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Within media, representations for varied bodies have been minute and when these bodies are acknowledged the perspective is one constructed of stereotypes. This thesis aims to interrogate the intersections between fatness, queerness, and disability and query the cultivation of representation specifically in the 2022 film *The Whale. The Whale* chronicles a fat gay man (Charlie) during his last week alive as he tries to connect with his estranged daughter. Using a close reading of scenes from the film, I question the way that the director, Darren Aronofsky, crafts a lens that perpetuates an ideal body, which is thin, white, and heterosexual. When looking at the interactions of queerness and fatness, this thesis will examine the increased scrutiny of bodies within the gay community while also tackling the imposed heterosexual norms that dictate futurity. Turning toward the intersections of fatness and disability, I work from the assertion of fatness as a disability to question the voyeuristic interest of media to watch fat bodies as if on display. By the end of this thesis, I propose that moments of fat rebellion can be found in media enriched with fat community and that this form of community can be wielded when combatting normative body ideals.

A FUTURELESS COMPULSORY BODY:

HOW REPRESENTATIONS IN *THE WHALE* PERPETUATE AN IDEALIZED BODY

by

Patrick Byrd

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Dr. Sarah Jane Cervenak
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DEDICATION

The thesis is dedicated to my mom, Patricia, and my sister, Bryson. Without them I would not have had the bravery or tenacity to see this through. I would also like to thank Alyssa for the countless hours of support.

APPROVAL PAGE

This thesis written by Patrick Byrd has been approved by the following committee of the Faculty of The Graduate School at The University of North Carolina at Greensboro.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

While answering emails for work last year, I stumbled upon the movie *The Whale (2022)*. I hadn't heard much about this film prior to my viewing, but I saw that it starred Brendon Fraser and Sadie Sink (two actors I relatively knew). I absentmindedly started the film for background noise while working from home. To my surprise, very little work was done that afternoon.

The Whale follows queer recluse Charlie over his last week alive. Charlie lives alone and works remotely, only visited by his best friend, Liz. Charlie is estranged from his ex-wife and daughter after coming out as queer and falling in love with a man. Shortly after, his lover, Alan, commits suicide from familial religious pressure and Charlie sinks into a great depression causing binge eating and gaining weight. The movie starts with Charlie having a cardiac episode while watching porn. At this time, a missionary, Thomas, has stopped by to spread the word of God, and Charlie reluctantly accepts Thomas's help as Charlie thinks that he is about to die. After that initial incident, Charlie's symptoms of congestive heart failure worsen as Liz relays that he needs to go to the hospital, or he will be dead within a week. When faced with this impending mortality, Charlie seeks to reconnect with his estranged daughter, Ellie, trying to convince her to work towards her education and graduate high school. Though Ellie is resistant, Charlie offers her all of the money that he has saved, $120,000, if she promises not to give up on her education.

Throughout the week, Charlie receives more visitors than he has in many years as the missionary continually checks on him, Ellie visits for schoolwork, and his ex-wife, Mary, confronts him about abandoning the family they created. When Thomas visits Charlie one last time, Thomas confirms Charlie's suspicions of Thomas's homophobia as he blames Alan's death and Charlie's life on Charlie's queerness. As the week nears its end, various characters try to get

Charlie to go to the hospital, but he refuses to spend the money saved on this as it was meant for Ellie. Charlie passes away at the end of the film while struggling to walk toward Ellie, trying to prove that he cares about her.

While watching this movie, I sobbed and mourned for the character of Charlie. For the next two hours, I also found myself immersed in strong emotions of disgust and anger. I wondered "Were these feelings brought on in response to the portrayal of fat bodies?" Why did my pulse quicken seeing Charlie stuff food into his mouth and choke? Are fat bodies really seen like this? Even scarier to me, I wondered: why does it matter? How does this depiction of Charlie warrant my opinion or conjure such staggering scrutiny? I questioned whether I was experiencing internal anti-fatness that subjugated myself to the fate of Charlie, or if this film intentionally provoked these emotions to capitalize on the rejection of fatness.

In truth, I saw a lot of myself within Charlie's character; we were both fat, queer, masc-presenting individuals. Not only that, but we both worked remotely from home. This offers an entirely different potentiality for ostracism. Gone was the obligatory daily sociality of a career; instead, Charlie (and I) were left with our thoughts revolving around internal monologues and body dysmorphia. In my mind, Charlie was my future, and I watched this film in tears reveling in the pain of his fat body. When the movie ended, my tears didn't; his story hung with me, tormenting my mind, telling me that my fat body was destined for the same harsh experience as Charlie's.

That night, I got on my stationary bike for the first time in a week and a half and exercised for 90 minutes. I pedaled until I was nauseous from the intense activity. It was only when staring at the ceiling before bed that I was left with the quiet contemplation of *why*. Why did I just work out until my body ached? What benefits were accomplished with this intense

form of self-hatred and degradation? Did this film spur new emotions of anti-fatness, or were these perspectives conjured from a dehumanizing film created to hone 'the sad, fat narrative'?

Indeed, throughout media, sad backstories have often been related to or brought on by the presence of fatness. For example, the movie, *To Be Fat Like Me* (2007) looks at the way fat students face discrimination and social ostracism. This dramatic film sees the main character, Alyson, dress up in a fat suit to "experience the horrors of living fat". With the fat suit, she hopes to make a documentary showing how fat people bring pain upon themselves and can overcome the ostracism of fatness. Here, the main character creates this project after living with fat family members and attributing their fatness to their own laziness and gluttony. She believes that fat people exist through lack of control and that they are ruining their future with unhealthy decisions. This film and others such as *What's Eating Gilbert Grape* (1993) and *Precious* (2009) put the blame on fat people for their own misfortune. ("Your life sucks? You're fat--what do you expect?") In these films, the fat main characters are consistently presented as unhealthy and as facing a short life. Socially, these fat characters are seen as having "one foot in the grave" with no future.

Returning to *The Whale,* when faced with imminent mortality, Charlie thinks only of his daughter and hopes to prove that he did something with his life by having her. Simultaneously, he is presented with the past invalidation of his relationship with Alan via the missionary, Thomas, as his heart issues appear. His queerness is ignored in favor of procreation; his sexuality relegated to the past. Furthermore, the film showcases Charlie watching gay porn when having his first cardiac incident as a missionary saves him. This scene is created to contrast his fat queerness with the compulsory heterosexuality that Thomas embodies. Charlie sits in a hyper-

vulnerable state while on display for Thomas and the audience to judge and stare with incredulity.

His partner Alan too was plagued by this strict Christian belief in moral superiority. Their queerness was tirelessly eroded by religiously constructed homophobia until Alan took his own life to escape this purgatory. Arguably, the film ensures this connection by beginning the movie with this scene. This masturbation scene is what triggers Charlie's initial cardiac response and forecasts his eventual cardiac failure. The framing suggests that he has been brought to this life-threatening point due to his queerness, and Thomas is there to act as the Christian savior to offer moments of retribution before the end. Moreover, Charlie's experience is compounded by his fat-related disability and presumptive lack of presumed future. Those around him bring up his limitations and focus on the looming presence of death. Ellie says that the only way for Charlie to prove he cares for her is to stand up and walk to her. She refuses to accept that Charlie has disabilities and instead attributes everything to his supposed lack of control and ambition.

Charlie's disabilities stem from his fatness, but does that make his life less valid? Does the connection between his disabilities and fatness justify a presumed imminence of death; or can fat disabled people live a life in defiance of the socially accepted body? Ellie exhibits compulsory able-bodiedness by refusing Charlie's disabled status; but, even deeper, Ellie rejects the reality of a life while fat and disabled. Ellie continually invalidates Charlie's disabilities and suggests that Charlie can simply reject these limitations on his body. She states that his fatness, as well as disability, are due to his own hand and therefore he can just change this and decide to care, failing to understand the experience of those fat and disabled. Here, the film simultaneously depicts a fat life as one without value or future prospects. With these identities, the audience is continually cued that Charlie has nothing left for him to look towards. This lack of longevity is

impressed by an ableist culture that stipulates a fat, queer, disabled life is equivalent to a death sentence.

If a body exists outside of the accepted default of able-bodied heterosexuality, is it less valid? Does one without an equated future mean that death is the only just action? This assertion of a lack of future draws from anti-fat, ableist, and homophobic rhetoric to destroy the possibility of a life unburdened from an idealized or permissible body. Those who are able-bodied and nonfat are no more guaranteed longevity than fat and disabled individuals, yet the prevailing narrative in society and *The Whale* indicates the opposite. People die each day who otherwise fit within the social ideal body, yet their death is not seen as just desserts. Why is it when fat, disabled, or queer individuals live in spite of prescribed norms, they are relegated to a marginalized life? Can their lives of defiance and prosperity craft countercultural stories that illuminate the true horror of depictions like *The Whale*?

Once again, the film works to cast the fat experience as one of sadness and futility. After Alan died, Charlie resigns himself to an isolated state while dealing with binge eating and gaining weight. His life exists in stasis with no forms of meaningful social interactions other than those forced by Liz. Why is this? When fat, does Charlie no longer seek to interact with others? Yes, it is explained that Charlie seeks to cut down on appearing in public to avoid potential gawking, but this narrative fails to explain a full perspective of how Charlie lives. Presumably, Liz picks up any essentials for Charlie, but what about a digital presence? Charlie looks up his daughter on Facebook to check in, but there is no recognition of alternatives to the traditional outgoing lifestyle. Charlie doesn't have any friends that he chats with or any forums that he posts to; he doesn't even text a single individual. Why must every aspect of Charlie's life convey a sense of tragedy and be centered around his fat? Charlie is no longer a person with a life and has

instead transformed into fatness itself. He is so weighted down by his fatness that he is literally relieved upon death. As Charlie dies and is dreamily lifted in the air, he smiles for the first time feeling weightless.

In this thesis, I am interested in the connection between fatness and a presumed imminent death by focusing on the film *The Whale*. *The Whale* poses a unique multi-faceted perspective that co-mingles sexuality, disability and fatness. Using Charlie as a proxy, the film posits that fat people exist in pain and agony and that the most they can hope for is to function as an epiphanic turning point for others. Within this thesis, I want to trouble this reduction and interrogate the way that these axes are used to degrade fat identity while simultaneously enforcing a lack of agency. To be clear, this thesis does not seek to rectify anti-fat narratives within media; rather, to understand the manners in which anti-fatness further subjugates fat bodies as commodified cautionary tales that cure others' myopic truths. With this knowledge, I hope to generate discourse over the objectification of fat individuals and the use of them to buttress the lives of those held with higher regard based on their bodies.

More broadly, I am interested in how fatness, disability, and queerness all experience a social compulsory status pressuring certain normative ways of being (as straight, able-bodied, and thin). People are generally presumed to be thin, heterosexual, and able-bodied and if they are not, then they are deemed as having less social status. What happens when we interrogate the connections between fatness, queerness, and disability? Can this generate a greater understanding of how compulsory body ideals contribute to representation in media? Even further, what happens when these bodies reject the ideal body altogether and search for a life free from these prescribed norms?

Literature Review

When looking at the way anti-fatness has prevailed and even thrived within the United States, we must be aware of the racial discrimination and stigma that has been tied with fatness. Throughout much of history, moving back to the beginning of Western colonization, blackness has been closely associated with fatness and thinness with whiteness. This linkage has routinely enforced a compounded impact of domination on differing bodies. Sabrina Strings discusses the racial origins of anti-fatness in her book *Fearing the Black Body: The Racial Origins of Fat Phobia* (2019). Strings traces the beginnings of anti-fatness back to the European's assumptions and 'observations' of African people. Europeans noted that African people are 'too 'gluttonous'. The racist narrative held that *they* crave too much of things such as sex and food and lack the control that Europeans possess. Due to this, Africans were then expected to be fatter as they overindulge in unhealthy amounts of desires. From these assumptions, even more prejudices were born as fatness and body size were used to determine who was a slave and who was a freed individual.

