegemonic assumptions, the change becomes the dominant note.”<sup>15</sup> Working on fat romances where fat is treated as merely one part of a heroine’s identity, rather than the biggest problem in her life, would have expanded the discussion of gender, fat bodies, and relationships in differently interesting ways.

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<sup>14</sup> Dykewomon, “In Search of the Fabled Fat Woman,” p. 4.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

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