Even after slavery ended, these assumptions remained woven into our social fabric and the racist notions of fatness spread into the medical field. This pathologized fatness to outlaw certain types of bodies. Strings mentions the Body Mass Index (or BMI) as a measurement to judge bodies. This type of racial "scientific" study within history can be traced back to older colonial times, specifically to the "scientist" François Bernier. Bernier was a French individual from the 1600s who used racial division to further prove supremacy and physiological differences of race. "While it is unclear whether he was a proponent of the polygenetic argument, he nevertheless believed that white people were innately and physiologically distinct from black people (Strings, 71)." This train of thought is what has systemically grown into tests such as the

BMI that focus on one ideal physical body. Though *The Whale* does not feature any black characters, there are still important interactions between Charlie and his relation to whiteness. With his fatness, his body is further away from that idealized body that prizes thinness and whiteness. These medical standards such as the BMI still seek to categorize Charlie's fat white body and tell him how his body *should* be.

With societal ideals repeatedly telling individuals such as Charlie how to live their life, one might wonder what life would be like if we were free from the current compulsory productivity pressures that dictate our lives? That is the question the José Esteban Muñoz takes on within *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity (2009)*. Within this work, Muñoz analyzes various modes of art that have been crafted from the Stonewall uprising and beyond to question the idea of the future. Moreover, Muñoz questions past writers such as Lee Edelman (*No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive*, 2004) who have crafted the argument that the future is not made for the queer individual. According to Edelman, the future advanced within society holds the values of heterosexuality at its heart. Individuals are expected to have a family and to contribute to the procreation of a future generation. This expected lifetime is marked by milestone events like marriage and birth; there is a certain, straight, way of doing things. Edelman argues that, because of this, the future is not meant for queer beings and that the queer community should instead reject the idea of futurity.

Muñoz agrees with his current heterosexual construction of the future, but argues that, instead of abandoning the future, we can craft an alternative future from the queer perspective. *Cruising Utopia* looks at numerous mediums and archives that show that we can begin to envision a queer future that does not hold these myopic values. Muñoz travels through art,

literature, and other media, pulling from the theory of concrete utopianism that states a vision of utopia can be found in within the lives of those in this current dystopic experience.

. From the media gathered, Muñoz states that the future can be rejected as it is now and instead be reimagined in a way that transcends the heteronormative. Instead of arguing for inclusion and the allowance of queer people to partake in marriage or the family unit, we can completely reshape what it means to have a future, and even further, what it means to live a life. *Cruising Utopia* focuses on hope and its position within society and the future, stemming from the idea that we can craft a world where better is queerer. "Queerness is that thing that lets us feel that this world is not enough, that indeed something is missing. Often, we can glimpse the worlds proposed and promised by queerness in the realm of the aesthetic (Muñoz, 1)."

That said, it is vital to recognize that this hope is not unfettered and exists within the balance of its counterpart, disappointment. The multitudes of works that Muñoz cover do hope for a future that is unbounded from the heteronormative ideals currently instilled, but they are also entrenched with the disappointment from the past and the disappointment of the future. By this, Muñoz notes that though one can imagine a utopian that is full of hope, there are simultaneous moorings in disappointment for what never truly was. While one can hope for a utopian future, we must also acknowledge the disappointment within the lived experience. Returning to *The Whale,* there are indeed cathartic moments within the film where Charlie revels in his queer love and live within the past as if it were the present. Simultaneously, the film carries out scenes that are deeply soaked in compulsory heterosexuality and Charlie seemingly craves the heterosexual ideals impressed upon him.

To understand the full arena of social ideals that are impressed on Charlie, I turn to scholarship that directly studies the impact of anti-fat masculinist social pressures on the body

image of gay men. In 2021, *The Routledge International Handbook of Fat Studies* was released. This is the first book of its kind that explores the epistemology, ontology, and methodology of fatness through diverse works tackling various perspectives and topics such as sexuality within fatness and analyses of media depictions. For this thesis, I will be focusing on two chapters. This first chapter I will be referencing is the twenty-fourth chapter written by Jason Whitesel titled "Review of Scholarship on Fat-Gay Men". This chapter looks at the way fat and gay men face increased social scrutiny when it comes to weight in comparison to straight men.

Whitesel begins this chapter by navigating the multitude of terms for body types within the gay community, honing in specifically on the "cub" and "bear". These two terms refer to larger and hairier men within the gay community. Digging deeper, Whitesel looks at the plethora of subcultures that exist within the gay community regarding weight such as the 'gaining subculture' that celebrates men gaining weight and even reveres the fat that people can gain. That said, though there are dedicated subcultures to the reverence of fat, Whitesel acknowledges the majority of mainstream media perpetuates an ideal gay body, one that is thin and white.

This is specifically notable when looking at gay pornography. Here, Whitesel notes that the vast array of pornography highlights the white muscular men as attractive and therefore the only bodies that should be seemingly showcased in coital acts. In contrast, there are smaller studios and projects that work to introduce more realistic pornography that showcases the wide experience of the human body and explore sensuality for all bodies. I bring in this source during the first chapter of this thesis to better understand the idealization of the gay body. During the beginning of *The Whale*, we see Charlie watching pornography that shows two conventionally attractive and muscular white men having sex. I wondered here: why are these the central characters of the film Charlie watches?

Additionally, I will be focusing on the eleventh chapter in the handbook titled "Fatness and Disability: Law, Identity, Co-constructions, and Future directions" written by April Herndon. This chapter looks at the intersection of the fat and disabled identity and whether or not fatness can be considered a disability. Herndon argues that fatness can be considered a disability pointing to scholar Charlotte Cooper who first explored this idea. Herndon argues this concept has received criticisms by both the fat liberation movement and the disability rights movement. While Herndon recognizes the separate connotations with each identity, she also acknowledges a shared positive nature that is within both identities. Herndon notes that both of these communities have worked for reclamation of space and worked to maintain agency over their bodies. Even with this shared connection, there is the prevailing idea that fatness is preventable and therefore should not be considered as a disability. "Although it is beyond the scope of this piece to go into all reasons for resistance, suffice it to say that the biggest ongoing fear of the general public and many legal scholars is that of frivolous claims, a fear driven by fatness being seen as a moral shortcoming and/or mutable (Herndon, 90)." Interestingly, Herndon notes that there is an exceedingly high amount of ambiguity surrounding the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA). Some activist focused lawyers argue that disability with fatness is included within the legislative spirit of the bill; whereas more textualist[1] lawyers argue that it was not explicitly included within the legislation so it should not be protected with this bill.

The rest of this chapter focuses on the relative idea of health. Here, Herndon acknowledges the strides that have been made in the body positivity and size acceptance movements. But simultaneously missing a word here points to a divide that is being created

[1] Textualism refers to a more literal reading of bills and amendments rather than interpreting subtext or inferred meaning (Constitution Annotated, 2023)

socially. These movements use the focal point of health as their condition for a body to be acceptable. Herndon argues that the movements say that it is okay to be larger as long as you are still working to achieve the end goal of health. Herndon notes this health divide and recognizes the existence of "good fattys' and "bad fattys". "Good fattys" are those that are fat but still work to achieve health through means of diets or exercise regimens. "Bad fattys" are the fat people who are happy with their fatness and do not actively work to "improve" their health (93). With this connection to health, Herndon discusses the concept of being a good citizen as a way to pressure fat people to seek thinness. In this way, fatness is just the latest avenue of hate within respectability politics[2], stating that those who are fat do not deserve the same rights as those who are thin. In other words, those who are "unhealthy" and fat are not playing the part of a good citizen who is seen as contributing positively to society. I will use this chapter of *The Routledge International Handbook of Fat Studies* to interrogate how the director of *The Whale*, Darren Aronofsky works to portray Charlie as a "bad fatty". Throughout the film there are moments where the camera focuses on Charlie's food decisions and lingers there to ensure the audience takes note. This is to inform their opinions of Charlie and help audiences come to the same conclusion that Aronofsky highlights: Charlie's death was bound to happen.

Within the third chapter, I will be turning to *Crip Negativity* (2023) by J. Logan Smilges. This book works within the Critical Disability Studies framework, specifically critical access studies to further complexly understand the experiences of disabled individuals (5). In this book, Smilges argues that we only look at the disabled identity in terms of access. Smilges says that the status of disabled is usually only seen by what an individual can or cannot do due to access. If

[2] Respectability politics refers to when marginalized groups with a shared identity work to distance themselves from seemingly controversial characteristics of that identity in the name of assimilating. This can be seen throughout history originating in 1900s (Harris, 2014).

these individuals cannot access a certain act or service, then they are disabled. Smilges introduces the concept of crip[3] negativity to move past the access-oriented identity and instead acknowledge the spectrum of emotions that comes with disability. *Crip Negativity* homes in on the negative emotions that can surround disability that do not have to do with access specifically. Smilges gives us the example of how he was relentlessly bullied in high school regarding his awkwardness due to his underdeveloped social skills. While these negative emotions that he experienced were not tied to his lack of access, they still stem from his disability. Smilges argues that failing to recognize these emotions would fail to recognize the full dimension of disability.

Crip Negativity is a text that lays the groundwork for anti-ableist liberation. This is because Smilges works to craft a new dimension of the disabled identity that recognizes the multitude of ways that the disabled identity interacts with society; specifically, Smilges recognizes that most people only think of disability in terms of accessibility. Smilges discusses how some aspects of the disabled experience cannot be neatly wrapped up in accessibility issues and that we must instead move beyond this framework to fully understand the affective nuances of the disabled experience. Once we begin to identify these emotions and their origins, we can actually begin to dismantle the ways in which society continue to oppress disabled individuals. While the negative emotions that Charlie feels throughout *The Whale* are palpable at times, I instead will use this text to analyze my emotions and experiences within a fat body. With Smilges insight, I will parse through the negative emotions that I harbor and see the connections between myself and Charlie?

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[3] The term crip refers to a reclamation of the term for the disabled identity while simultaneously referring to disrupting the oppressive abled perspective. This term is noted in Robert McRuer's *Crip Theory: Cultural Signs of Queerness and Disability* (2006).

With these sources (and other readings), I plan to critique the narrative of *The Whale* and other fat media. This film seeks to villainize Charlie as a fat-disabled-gay man who meets a just demise that is covered in fat. The three chapters of this thesis will target the intersections of fatness, queerness, and disability and the culmination of damaging representation. *The Whale* takes time to construct Charlie's queer identity and the fatness and disability that followed the supposed tragic end of his sexuality. All three of these identities exist within the margin and have been constructed in opposition to the normal body that is sanctioned by society. These identities share a default status that culminates in a perceived lack of humanity as society cannot comprehend a vision where queer, disabled, or fat people maintain agency. While understanding this dehumanization, I want to question what a life that lives in dissent and imagines a future looks like. What could this mean for representation of fat bodies?

Chapter Overview

For the first chapter of this thesis, I plan to study the intersection of fatness and queerness. From *The Whale*, I'd like to examine three scenes that showcase this push and pull between the queer and fat identity. The movie begins with Charlie watching porn and dealing with his first cardiac event, having to face Thomas for support. Here, we see Charlie watch porn between two muscular young white men. Why? What does this choice mean in regard to the mindset of Charlie? I hope to question this meaning by delving into literature on fat-gay men and pornography to further trouble the default ideal body. Tied to this, I want to look at the scene where Charlie confronts Thomas about Thomas's homophobia. During this scene, Thomas relays to Charlie that Alan died because of his queerness, but Charlie disputes this. In defiance of religious conviction, Charlie recounts the love that he and Alan shared, reveling in the queerness. Simultaneously, Charlie denigrates his own body, expressing that he hoped there was no afterlife

so that Alan could not see him in this form. At this point, Charlie describes everything he hates about his fat body detailing it with disgust until Thomas agrees that his body is unlivable. This scene exhibits his opinion of his body image; Charlie is no longer a queer man, just a fat husk of the life that he had with Alan that was ripped away.

Additionally, I want to interrogate the scene where Charlie is confronted by his ex-wife Mary. Here, both parties realize what was lost during their estrangement and for Charlie, raising Ellie to be a good person would prove that he had done one thing right in his life. Bringing in the concept of queer futurity from José Esteban Muñoz's book *Cruising Utopia* (2009), I want to interrogate this perceived value that is linked to procreation. Why is the meaning of life confined to that of passing on a lineage? Can Charlie live in the queer moments and reject the compulsory heterosexuality he has continually fought throughout his life?

In Chapter 2, I want to extend this perceived lack of futurity to the relationship between disability and fatness. *The Whale* displays Charlie as an individual whose fatness is said to be brought on his disability. The film takes a voyeuristic approach on Charlie's life through scenes where we see Charlie shower, listen to him discuss the limitations of his body (a tumor on his back and flaps of skin), and watch him aggressively eat. Here, I'd like to incorporate the "Fatness and Disability" chapter from *The Routledge International Handbook of Fat Studies*. This chapter discusses the concept of fatness being considered a disability and the validity of a fat life.

As previously mentioned, Charlie portrays the life of a "bad fatty," betraying the goal of health. According to this logic, Charlie has brought this disability upon himself and therefore does not deserve sympathy; instead he must be on display as a cautionary tale. This phenomena can also be seen in shows like *My 600 lb Life* or *1,000 lb Sisters* which seek to capitalize on

im/possibility of living a fat-disabled life. From creating episodes focused on health issues to chronicling dating with incredulity, these shows encourage audiences to craft a spectator position where these fat people are no longer people but now exist for the purpose of entertainment. Here, fat-disabled bodies are showcased as invalid modes of lived experiences that have no possible life outside of the camera lens, prompting me to again ask: What lives are considered livable? At what point is a fat, disabled person's life not just? When does society say disabled people should just "throw in the towel"?

Finally, Chapter 3 culminates in my rejection of the representation that *The Whale* provided and instead posits what the representation could have been if Charlie was crafted with dimensionality and access to a full spectrum of emotions. *The Whale* focuses intensely on how sad and tragic Charlie's life is; in fact, Charlie's life is so devoid of any happiness, that it seems intentional. This film is seemingly crafted in opposition to fat community building. To highlight this, I will look at television shows such as *Huge* (2010) and *Shrill* (2019) that capture exchanges of fat community. These shows broadcast what it looks like when fat bodies are the norm within a social setting and the deep connections that can be fostered under this shared identity. What can arise from these moments? With multiple representations of fat bodies being ones that equate sadness with tragedy, it may feel like fat people are not allowed to feel the full spectrum of emotions. In recognizing that there are emotions centered around fatness that individuals may not fully embrace, I will then deploy J. Logan Smilges' book *Crip Negativity* to discuss the very real negative emotions that can be tied to fatness. This does not focus on access issues, rather the very real emotions that stem from social interactions or the disabled identity altogether. While sitting with these emotions, I connect my experience to fat insecurities and my own recognition of self-worth to the experiences of Charlie throughout *The Whale.*

When parsing through my insecurities, I could not help but notice a similarity between me and Charlie. Within these split-second scenes, I find common ground between me and Charlie and think of the potential for fat rebellion in this film. What could The Whale have been if it actually recognized Charlie's fatness as a lived experience rather than a large set of padding? What if his life was not told with a death sentence? To conclude this thesis, I will be questioning what positive fat representation could have looked like with *The Whale*. What stories are possible when we include the notion of fat community and push fat liberation into a fat rebellion? Though we may never know what impact a fat positive version of The Whale would have had on society, it is interesting to juxtapose these two visions. While I have brought in sources within each of these chapter summaries, I do want to make note that I will be drawing from additional sources than just those listed within this introduction.

CHAPTER II: NO QUEERS, NO FATS, NO FUTURE

The Whale begins with a voice over from Charlie discussing the most recent homework with his class. Here, we see that all of the class has their camera on with the exception of Charlie. Instead, we observe a black screen behind which Charlie speaks and excuses his lack of video due to a broken camera. As the scene switches along with camera perspectives, we witness Charlie visually for the first time, watching pornography. Charlie is out of breath and sweaty while watching two white, muscular men have sex vigorously. Suddenly, he grabs his heart ass he experiences a dramatic cardiac event. With the heart palpitations, he clumsily drops his phone and then grabs his daughter Ellie's essay on *Moby Dick,* stumbling through the words and struggling to catch his breath.

As if fated, there's a knock at the door and we are hurriedly introduced to Thomas, a Christian missionary who has been going door-to-door to spread the word of God. Charlie calls Thomas into the house, thinking that it's his best friend Liz at the door. When Thomas enters Charlie's house, he's taken aback from the sight; the camera glances at the gay pornography playing beside Charlie as he's breathing in distress. Thomas states that his phone is dead and asks Charlie whether he has a phone so that he can call an ambulance and get Charlie to the hospital. Rejecting this idea, Charlie instead shoves a paper in his hand asking him to read the essay. While Thomas begins reading about *Moby Dick*, Charlie is able to take deep breaths and steady his heartbeat to the rhythm of his reading. When Thomas questions why he wanted to hear the essay rather than head to the hospital, Charlie states that he thought that he was dying and wanted to hear the essay one last time before his death.

Though this scene is a brief introduction to these two characters, it establishes a fixed tension between Charlie and Thomas that is imbued with strict heteronormative ideals. The

interaction stands Charlie and Thomas in opposition: Charlie as a fat older queer man and Thomas as a thin, straight man. *The Whale*, however, does not choose to display this opposition subtly, as gay porn plays simultaneously in the background of their interaction. This film does not start with Charlie having a cardiac event due to teaching or walking, rather, he is experiencing this distress directly due to his queerness and "deviance". The filmmakers work to ensure that Charlie is essentially dripping with queerness. In contrast, Thomas enters the scene veiled in heteronormative Christian ideals as shown by his initial disgust at the image he walks in on. This evangelical aura does not stop there as Thomas readily resumes his monologue regarding the importance of being saved by the word of God.

When we first hear from Charlie in the beginning of the film, all the audience is privy to is a voiceover where he is lecturing his class virtually. During this time, his essence is contained to a black frame and a disembodied voice. It is not until the camera pans to Charlie masturbating that we actually get to see him for ourselves. In this sense, Charlie does not exist without his queerness and sexuality. Simultaneously, the filmmaker constructs it so that we see Charlie for who he "truly is": a deviant body of sexuality and a "disgusting" fat one at that.

Let me be clear, I am not seeking to describe Charlie's fatness in this negative framing; rather, highlighting the lens that the filmmakers deploy within the film's narrative. Within this scene the set works to cast an air of darkness around Charlie's body. The room Charlie sits in is shown as cramped and small in comparison to Thomas who looms spaciously in the doorway. Outside there is a storm with powerful rain; this, coupled with the low lamp lighting, paints Charlie as a hermit that is not accustomed to daylight. In previous interviews with the director, Darren Aronofsky, he toted pride with the composition with this film. Specifically, Aronofsky worked with cinematographer Matthew Libatique to ensure that the film did not come off as

claustrophobic (NBC Los Angeles, 2022). Though this film did not seem claustrophobic to Aronofsky, he used a plethora of tactics to paint Charlie's body as larger than life and somehow outside normative human existence. Charlie's living room is cramped and full of papers and different obstacles that work to make the space feel much more crowded, almost as if he is towering over his own life. The lighting works against Charlie's physical form, casting shadows over himself and his life as if they are not important. One of the most telling methods that the director deploys is the camera work. Throughout the introduction of Charlie where he is watching porn and begins experiencing a cardiac episode, the camera points to Charlie straight-on. Once Thomas enters the house, the camera moves up to his (Thomas's) eye level. From then on, the audience looks down on Charlie through the camera lens like Thomas, crafting an air of superiority. Not only does Thomas hold the theoretical moral high ground when it comes to Charlie's queerness, but, once introduced, the film conveys that Thomas holds the literal high ground in perspective: his view of Charlie's is advanced as the correct one.

When further considered, the pornography that is playing within the background of the scene depicts two white, gay muscular men. Why these two men? Why display gay sex, but use socially idealized bodies? What made Charlie choose this pornography to watch, and even deeper, what made the director choose this scene? To understand these positions, I consult Jason Whitesel's chapter within *The Routledge International Handbook of Fat Studies* (2021) titled "Review of Scholarship on Fat-Gay Men". Whitesel chronicles the higher levels of size bias that is prevalent throughout the gay community. He cites previous studies that investigated the gay masculine body image and found that gay men were more likely to experience sizeism as well as perpetuate body-shaming onto other gay men. Additionally, Whitesel comments on how the

media exhibits body bias as television shows like *RuPaul's Drag Race* continually mock larger bodies and negatively reinforce a social stratification of bodies (230).

Further, Whitesel acknowledges the pressure that fat-gay men experience noting that, with fatness, comes a social feminization. These individuals are socially stripped of their masculinity. To the shame and stigma, Whitesel states that fat-gay men deploy tactics such as self-deprecation to name and target the elephant in the room first, or they will craft oppositional identities to pit their fatness against the thin identity. Whitesel specifically cites how fat contestants are treated in the show RuPaul's Drag Race (RPDR) and how, in turn, RPDR contenders deploy "strategies" in various combinations to weather the shame of fat stigma and resist sizeism. First, some queens capitulate to the sizist stereotypes, which the judges reward. Second, fat queens walk a thin line between campy empowerment and self-deprecating jokes that cooperate with fatphobic hegemony" (230). While these strategies can serve to lessen the outside barrage of anti-fat rhetoric, they still contribute to a larger understanding that fatness is an attribute that should face increased scrutiny and ridicule.

Whitesel also covers the prevalence of the gay-fat kink within relationships and pornography. On the one hand, fat-gay men are robbed of their sexuality within mainstream representation. On the other, categories such as the "gay-fat" kink refuse to de-sexualize fat men and instead praise their fatness as an enviable attribute. These fetishizations, though partially objectifying, generates an acceptance that is largely missing from the social zeitgeist. They reject the ideals of thinness and celebrate the body's ability to grow and expand. Interestingly, chubby-gay porn creates a queer counter-public to the general consensus of accepted bodies. Whitesel noted that within these pornographic videos, the content shifts from just a showcase of bodies and sexual acts and extends to craft a feeling of "real-life" porn. They often include interviews

with actors about their personal thoughts and perspectives and depict fulfilling relationships with communication between fat-gay men. This version of porn challenges the seclusion of the fat body; while fatness is meant to be hidden in society, pornography, though still marginalized in society, is meant to be seen.

Indeed, the never-ending critique of bodies causes pockets of countercultures that affirm and even revere larger bodies. Within these subcultures, scholars have documented different archetypes like "chubs (big gay men), gainers (gay men who seek to "bulk up" intentionally), chasers (admirers of chubs and gainers), and encouragers (those who support gainers' intentions to loosen up the restrictions on their waistlines)" (218). The archetypes, have importantly inspired groups such as 'Girth and Mirth' or the Big Gay Men's Organization that have expanded social chapters across the United States, spaces that rejoice in fatness and accept fat fetishism.

With this in mind and returning to *The Whale*, the use of these two muscular white gay men holds significant value. The use of these traditionally ideal bodies works to establish furthered separation between an acceptable version of queerness and Charlie's life. Arguably, these two men display the common attitude that masculine gay men colloquially call "masc4masc'. This term is shorthand created from the popularization of dating and hookup apps (Ersing, 2015). Here, masculine gay men would put masc4masc or masculine only within their app profiles to discourage any feminine individuals from swiping or messaging them. This lends to Whitesel's observation with social feminization. The masc4masc seekers are looking for individuals who can be perceived as straight acting and aligning with more traditional gender roles. This masculinity is associated with signifiers such as facial or body hair, clothing, body build, voice, hand gestures. One could view this opinion as a reverence of masculinity; however,

this can be seen as an avoidance of femininity. According to the author, the masc4masc seekers implicitly reject the social feminization by avoiding any connection to femininity possible (Ersing, 2015). After all, if even the men that they have sex with exude masculinity, how can they be feminine?

This idolization of body images does not end with the exclusion of femininity. The pornography Charlie watches exhibits socially perfect gay men in many facets stemming from masculinity, thinness, and whiteness. This "preferred" body is not far from another common phrase plastered around gay dating apps, which is "No Fats, No Femmes, No Asians or Blacks". Like "masc4masc", this is a phrase that can be seen in dating and hookup apps to express "preferences" and deter unwanted matches. This statement designates the intersection of anti-fatness, hegemonic masculinity, and racism within the gay community to further oppress racially minoritized groups. With the "No Fats, No Femmes, No Asians or Blacks" phrase, racially minoritized individuals are explicitly stated that they are not wanted.

Matthew Thomas Conte queries this phrase within the thesis "More Fats, More Femmes, and No Whites: A Critical Examination of Fatphobia, Femmephobia, and Racism on Grindr" (2017) where he confronts the connected prohibitions around femininity, fatness, and non-whiteness. Conte acknowledges how white thin gay men have worked to craft these divisions. Within society, the "corporate queer man" is one that is white, muscular, middle-class, able-bodied, and masculine. This type of person, as such ads suggest, is the "right" kind of queer. The bodies that fall outside of this vision are systemically excised from the prevailing narrative and erased from the story of queer community. As Conte argues, "the discriminations faced by these marginalized queer folks are often the product of queer communities that are continuing to mark and script certain queer bodies as "Other"" (11). These bodies are collectively 'othered'

and barred from social acceptance unless fetishized. This is exemplified by the slogans of "No Fats, No Femmes, No Asians or Blacks" which suggest that there is continual pressure on only accepting a certain type of body[4]. People who are fat, feminine, and/or a person of color deal with a doubled form of ostracism from society as a whole and within the queer community.

The existence of race is simultaneously ignored and prevalent throughout *The Whale*. To understand the nuance of race and fatness, I turn to Sabrina Strings' *Fearing the Black Body: The Racial Origins of Fat Phobia* (2019). Within this piece, Strings highlights the racially charged history of fatness. Specifically, Strings looks at how society historically perpetuates this idealized thin white body and thus aligns fatness with blackness: "Since the height of the slave trade and the growth of Protestantism, black women had been symbols of "savage" aesthetic inclinations and amoral appetites" (202). According to the author, historically, thinness was valued as civilized and associated with whiteness, whereas fatness was solely related to indulgence and blackness. As time went on, thinness was marketed for marriageability and attractiveness, then turned toward a moral battle as fatness was linked with health. Despite its changing politics, fatness, according to the author, continued to hold a societal association with blackness. While there are no black characters within *The Whale*, Charlie's fatness works to separate him from an idealized whiteness. Not only is Charlie queer, but he is also very fat and this catapults him further from the sphere of whiteness.

Let me be clear, I am not conflating Charlie with a person of color; rather, acknowledging that Charlie lives in a distanced experience from whiteness. With this, he deals

[4] Conte further points to the "It Gets Better Project" that was launched in 2010 that was meant to provide inspiration for a future that is not plagued with systemic obstacles or ridicule. Unfortunately, this is not the case for anyone that lives outside of this corporate queer man that is idolized. For most of those whose body is outside this right type of queer individual, it might not get better, it might even get worse (10).

with increased societal pressure for failing to conform to this idolized body image. Even within the queer community the terms mentioned above like "No Fats, No Femmes, No Asians or Blacks" align race and fatness as unwanted attributes that pull away from this ideal being. This additional scrutiny within the gay community displays increased ostracism for Charlie. Not only does Charlie face backlash from this white evangelical hierarchy, but this subjugation is further cemented within gay culture and potentially separates him from queer allies. More specifically, the film continually finds methods of dissociating Charlie from the white manhood that Thomas possesses. Thomas's entire plot of the film is presented to give him grace. As a thin, straight white man, he's allowed to act out and have missteps because, in the end, he will be forgiven (Kimmel, 236). This is the benefit of white manhood. Though Charlie is a white man, he is not extended the same privilege as someone who possesses white manhood such as Thomas.

Further, while Charlie is dissociated from whiteness, Liz's race is seemingly left out. Though Liz is Asian-American, her race is never brought up within the film; Liz is played by Hong Chau who is Vietnamese. Additionally, the character of Liz does not hold racial stereotypes or an accent to highlight her race. Instead, Liz is just a character that is trying to help her friend. In another light, Liz's race is highlighted via her positioning to Charlie. Like Charlie, Liz feels ostracism and contempt for the Church of Life, the church that her deceased brother, and Thomas, belonged to. Charlie and Alan's relationship in conjunction with the white evangelical perspective led to Alan's eventual death. Charlie is Liz's only connection left to her brother and vice versa leaving them with each other against the world that killed their loved one. The film's alignment of Charlie and Liz displays the result of marginalized otherness in favor of an idolized body. One that exudes what neither Liz nor Charlie possesses: white masculinity.

As an adopted Asian-American daughter in a town and family steeped in evangelical teachings, Liz faces these similar strains of otheredness that Conte discusses. Between Liz and Charlie, there is an interesting interaction between race, fatness, and femininity that Conte notes within the queer community. Though Liz is not queer, she is minoritized in racialized and gendered ways and while Charlie is white, his fatness causes otheredness through feminization. With this, they both experience ostracization that can simultaneously create a community for support. The 'othered' are rejected from homonormative spaces, this aligned marginalization can cause further community-building for these bodies as they connect and generate spaces to provide mutual aid (Conte, 104). These are allied spaces that encourage the acceptance of all bodies, a counterculture if you will. This can assist in providing resistance to the notion of a singular ideal body. The film highlights how Liz and Charlie have become their own community where they exist without these pressures of ostracization. There is a connection (or even safe haven if you will) between the two characters that is situated in opposition of this idealized body. Here, they can talk and be themselves in honor of Alan and in spite of societal impositions.

What happens when that community that Liz and Charlie created is breached? The film introduces Thomas as the evangelical foil to Charlie's deviance. The juxtaposition of deviance between Charlie and Thomas continues to grow throughout the film. Tensions remain stable between the characters until Thomas pushes the evangelical world view too far. Here, I turn to a scene that takes place at approximately and hour and thirty-four minutes into the film. This scene begins after a binging and purging episode from Charlie as Thomas approaches Charlie's house. Charlie beckons Thomas inside his home, thinking that it was Liz initially. Thomas wants to share with Charlie the lengths that Ellie has gone to repair his (Thomas's) familial relationships. Thanks to Ellie, Thomas can now go back home and begin to make amends after stealing money

from his church. After sharing this news, Thomas transitions to preaching to Charlie while holding Alan's bible. Thomas shares that he can help Charlie, not by taking him to the hospital, but by helping Charlie give up the sins of the flesh. Thomas theorizes that Alan turned away from God and instead lived within this sin by living a life with Charlie. Thomas explains that if Charlie gives up these queer sins, then he can still be saved by God.

The film makes several key decisions within this scene to subtly communicate Charlie's perspective. At the moment of this interaction, Charlie is coming right off of an intense bout of binging and purging. He is sweating profusely and is out of breath, covered in food stains. Much like the original scene, Charlie invites Thomas into his house thinking that it is Liz. This gives Charlie the extremely disheveled look of "being caught with his pants down" only this time it is figuratively. With this, Charlie is forced into a position of shame when he sees Thomas. He is no longer in a private setting where he can deal with the emotional effects of binging and instead his deepest insecurities are on display. This automatically gives Thomas the mental and social high ground having barged in on another deeply intimate moment for Charlie. Interestingly, gone is Thomas's hesitance to interact with Charlie. Rather than recognizing the emotional state of Charlie, Thomas begins his monologue regarding saving Charlie.

For Thomas, whatever is happening with Charlie is no longer important. Charlie can be saved by accepting God as his savior and renouncing his queerness and sins. In this interaction, he not only proselytizes religion, but also the idealized version of whiteness, thinness, and heterosexuality: "Charlie, when I read this, I finally got it. I finally understood why God brought me here to you. So that I can help you understand what happened to Alan so that it doesn't happen to you… Alan tried to escape God's will. He chose his life with you over God" (*The Whale* 1:56:35-1:58:30). According to Thomas, Charlie can never be this preferred body, but he

can let go of these less-accepted bodily attributes and acknowledge his subjugated state within a hierarchy.

Powerfully, rather than expressing anger, Charlie responds by describing to Thomas how he and Alan fell in love. Alan was one of his students and they would spend time in Charlie's office falling in love and having a passionate love affair. While Charlie depicts this story, Thomas is visibly uncomfortable and wishes that Charlie would stop this reveling in queerness and instead turn to being saved by God. As Charlie talks, he focuses in on Thomas and notices the disgust hiding within his expressions. At this point Charlie begins raising his voice and says that he hopes that Alan cannot see him in the state he is in now, and that Charlie would be ashamed if Alan was able to see what he has become.

This scene still uses the point-of-view camera perspective, though there are more shots from Charlie's angle. That said, from these shots, we no longer have the primary version of looking down on Charlie, but rather looking up to Thomas. These shots further cement him (Thomas) as the film's potential savior.

That said, when Charlie verbally rebukes Thomas's saving gestures, Thomas steadily backs away trying to leave the conversation and Charlie. It is clear that Thomas was not expecting this rebuttal in values and returns to his visible state of discomfort at the thought of this liberated queer love. Thomas uses the space to his advantage by moving away from Charlie and betting on his (Charlie's) disabled status to aid in his own escape from the house. Even still, Charlie does not let this slide, matching him beat for beat, navigating around his house in his wheelchair with invigorating anger. Charlie follows Thomas embracing his love of Alan as a beacon of queer love. In response, Thomas sheds the silent opinions and instead outwardly pushes the moral superiority of heterosexuality. For Thomas, he is bringing hope for Charlie. He

is bringing hope that he can escape this supposedly horrible life after death. By rejecting queerness, Charlie would be able to do what Alan was not able to do and save himself. Thomas explains: “Alan tried to escape God’s will. He chose his life with you over God, but this is why he was so obsessed with this verse. He knew that he was living in the flesh and not the spirit. He never prayed for salvation but it’s not too late for you” (*The Whale* 1:36:17-1:38:20).

Powerfully, though, while Thomas espouses his views, Charlie reminisces on the moments of love that were shared between him and Alan. Charlie states: “Alan loved me. He thought I was beautiful. Halfway through the semester he started meeting me during office hours. We were crazy about one another… it was just after classes had ended for the year. It was the perfect temperature outside. We took a walk in the arboretum, and we kissed. We would spend the entire night laying together naked. We would make love” (*The Whale* 1:37:08-1:39:20).” Not only does Charlie reject Thomas’s offering of saving, but he also focuses on queerness and leaning into its beauty.

It is clear here that Thomas hates Charlie due to his disobedience of repeated heterosexual ideals and hopes to work as Charlie’s imposed savior. During the pornography scene, Charlie is full of queer shame recognizing that this is not acceptable. Yet, by this later scene, he has shed this shame and instead embraces his queerness, treasuring what was shared between him and Alan. He is no longer embarrassed of the love that he and Alan shared, but rather gathers emotion from this love to fuel his stand against Thomas’s religious convictions. Here, Charlie decides that Alan will not be used as ammunition against him anymore and instead, he will celebrate their love.

Nevertheless, by the end of the scene, Charlie lands on a statement that both of them do agree with: he is disgusting. Charlie truly hates himself and his body. While Charlie was able to

recognize queer liberation through his love with Alan, he remains in a state of disgust regarding his body. As was hinted in the pornography displayed previously, he loathes his fatness and judges that his own body is not one of humane status. While this moment does mark personal growth for Charlie as he now accepts his queerness, he continues to see the identities of fatness and queerness as separate. As in the pornography, queerness is something that can only be allowed through bodies that otherwise fit the social mold. When with Alan and thin, he was queer; once he lost Alan and gained weight, he is no longer allowed to access queerness in relation to another. Charlie refuses to accept his body as one that currently exists, rather a shell of what his body once was. Here, he is not just mourning Alan, but also the queerness that died with his thinness. This perpetuates the higher body bias that persists within the gay community. The pornography that Charlie watches touts an ideal body that can afford to be queer, and Charlie's does not fall into this category. His body itself is too queered to be one that exists within society.

In truth, rather than existing in opposition, queerness and fatness both exist in a subjugated position that share mutual goals of social recognition. Both of these populations continue to fight for representation within media and the public while simultaneously facing obstacles that work to discourage their liberation. Though queerness could serve as a vessel for further recognizing his body as a valid individual, the director chooses to craft it as an interaction of disconnect between queerness and fatness. Charlie was only able to accept his queerness in the past by focusing on the beauty and love between him and Alan. Charlie did not gain this weight until after Alan died and so his fatness is only associated with trauma. With this, the director makes it clear that he views Charlie's fatness as separate from his queer identity. Charlie's queerness is a redeemable aspect of Charlie's character whereas his fatness is this pain that

Charlie is saddled with. *The Whale* would posit that Charlie's fatness is this depressing byproduct attached to his body and by the end, his fatness has taken over. Though this film centers around Charlie and his fatness, it fails to actively take into account the fat perspective. When the credits roll, audiences do not understand Charlie's life any more than if they read an IMDb summary. Rather than bathing Charlie's fatness and queerness in a redemptive light, Aronofsky chooses to focus on Charlie's queerness as the only attribute that can be interrogated and accepted.

Even with this eventual acceptance of queerness, Aronofsky ensures to present a heteronormative dream of what straightness could have presented for Charlie. This is shown in the interactions between Charlie and Mary, Charlie's ex-wife. When dealing with Charlie's battle between queerness and heteronormativity, it is as if Charlie's fatness completely dissipates. Rather than have to deal with the reality of Charlie's fatness interacting with his queerness, Aronofsky escapes to the past before Charlie gained the weight. I want to discuss a scene that takes place approximately an hour and fourteen minutes into the film. In the scene, Liz has brought Mary to the house to talk some sense into Charlie regarding the hospital and Ellie. The scene begins with Liz checking on Charlie to ensure that Ellie did not hurt him (in an earlier scene, Ellie slipped Ambien into Charlie's drink). Mary interjects, during Liz's exam to ask Charlie how much money he has offered to Ellie. To Liz's shock, Charlie has a bank account with well over $100,000 that he has promised Ellie. Liz feels betrayed as that money could have been spent taking care of Charlie or buying insurance. Even further, he could have helped Liz when she needed support. For example, Liz had been having car troubles and struggled to pay for the repairs. Liz rejected his money figuring that Charlie is strapped for cash when, in reality he, had been squirrelling money. Liz storms out of the house and Mary yells at Ellie to leave. During

her exit, Ellie yells at Charlie that she does not care about him and wishes that he would just die already. Once Ellie leaves, Mary pours herself a drink before talking to Charlie. Through dialogue we learn that Charlie has always been the positive parent compared to Mary's cynicism about Ellie's future. Here, we learn that Mary fought Charlie for full custody, but Mary says that Charlie was the one that left her for Alan. The two argue over Ellie as Mary expresses her dismay at Ellie's personality while Charlie is captivated by her honesty. Mary gets angry at Charlie's positivity and states that the only reason Charlie married her was to have a child. With tension they discuss the loss of Alan. After which, they reminisce about a previous beach trip they took when married. Charlie shared that he needs to know Ellie will have a decent life. As Mary storms out of the house, Charlie yells "I need to know that I have done one thing right in my life" (*The Whale* 1:29:07-1:31:12).

Interestingly, this scene abandons the point of view camera perspective previously present between Charlie and Thomas. Instead, the scene takes a larger scope and shows multiple characters within one shot, providing more spatial context of how characters move around the room. This could be attributed to the larger number of individuals within the scene (four), however, even when the scene is paired down to Charlie and Mary, this camera perspective remains. In the beginning of the scene, Mary sits at Charlie's dining room table as far away possible from Charlie while still being in the same room as him. Once it is just the two of them, Mary begins to slowly edge closer to Charlie until she is resting her head on Charlie's chest while he recounts the beach memory with Ellie. As the two begin arguing, Mary creates additional distance between them and then leaves abruptly from Charlie's house.

I attend the spatial positioning of characters in great detail above because I am interested in how their location and interactions represent Charlie's complex relationship with

heterosexuality. In this scene, Charlie and Mary begin at a large distance apart. Charlie is far removed from his former heterosexual life and does not know how to approach this past life. As him and Mary converse, they move closer back into the grooves of their previous relation and Charlie seemingly grows closer to the heterosexual ideals he used to hold. This builds until Mary rests her head directly on his chest as he recounts a moment of complete happiness that he felt during their marriage when he took Ellie to the beach. This is the moment where he feels comfortable within this heterosexual façade and him and Mary are physically touching. As Mary leaves, so do the remains of his old heterosexual self. Arguably, this final abandonment is one of the factors that leads to Charlie's queer revelation to Thomas later in the film.

Like I mentioned previously, it is in this scene that Charlie's fatness is melted away. When audiences are taken back to the day at the beach, it is well before Charlie gained this weight. In these moments, Charlie is embodying the ideal body; one that is thin and seemingly straight. We see for a second that maybe Charlie can live in this moment of ideal bliss. As quickly as we are introduced to this memory, the moment is gone. Instead of seeing this endless opportunity from the ideal body, audiences are brought back to the reality of Charlie's fatness and queerness. But what if we were to live in memories and build a different future? Could a reality be dreamed where Charlie and Alan are still madly and hopelessly in love?

To explore the possibility of living within the seed of memory, I turn to José Esteban Muñoz's work *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* (2009). For Muñoz, queerness is not based solely within the spectrum of sexuality and gender; instead, "queerness is an ideality" (1). The future is a sphere that is situated in queerness, imbuing the future with endless possibilities that can stretch far from the traditional normative experience. With this, queerness allows for structured hope via freedom dreaming of a possible future. In this sense,

queerness is then more of an action or performance as it is less an identity and more a method of moving toward the future. This allows us to use queerness as a mode of living that manifests a future that champions the possibility of hope for all marginalized bodies.

Muñoz's interpretation of queerness and queer futurity is informed by theorists Lee Edelman, Jack Halberstam and himself. Edelman wrote the work *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (2004) that highlights what he coins "reproductive futurism". Here, Edelman states that the future is not constructed with queer individuals in mind. Society revolves around milestones that focus almost exclusively on cisgender-heterosexual people and procreation. Events like marriage and child-rearing are used to determine success within life and promote the increase of the population. Jack Halberstam also advances this idealized notion of the future and suggests the possibility of queer time. Queer time is the temporalities that abandon the societal frames of concepts like reproduction, family, or longevity. Queer space is then the place-making practices that work to understand alternative ways of living.

Returning to Muñoz, he extends Halberstam's argument to argue that queerness presents hope especially when applied to the future. Muñoz theorizes that one can use the concept of queer time and queer space to trouble these moments that are imbued with hope and generate greater utopian possibilities. "At the center of Cruising Utopia there is the idea of hope… Bloch offers us hope as a hermeneutic, and from the point of view of political struggles today, such a critical optic is nothing short of necessary in order to combat the force of political pessimism (Muñoz, 4)." Here, Muñoz highlights that these points of hope (found within art pieces through the late 1900s regarding the HIV/AIDs epidemic) can be used to fight the heteronormative pessimism assigned to queer individuals. This hope can be used to postulate potentialities that do not adhere to the heteronormative actualities that are constantly impressed. This is a form of

freedom dreaming[5] that embraces a queer alternative. Instead of rejecting the future, Muñoz posits that we can craft a queer utopian future based on moments created within queer time and space.

In *The Whale*, Charlie is still gripping onto the heterosexual ideals that he was prescribed at birth. Mary states directly that Charlie only married her to have a child and the scene ends with Charlie expressing that fathering Ellie may have been the only thing that he "did right" in his life. Throughout these exchanges with Mary, Charlie is stuck in the traditional heteronormative idea of futurity. This type of future only looks at how we can pass on longevity to a future generation and focus on the children, after all, "the kids are alright" (Halberstam, 14). For Charlie, if Ellie goes on to live a good life, then he will feel satisfied as he has fulfilled this heteronormative role. The tragedy of the film presumably revolves around this tension; even as Charlie clings onto the hope that Ellie represents of the future, he simultaneously fails to live up to the heterosexual promises that were originally made to Mary.

Having said that, I argue that this scene with Mary tees up Charlie for his breakthrough of queer revelations during his later scene with Thomas. Throughout this entire scene, Charlie is reminded of the prescribed heterosexual future that he will never have. After mourning this loss through an episode of binging and purging, Thomas pushes Charlie to his limits. Charlie recounts the moments where he fell in love with Alan. While wrapped in this nostalgic love of Alan, Charlie is finally able to fight against the heterosexual evangelical perspective that Thomas and society push. I think that these moments that Charlie recalls are those seeds that Muñoz mentions. Muñoz describes these seeds of hope as "negation of negation" (12). That love that

[5]Freedom dreaming refers to the practice of liberatory visualization as a means of troubling what a future would look like free from oppressive systems. This is especially exemplified within Black feminist and womanist perspectives (Neal & Dunn, 60)

Charlie feels is imbued in those moments. They show a potential alternative future, one that displays queer liberation and freedom. They are what fights against this force of marginalization. These seeds give Charlie a concrete utopia where he can build a future in his mind that is not dictated by traditional heteronormative ideals.

While it might be easy to dismiss this as "daydreaming", we can acknowledge not everyone seeks to experience life in the traditional fast paced hetero-production mindset. ""Queer time" is for those specific models of temporality that emerge once one leaves the temporal frames of bourgeois reproduction and family, longevity, risk/safety, and inheritance" (20). In this space, Charlie can take as much time as needed to mourn and rejoice in the past queer love. Charlie can take the space to posit what could have been and what was. Charlie can treasure these moments and they can coexist simultaneously, continually impacting the multitude of future possibilities.

Nonetheless, while Charlie can use the idea of queer futurity to finally break away from heterosexual ideals that have held him in a mortal grip, he remains under prescribed bodily ideals. Much like Muñoz's idea of futurity, I postulate that fat bodies are also excluded from social futurity. Where queerness is rejected as traditional futurity hyper fixates on procreation, fat bodies are fully barred from the possibility of a future as they are thought to be on the brink of death.

Once more, according to mainstream society, fatness is associated with being unhealthy. While this can be seen in many ways, a primary example is the term "morbidly obese" that is given to those of a certain weight. Though the phrase would assert that these fat bodies are going to die soon, there is no direct scientific way to determine the length of someone's life. This term just works to bring more social understanding that fat people are going to die, it is just inevitable.

After all, the film serves as a countdown to Charlie's death. Based on the story crafted by the director, Charlie is crafted to never be able to love his body. Whereas his character was given the seeds of queer love to generate liberation, his fatness was created to function as a prison. The memory of Charlie and Alan's love is one where he has embraced his queerness, but within this moment he still holds a more idealized thin body. This would suggest that while queerness is worth a redemptive revolution, fatness is an attribute better left out of utopian dreaming. From the perspective of the director, his fatness is the reason that he has no life and the reason that he is about to die. How could he possibly love this part of himself? Though his body has taken him through these seeds of memory, it was before his fatness. This seems to imply that his fatness is not a part of his lived experience, but rather some horrible that has happened to Charlie and causes his downfall.

Against this, I argue that fat utopianism can be found in knowledge of the body. This body that Charlie rebukes was with him as he showed Alan love and devotion. Though different, this body was on the beach that day with Ellie too. Charlie fails to acknowledge this fact and I think that this stems from a lack of understanding of the lived fat experience from Darren Aronofsky. How can a director accurately depict fat life if he himself has never been privy to this lens?

Throughout *The Whale*, Charlie grapples with his self-image but can only come to terms with his queerness before his death. His fatness is instead pushed aside and villainized as the problem. The film never stops to consider the social pressures that led to his intense despair and loss. Instead, it would rather tell the story of a man that has lost everything who must then come to terms with his life before his death. The way this story was made, Charlie would never be able to accept a love for his body because it was created to push the narrative that fatness represents

an evil that takes away your life. Never is his fatness a part of him, but comparatively something that he was saddled with that would be his undoing.

Throughout the film, Aronofsky has Charlie come to terms with his queerness while simultaneously digesting his imminent mortality. As an interesting point, the writer of the original screenplay was intimately acquainted with his queerness, whereas the fatness of Charlie was borne from imagining the playwriter's deepest fears of a fat future (Wilkinson, 2022). In truth, he cannot imagine a fat future that holds anything but the end. The character of Charlie provides us an example of fat representation that fails to incorporate bodily knowing and the multitude of experiences that happen when residing in a fat body. While delving into the possibility of queer utopia, *The Whale*, the film itself takes away the dimensionality of the fat experience and distills fat bodies to isolation and death. Moving forward, I want to interrogate this association with fatness and death and their entanglements with disability. This will provide a greater context for the systemic obstacles that seemingly condemn Charlie to a predetermined death.

CHAPTER III: THE BODY IS NOT PADDING

When navigating *The Whale*'s IMDb page, there are multiple synopsis submitted by viewers to give potential audiences a snapshot of the film (IMDb, 2023). Within all of these blurbs, critics use the term "morbidly obese" to describe Charlie. This is a term commonly thrown around to describe "very" fat people. This term is tied to the BMI and assigns health risks due to fatness (Gordon, 54). In terms of origin, obese is derived from the Latin word obesus referring to "having eaten oneself fat" (Gordon, 17). When tacking morbidly onto the front of obese, there is an increased emphasis stating that they (the so-called 'morbidly obese) will die due to their fatness.

Terms such as "morbidly" obese work to highlight and ostracize fat individuals and emphasize their likelihood of dying *soon*. Words like 'obese' and 'overweight' suggest that there is a certain way that bodies should appear by denoting that fatness is a blameworthy or that there is an acceptable weight for all bodies. Even further, they (these words) imply that bodies that do not fit this mold are unwanted or should not exist altogether. In other words, there has been a larger push to enforce the ideal standard of a body. This can be seen with the language of the obesity epidemic used in the so-called war on fatness.

While this war exploded in popularity during the 2000s, the 1980s saw the first crack down on fatness during the Reagan administration. In 1988 the US Public Health Service (PHS) released a report noting nutrition and health guidelines and said that fatness was of great concern and caused diseases such as high blood pressure or heart disease. Following this, in the 1990s, the surgeon general, C. Everett Koop stated that fatness was killing one thousand Americans per day. Since that time, there was an increased push for visibility on nutrition health guidelines

while simultaneously ads and programs were released vilifying fat bodies (Johannes and Stecklow, 1998).

While nutritional health and education are important subjects, many ads and programs focused the "problem" of fat people rather than a focus on bodily health. These ads appeared on billboards and public transportation to reach families and individuals en mass as a wake-up call to emphasize the detriment of fatness. A prime example of this sort of vilification is a series of ads and billboards that were placed around the state of Georgia by hospital networks and insurance companies in 2012. These black and white ads featured fat children with alarming statements such as "Chubby kids may not outlive their parents", "Fat kids become fat adults", and "He has his father's eyes, his laugh and maybe even his diabetes" (Lohr, 2012). Within the campaign, there is a direct implication that fat kids are bad and fat adults are even worse. Though this could be written off as a critical campaign meant to propel action with shock value; in reality, this ad campaign is the result of an insidious ideology called "healthism".

Healthism was first coined in 1980 by Robert Crawford within the *International Journal of Health Services*. This term seeks to address the conflation of health with morality. According to Crawford, healthism states that your personal health is reflective of your moral status. Healthism believes that you can achieve good health through sheer force and discipline (Crawford, 1980). This takes quite a reductive stance that does not account for systemic issues that may be contributing to your health. It also completely fails to acknowledge disabled people and the fact that bodies come in all different forms. Like the BMI and obesity, healthism stems from the medical-industrial complex[6] which means that it still perpetuates this idea that there is a

[6] This term refers to the to the privatization of the health care system and the increasing power these corporations garner off individual's bodies and health. This was coined in 1980 by Dr. Arnold Relman in his article "The New

single ideal way that a body should look and medically managed. Those who fit the mold of the white, cisgender, heterosexual, thin man are then considered healthier and more morally upright in society.

With the creation of healthism, fatness became a space of moral quandary. Within the eleventh chapter of *The Routledge International Handbook of Fat Studies* (2021) called "Fatness and Disability: Law, identity, co-constructions, and future directions", April Herndon discusses the way fat bodies are consistently socially targeted. Herndon recognizes that recently the size acceptance movement has grown notoriety with the Health at Every Size (HAES) initiative. This initiative states that bodies come in multiple sizes and that healthy bodies can be large, small, and in-between. But what happens when a body does not fit within this healthy mold? Herndon cites arguments against the HAES movement as it posits the existence of so-labeled "good fattys" and "bad fattys".

Mirrored after the concept of good and bad fats within food, this terminological distinction stratifies the fat community further. "Good fattys" are those individuals that fit this ever-shifting mold of health. Though these individuals are larger, society can justify them as healthy or striving for health. They exercise and try to lose weight and compensate for their fat by shrinking in social settings and ease social discomfort due to their fatness. Bad fattys are those whose fatness is disabling for them or whom otherwise do not fit the socially accepted version of health. These individuals refuse to apologize for their fat and instead live in their fatness by rejecting social pressures for reductive measures such as diet plans or weight loss

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Medical-Industrial Complex". This stems from President Eisenhower's deployment of the military-industrial complex in 1961.

initiatives. Here, the movement further divides the fat community, seeking to pit good fattys against bad fattys (93).

Further, Herndon talks about the burden of being a "good citizen" being a new fashion of neoliberalism to project self-worth. In this respect, fatness is just the latest avenue of hate for differing bodies where those who are fat do not deserve the same rights and social support as those who are thin. Those who are "unhealthy" and fat are not playing the part of a good citizen and are not contributing positively to society. These individuals are then not seen as worthy of citizenship and must, in turn, prove themselves viable for basics like healthcare (95). This can be seen with the rising usage of pre-existing conditions for health insurance and access to affordable care. Many companies, indeed, have put in place screening and questionnaires to weed out those with conditions or disabilities. When these pre-existing conditions are noted, companies will raise the cost of coverage, refuse coverage or treatment, or flat out reject their coverage altogether.

Moreover, with healthism lying in-between anti-fatness and ableism, Herndon also discusses the intersections of fatness and disability, specifically the question regarding whether fatness can be considered a disability. Herndon covers this controversial thought gaining traction in the last twenty years since the publication of Charlotte Cooper's 1997 article "Can a fat woman call herself disabled?". As Cooper expresses, "I consider the experience of being fat in a fat-hating culture to be disabling" (qtd in Herndon, 89). Not only that, but Herndon also recognizes the positive identity that is associated both with fat and disabled communities. She notes that these communities may appear disparate but show similar histories of community formation for support and shared identity. Bridging communities generates a sense of trust and belonging between individuals where they can be bodies of power together rather than sites of

disgust. Many Fat Studies scholars have agreed with the concept of fatness being a disability as fat people face the same types of social, political, and cultural discrimination as disabled people.

At the same time, Herndon notes that there have been critics of considering fatness as a disability. According to the author, linking fatness to disability can cause turmoil as it may work against the validity of fat or disabled bodies. Herndon states that there are critics from both the Fat Liberation and Disability Rights movements regarding this topic. Certain Fat activists think that marking fatness as a disability would convey that fatness is a hindrance for fat bodies. This however, paints disabilities and disabled bodies in a negative manner of unwant. Some disability activists feel that marking fatness as a disability would be incorrect as fatness is a condition that can be prevented or mutable (90). This perspective on the other hand would suggest a healthist perspective of good versus fat bodies. Legally, there is no clarity on whether fatness is included under the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA). Herndon mentions both sides as many legal activists argue that this bodily status is included within the spirit of the legislation, while others argue that fatness does not automatically include health problems that would qualify for applicable accommodations.

Returning to *The Whale*, I would like to direct our attention to a scene mentioned in the previous chapter where Charlie confronts Thomas about being "saved". I have decided to return to this scene and view the interactions within the context of fatness and disability, rather than fatness and queerness. When looked at through this differing lens, I will dissect Charlie's connection with healthism rather than queer temporality. The primary interaction within the scene:

> Charlie: We would make love. Do you find that disgusting?
> Thomas: Charlie, God is ready to help you.

Charlie: Oh, I hope that there isn't a god, because I hate to think that there's an afterlife and that Alan can see what I have done to myself.

Thomas: Charlie…

Charlie: That he can see my swollen feet and the sores on my skin and the patches of mold in between the flaps.

Thomas: Stop.

Charlie: the infected ulcers on my ass, and the sack of fat on my back that turned brown last year.

Thomas: Okay, stop!

Charlie: This is disgusting?

Thomas: Yes

Charlie: I'm disgusting?

Thomas: Yes, you're disgusting! (*The Whale* 1:37:30-1:39:20)

This exchange is a parallel to their initial conversation where Thomas broaches saving Charlie and refutes any disgust towards Charlie. After repeated questioning, Thomas finally breaks and admits that he finds Charlie's body disgusting. Echoing Herndon, in this scene, Charlie's body is seen as a site of disgust and discomfort. The idea of healthism is palpable throughout the entire film, but this interaction brings forth the potential truth that the normative world, embodied by Thomas, is secretly disgusted with Charlie's body. Charlie's continually questioning of Thomas's motives and thoughts leads Thomas to admitting these negative perceptions. Healthism would have you believe that Charlie is disgusting and a bad person at his core. But for Thomas, he can save Charlie from these issues and from himself. In light of Herndon's argument, Charlie might be considered one of the bad fattys that are not contributing to the morality of society. Charlie does not work to change his body and lose weight and he avoids going to the hospital to address his health issues.

Interestingly, Charlie's disability is not mentioned within the aforementioned IMDb synopses. He is only described as morbidly obese. When looking through the lens that Herndon provides, it can be argued that the term simultaneously encapsulates a disabled status. While fatness as a disability is still a topic of discussion, Charlie does have disabilities at least partially resulting from his fatness. Through the first portion of the film, Charlie navigates his house vis a walker. Once his heart condition progresses, Liz brings home a wheelchair and Charlie adapts to moving around his house on wheels. Charlie is disabled, yet the film (and subsequently reviews and synopses) only centers his fatness. The only times that Ellie, his daughter, acknowledges any limitations are when she tries to make Charlie prove his love by walking to her. In this regard, his disability is negated to a background oppressive plot device that is meant to show that people can be more than their limitations and "overcome disability".

When Charlie's disability is brought up in the film there is a lack of seriousness for what he feels and experiences. In fact, *The Whale* works to pack a lot of its ableist ideology in the character Ellie. When we first meet Ellie, she is visiting Charlie but shows visible disgust and distrust towards him. Visiting him after a long estrangement, Ellie lashes out at Charlie for abandoning her and he works to make it up by tutoring her and giving her all of the money within his bank account when he dies. As Ellie walks to the door to leave, she demands that Charlie walk to her across the room. Ellie insists that this is the only way to prove that he truly loves her and does care about her. Charlie repeatedly refuses stating that that was not possible for him and then she yells at him to shut up, not taking 'no' as an answer. Charlie struggles to stand and while leaning on the side table, it buckles under his weight. Charlie falls back onto the couch and grabs his chest as he gets intense chest pains due to the exertion. Rather than check on Charlie or show any ounce of sympathy, Ellie turns and leaves slamming the door behind her.

Ellie refuses to accept that Charlie has physical limitations or a disability. In her eyes, Charlie is just a lazy fat guy who does nothing.

This storyline with Ellie and ableism actually culminates as the ending of the film. Marking a parallel scene, at approximately an hour and fifty minutes into the movie, Ellie stands at the doorframe again and now she's begging for Charlie to walk to her. As she reads her essay on Moby Dick, Charlie struggles to his feet, pouring sweat and breathing extremely heavily. Charlie slowly takes steps to Ellie, and she starts crying as she walks to meet him halfway. Once they meet, Charlie seemingly begins to float, his feet being lifting off the ground as he is covered in light. This signifies the death of Charlie. This is a beautiful and heart-wrenching scene that wonderfully encapsulates the message of empathy; Ellie finally grew a heart and met Charlie halfway. That's what the director would like you to believe at least. After all, at least Charlie got some exercise in before his death. But, in the end Charlie still died all the while being berated from his daughter which he heralds as his magnum opus. Even in his dying breath, Ellie refuses to acknowledge Charlie's body or that he is disabled. She would rather stick with this one-dimensional caricature of Charlie that is just "a fat gluttonous slob" who has no drive to do anything, including walking over to her. In her mind, the only way that Charlie can prove he loves her and maintains any value is by being able to walk to her. By her logic, if Charlie cannot physically get to her, then he must have never really cared for her in the first place.

While Ellie meeting Charlie halfway is growth, in reality, it still shows that she fails to even see Charlie as a human being with different accessibility needs. Even in Charlie's final moments, all he cares about is conveying to Ellie that he loves her. Ellie on the other hand would rather see Charlie die than meet him where he is at. In general, this is quite reflective of society's lack of willingness to make any accommodations for disabled people. Herndon brings this

rigidity up when covering the tumultuous passing of the ADA. In the final version that of this law, there were amendments that focused on reasonable accommodations and undue hardships (Herndon, 91). These clauses were meant to keep disabled people from being able to navigate environments and participate in activities. Any disruption to the status quo of bodily expectations is seen as outrageous and cannot be fathomed. The fact that Charlie literally is not able to walk to Ellie seems outside of her realm of possibility, most likely due to an overarching lack of disabled representation and recognition within society's framework.

Indeed, many different places and social settings lack the adequate accommodations and the thought that not everybody has the same capabilities. In terms of services, only 5 percent of housing within the United States is accessible (Konish, 2023). Charlie's house is no exception, yet Ellie fails to see this as an actual issue. When it comes to the media, representation is abysmal with only 4.2 percent of movies and TV shows having a main character who is disabled (Bahr, 2022). This contrasts with the 26 percent of adults who are disabled in some manner in the United States (Bahr, 2022). This means that Ellie is likely to not have had many interactions or knowledge of disabilities. Perhaps, in her mind, if you are not a productive member of society and able to contribute as a good citizen, then you are a failure who does not deserve any sort of grace.

With this in mind, Charlie's fat and disabled identity are vital when understanding the plot that unfolds. Charlie's death in this movie is expedited from his lack of willingness to go to the hospital or seek any systemic form of healthcare. Through the film, Charlie repeatedly refuses to go to the hospital because he does not have healthcare and does not want to deplete any funds that could go to Ellie. But let's imagine that he had; what would his experience have been? Many hospitals across America are not equipped to care for bigger bodies. They lack MRI

or CAT scan machines that can hold the weight of fat bodies, or they do not have blood pressure cuffs that can fit on all arms. At times, fat patients are referred to zoos that have equipment that is big enough for large animals (Mishori, 2003). If Charlie was to go to the hospital, they might not be able to provide the basic care of even diagnosing a critical issue (Kolata, 2016). If the hospital is not able to weigh Charlie accurately then they cannot provide him with the proper medication and dosage. Many meds are dispensed base on the weight of patients and, even if not, most medicines are not tested on fat bodies so they can have a lower effective rate during treatment (Kolata, 2016). These issues concern just the logistics of treatment; this does not even consider potential traumas or negative experiences that can occur within the medical complex. A study completed in 2001 from Yale noted that the medical industry harbors negative feelings towards fat bodies. From teachers to nurses, professionals made statements such as "becoming obese is the worst thing that can happen to a person" or that they are "repulsed by obese persons" (Yale News, 2001). Seeing how other characters interact with the main character in The Whale, this potential of Charlie facing intense stigma in a hospital seems highly likely.

Even with the issues of the medical system in mind, the role of Liz within *The Whale* suggests a more intimate relationship between Charlie and the medical-industrial complex. Liz works as a fulltime nurse and helps Charlie out by making any necessary runs and to check up on him in general. She is his one and only confidante. Throughout the film we see Liz provide care from supplying emotional support to acquiring a bariatric wheelchair for Charlie to use. Within *The Whale* Liz exists as a humane juxtaposition to the medical industrial complex. Liz comes from a point of genuine care and compassion, potentially due to her personal connection to Charlie in combination with her medical background. She constantly talks to Charlie as if he is an actual person with feelings and emotions. Rather than treating Charlie like a body that comes

in and out of a sterile office, Liz tries to talk to him about his body and provide open communication for care.

The most important aspect of Liz is that she respects Charlie's autonomy. Oftentimes, disabled people are told their limitations, or their autonomy is revoked for their "own good". Alice Wong from the Disability Visibility Project (with a podcast of the same name) sat down with Dr. Kim Sauder to discuss a lack of autonomy afforded to disabled individuals. During this podcast episode titled "Autonomy and Disabled People" (2017), Sauder and Wong discussed how autonomy goes farther than just decisions about your body, but also manifests in deciding the point of assistance. Wong stated that "I think a lot of it is about having control and having freedom and the power to make decisions about how we wanna live" (Wong, 15:37). Disabled people are consistently told what is needed for them and their life and options are laid out as predetermined paths that must be followed by those who are qualified (not disabled).

At multiple points in the film, Liz suggests that Charlie go to the hospital. While the urging grows more forceful, there is not a single point in the movie where Liz enforces her will over Charlie or says that she knows best. She provides general information that she can about his condition but recommends reaching out to a specialist and the hospital for the best insight and treatment. One could argue that no other character acted on Charlie's behalf, however, Liz is positioned in the film as the only person who truly cares for Charlie. Other individuals like Ellie or Mary do not really care like Liz does and in the end, cannot be bothered. At no point in Liz's care, does she impose her will and opinion on Charlie. Even when he begins discussing the end of his life, Liz does not stand as authority, nor does she make any calls against his wishes. Instead, Liz provides support as best she can by picking up supplies, monitoring him, and even going out of her way to obtain assistance devices like the wheelchair. Presumably, Liz has seen

the medical system disregard disabled individuals and assume that they know what is best for them. Rather than replicate this cycle of abusive care, Liz instead leads by listening and still sees Charlie as a person. He is not a patient, but a close friend who needs a support system that does not try to overwrite his own thoughts and wishes.

Though the character of Liz acts as Charlie's support system and works to assist him however desired, she remains as an outlier throughout the entire film. At multiple times during the film characters yell at Charlie to go to the hospital and throw general arguments of health his way; but Liz works with other suggestions even bringing a wheelchair when she notes his trouble with walking. It is important to acknowledge Liz's treatment of Charlie as the only form of genuine connection that we see between Charlie and another person. Instead of leaning into this narrative and showing the strong connection between a disabled person and their caregiver/ support system, the playwright and director shy away from this storyline. These creators would rather target the sad and tragic story of a fat and disabled man who will die facing his failure to live the ideal straight and thin life. In fact, this film sidelines Liz at the end of the film and focuses on Ellie and Charlie's failed relationship. This signals that if only Charlie could just rekindle a connection with Ellie, then maybe he would actually live through the end of the film.

Prior to the introduction of Charlie's fraught relationship with Ellie, one of the most jarring scenes within *The Whale*, happens seemingly out of nowhere. Approximately seventeen minutes into the film (*The Whale*, 17:20-20:20), Charlie begins processing his mortality and the very real possibility that he may be facing the end of his life. Here, we see Charlie fall down a Google rabbit-hole where he and the audience witness web-based information that informs that obesity will cause congestive heart failure and, as a result that he (Charlie) will subsequently die because of his weight. Following this realization, Charlie eats a sweet treat and discards the

wrapper in a snack graveyard drawer. The film then cuts to Charlie showering as his whole body is on display. There is a short montage of Charlie prepping to meet who we then learn is Ellie.

Within this scene, the film works to show its message rather than tell the audience. This technique is glaringly apparent as Charlie eats the dessert and the camera focuses in on the drawer of discarded wrappers. Without words, the film highlights that this is why Charlie must die. From this lens the audience thinks "Okay, one or two treats are acceptable; but this is out of control." This seeks to align the audience against Charlie rather than try to understand his perspective. When faced with mortality, does one not deserve grace? Rather than acknowledging the pain and plethora of emotions that Charlie must be confronting, the audience gets an up-close look at Charlie's failure insinuating that he is the problem and should be blamed. In case this was not cemented within the audience's head, the camera then pans out to a larger angle swooping in with a bird's eye perspective. Suddenly, we are looking down on Charlie from a God-like omniscient lens as he sits in personal dismay. We even see Charlie's belly show out from under his shirt showing that he cannot even be contained within his clothing.

This intense camera focus is then magnified multiple times over as the film cuts to Charlie taking a shower and scrubbing his bare body. I'd like to be clear here that I am not suggesting that Charlie's fat body is not meant to be on camera; instead, I want to interrogate the way that the movie uses his body for shock value. When completely naked in the shower scrubbing himself clean, Charlie experiences notable difficulty cleaning his entire body. The camera lingers here for seemingly a second too long to make it clear that his body is the object of absurdity. Like in previous scenes, Libatique (scene choreographer) and Aronofsky deploy a cluttered view when placing Charlie in a set. His body is cast as the main attraction and the rest of the surrounding area is made smaller to emphasize his size. Charlie stands in his shower but

seems to be too tall for the area and almost too wide. With this scene, we see a massive change in lighting. Almost all the other scenes play with shadows to make even interior sets seem overcast with an ominous cloud in the air. This scene trades this darkened lighting for a fluorescent overhead light that illuminates his body as if in a medical exam room. Why change the lighting method so drastically if not to place Charlie's body under intense scrutiny and to be ogled?

With so much camera focus on the body of Charlie, one might think that the body that they are viewing is real. Unfortunately, it is not; Charlie is played by Brendon Fraser. Fraser, most notably known for his roles as a heart throb in *The Mummy* (1999) and *George of the Jungle* (1997*)*, is a non-plus size actor. For the role of Charlie, Fraser worked with production to portray Charlie's body via practical effects with a body suit, CGI body modification, and specialized bodily movement. Fraser reported that the prosthetics that he used composed of 300 pounds of padding and that the suit caused him to move and adapt his body in ways to where he could understand the situations of fat people. In his words, "It was cumbersome, with good reason. Because putting an actor in a costume, an apparatus, to emulate weight gain for the character has, in years past, cut the corner on authenticity. It's normally the silhouette of a costume that's worn by a fairly athletic actor and it's in service of a cheap joke or to vilify a character" (Hammond, 2023). This quote conjures a nagging question in my mind: What does it mean that my fatness is a costume for Fraser? While this can be disregarded as off-handed word choice, I think it begs a point of tension; Why are intense fat suits like the one created for Charlie acceptable? Fraser continues by admiring the strength of fat people on both a physical and emotional level. In a different interview, Aronofsky stated that it would have been harder for an actor of Charlie's size to play the role of Charlie and that Fraser "just fit" the character (NBC Los Angeles, 2022). If this is the case, then how is the role of Charlie a realistic depiction of a fat

life? How can a role that would be harder with a plus size actor accurately craft the fat experience?

Though Brendan Fraser won an Oscar for Best Actor for playing Charlie, I feel that casting him in this role crafted a culture of inauthenticity for the film. Fraser wore an intense fat suit for this role, but when discussing this with press, he neglected to call it a fat suit and instead opted for costume. How does this encourage a better understanding of fat bodies? Fraser noted that the fat suit would give him strong vertigo when taken off as if he was weightless (Head, 2022). During this filming, Fraser said that the suit caused him to understand the strength of fat people. This is a very narrow understanding of fatness and living in a fat body. The fat experience does not end with weight. Fraser does not know what it means to interact as a fat body in society. He knows this incased perception crafted by prosthetics on a movie set.

At the end of the day, Fraser can take off the suit and feel that vertigo. He has never felt the sensation of fat flaps despite him projecting this on camera. The fat suit additionally adds a false sense of representation as Fraser mentioned that he was sore in muscles that he did not even know existed. No amount of padding can replicate the skin he's missing. This one remark sums up his experience and while it is a positive that he understands the strength of fat people, he cannot understand the bodily experience for fat or disabled people. His aches and pains come from padding and hazards of his job, not his own body.

To really dive into the way that Charlie's body is showcased and viewed, I would like to turn to a newer form of anti-fat voyeurism that can be seen in housed in the television genre human interest[7]. Shows such as *My 600 lb Life* (2012*)* or *1000 lb Sisters* (2020) have carved out

[7] This genre turns to capturing "real life" subjects and extreme life experiences (Richey, 2022)

a space in media to further objectify fat bodies. As recent as 2010, many characters and figures are used as a fat shtick, even children's media espouses these stereotypes as 40% of fat cartoon characters are displayed thinking about food or are disliked altogether (Heuer 2010). Instead of comedy, these shows work from the voyeuristic nature, allowing audiences to look on with shock and think "at least I'm not fat like them". Rather than cameras pointing to the absurdity of fat bodies working out or exercising, these human interest shows go further and point to the absurdity of fat people living point blank. With this evolution in media, fat bodies are now looked on as animals in the zoos that are already called in to weigh them. In my opinion, the individuals in these shows are to reassure audiences that they are healthy and good people (at least in comparison to the people on their screen). Rather than humans with agency, their walking fat are seemingly, meant to appease the viewers at home.

This might seem farfetched; however, these shows focus intensely on the health of their "main characters" as the driving force for the show's episodes and then broadcasts it for shock value. Though these shows claim to be capturing the real life of individuals, they instead focus on the disabilities of these bodies to garner a spectacle for audiences. As of writing this (March 27th, 2024), when Googling *1,000 lb. Sisters*, the first article that comes up is published from People. This article is titled "1000-Lb. Sisters' Tammy Slaton Feels 'Hurt' After a Comment About Her Excess Skin Makes Her 'Insecure': It Bothers Me" and was published February 5, 2024. This article covers a TikTok that Tammy made in response to comments about excess skin and her chin flap. In the video, Tammy expresses that she gets criticized daily and gets many hateful comments about her body comparing her to a turkey due to excess skin. It is important to note that this excess skin is from weight loss that has been chronicled through *1,000 lb. Sisters.* The very first episode of this television show holds this synopsis on TLC.com "Discover how the

Slaton sisters achieve their weight-loss journey" (TLC). Though presented through the veneer of telling 'the fat story', this show instead works to say that this fat disabled life is one that is outrageous and unlivable. It feels as if this show says watch how crazy their life is because they are just too fat to function. The show even makes a point to say that they are too fat to have fat removal surgery. This holds the overbearing message that these individuals may even be too fat to save; but to find out, audiences will have to tune in of course.

The Whale is a culmination of this type of representation of fat bodies. Though a fictional movie, the film relies almost entirely on Charlie's fatness and disability to drive the story. This is so true that Charlie is almost a secondary character in comparison to his fatness. Charlie is going to die in a week due to his fatness and almost all his relationships are shaped primarily through him being fat. Charlie and Liz have such a close relationship partly to how much she functions as his caretaker. She goes to the grocery store, monitors his health, and even works to assist with mobility issues. Ellie hinges his love on his ability to walk across the living room to her. Though Thomas wants to save Charlie due to queerness, he also refers to Charlie's fatness as a punishment for his queerness. Even the parasocial relationship between Charlie and the pizza delivery guy is contingent on Charlie not leaving his house. As soon as delivery guy is aware of Charlie's fatness, he leaves as quickly as he can. The only relationship that does not have fat surrounding it is between him and Mary. This is arguably because their relationship is nonexistent except for the scene where they reminisce about their marriage. Throughout the entire plot of the film, it seems that Charlie is not worth more than his fatness and disability as they take center role.

Roxanne Gay covers this view of Charlie within her review of The Whale, published by the New York Times in 2022. Here, she mentions that though the film projects itself as a high

thought piece of cinema, the plot and visuals focus more on the "freakshow" nature of Charlie's existence. Gay notes that while watching the movie, there were many points where she debated walking out of the screening due to how inhumane Charlie is depicted. Specifically, Gay says "In most circumstances, eliciting such a visceral reaction to a movie would be a sign of good filmmaking. Productive things can happen in spaces of profound discomfort. But there is a difference between discomfort and devastation" (Gay 2022). I really appreciated the way in which Gay provides this delineation. In this era where fat bodies are used for shock value, Aronofsky decided it was his turn to take a stab at fatness. Aronofsky is no stranger to bodily extremes. His previous films such as *Black Swan* (2010) or *The Wrestler* (2008) both take on challenging what is possible for the human body in ballet and wrestling respectively. With this in mind, *The Whale* then seems like the latest in a long line of films where Aronofsky just tries perspectives on for size. The story of Charlie no longer represents a project of passion like Aronofsky suggests (NBC Los Angeles, 2022). Instead, the story of Charlie seems more like a costume much akin to Fraser's fat suit. This visual fetishization comes across heavily in the scene where Charlie showers. Aronofsky puts Charlie's body on display under intense lighting to ensure that the audiences see his body served up for their eyes to devour.

Near the end of Gay's review, she questions what role a film like this plays within society. "The Whale exemplifies the blurry line between creative license and cultural harm. Creators are free to tell the stories they want; in the ways they want. But there are consequences. A movie like this will only reinforce the dehumanizing ways in which many people understand fatness" (Gay 2022).

Like Gay, I have been pondering this blurry line between representation and degradation. Indeed. *The Whale* does not only work to dehumanize fatness, but also disability. When viewing

fatness as a disability, Charlie experiences many bodily and social limitations that can come with disability, from not going outside to struggling to walk distances. But rather than creating a narrative that shows lives of disabled fat people with a spectrum of emotional experiences, Aronofsky instead hones the scrutiny from healthism and perpetuates Charlie as the ultimate "bad fatty". Never once does Charlie mention a show or movie that he might enjoy, only the food that he can eat, or his impending death. His entire personality can be distilled to his connection with his weight; it is as if his life does not extend past his fatness. I cannot help but think of the ways that this film will enforce anti-fat and ableist rhetoric around how bodies should look.

Aronofsky and Fraser tout *The Whale* as a story of deep empathy and Charlie as a deeply empathetic individual who holds immense strength.. While they boast this, they simultaneously take such little care in their representation of fat disabled bodies such as Charlie's. In their eyes, this movie is a work of love that portrays the strength of fat people; however, it instead paints fat bodies as ones that live in isolation and eat themselves to death with no actual life. Even if someone does live in a fat Boo Radley-esque existence, it is not a topic that Aronofsky or Fraser are equipped to comment on. Their life experience is so different from a person like Charlie, that the depiction created within this film contributes to anti-fatness as it enlists caricatures of fat people instead of the actual fat experience. Rather than provide empathy as Aronofsky and Fraser would suggest, *The Whale* opts for an anti-fat and ableist perspective that conjures pity and generates hatred towards fat bodies. *The Whale* focuses on Charlie's body as a subject of shock and awe to bring about the voyeuristic ableism that society currently sees in multiple human interest television shows. With this, it is unclear whether the story of Charlie is

salvageable as it is steeped within an anti-fat mindset and constructed without fat experiences for grounded understanding.

CHAPTER IV: CONCLUSION (OR) FEELING LIKE A WHALE

Over the course of creating this thesis, there were some nights that Charlie's pain felt palpable. As I watched Charlie struggle to walk across his house for the twenty-seventh time, I felt the walls closing in around me. My one-bedroom apartment was suddenly a coffin, too small to contain me. It felt as if this movie was trying to tell me that my death was imminent and one without mercy. Charlie's story became a surrogate for my future, telling me that I was stuck with a dark depressing life where my body was too big for existence. Simultaneously, there were nights where Charlie's story left me feeling numb. At times, I watched Charlie take his last breaths and no longer felt anything except a deep flood of apathy. His death was as menial as cracking an egg while baking.

Experiencing these two opposite emotional spectrums gave me emotional whiplash. More importantly, I felt desperately and hopelessly alone in both of these experiences. I would sit in my small apartment and write throughout the middle of the night while watching Charlie's life fade time after time. In these hours it felt like I was removed from society, replaying the same story time and again, each experience further confirming that my death was prescribed just like Charlie's. When daylight hit the next day, I could not help but wonder what these conjured emotions meant and if other individuals were left in this same emotional purgatory after watching *The Whale.*

I began to realize that I was digesting this media in the same way of Charlie, reaching from isolation. Throughout *The Whale*, Charlie's support system boils down to Liz. While Liz provides medical and emotional support to Charlie, she has no true idea of what life is like in a fat body. Would Charlie's social life and self-worth have been better if he had other friends that were fat? I believe that he might have loved his body and himself more if there were individuals

that could connect with his experience. April Herndon discusses this connection between fat individuals within her article "Disparate but Disabled: Fat Embodiment and Disability Studies" (2002). This article notes the importance of community for fat individuals and the connection to disability. Here, Herndon draws from the characterization of fatness in respect to medicalization as well as politicization. Herndon states that like deafness, fatness is a shared political identity. Though these groups are seemingly disparate, they have similar experiences rooted in a political, social, and medical context. One of the strongest comparisons that Herndon mentions is the parallels between bariatric surgery and the cochlear implant. Both of these medical procedures work to erase the corresponding identity and pose serious potential health risks. This suggests that these identities are both considered as undesired within society. Herndon hypothesizes that fatness can build a community of support much like the deaf population; one where their fatness is not an attribute of ostracism, but instead valued. It can be argued that there are countercultures that fetishize fatness (Whitesel, 218), but Herndon is pointing to a larger call for community that does not fixate on the body in a negative or tokenized manner.

As an example of this potential community, I point to the creation of fat groups within the past that have pushed for fat liberation within the United States. Starting with the Fat Underground, this group was created in the 1970s and worked to publish articles and research regarding fatness and gender bias (Foreman, 2018). They worked within feminist circles in California to push against the practices and ideology behind anti-fatness rather than just fighting legislation. They recognized the harm that the 'reducing industry'[8] subjects fat individuals to and the multitude ways that fat bodies are looked at with equity. This community was not just present

[8] This term refers to the various outlets in society that focus on shedding weight and maintaining the ideal slim body (Alderan and Freespirit, 1973)

within political movements or organizations, but also in the dance troupe Fat Chance (Hernandez, 1994). This was a group of traveling fat performers that participated in many forms of the art of dance, breaking what is considered socially acceptable or even possible for fat bodies.

Though rare, this community-building can also be viewed within media. In 2010, ABC Family premiered the television show *Huge* that chronicled a summer at a teenage fat camp[9]. Though full of moments that push an anti-fat agenda, this series does work to capture fat individuals as fully fleshed out characters that can bond and share comradery. The episodes within this single season display moments of laughter and joy despite the frigid environment to which they are subjected. Specifically, in the mid-season finale (series finale) titled "Parents Weekend Part 2", all of these teenagers are gathered around the campfire singing the camp song together. While there are some bitter-sweet summer love connections in the air, there is a broader sense of community and understanding. There is something magical and special seeing these fat characters have that "traditional trope filled" summer camp experience where everyone is fat. There is nothing inherently special about this seemingly mundane act, but the bonding of these teens is palpable through the screen.

This media promotion of a fat community does not stop there. The show *Shrill* works to display the life of a journalist who wants to change the current pace of her life. She realizes that she is unhappy with her job and love life and wants a change, but her body is not a part of this equation. Her body is not the root of her unhappiness or something that she must overcome. This is particularly prevalent within the fourth episode of season one titled "Pool". In this episode, the

[9] Fat camp is a colloquial term that refers to programs and camps dedicated to help individuals lose weight. These programs enforce strict diet and exercise to shed weight at all costs.

main character, Annie, attends a Fat Babe Pool Party where all of the partygoers are plus size. While at the pool party, Annie sees the waves of fat rebellion, love, and more importantly skin. Pool parties can be a difficult arena for fat bodies as the lack of clothing seemingly puts fatness on display. Here, however, fat bodies are not gawked at or viewed as obscene. These characters feel comfortable and relaxed as there is a shared identity under fatness. This connection is not limited to the skin as Annie can interact with individuals that can share clothing options (as plus size options are extremely limited) or even gain an intimate connection. The interactions at this party leave Annie feeling empowered and more in love with her body. The community displayed also ventured into queer territory between her friend and another individual. This further exhibits the possibility of liberation for queer and fat people, much like Charlie from *The Whale.* Though Annie was hesitant at first, the fat community around her showed her this self-love was possible.

While seeing Charlie die repeatedly in my mind, I became convinced that my death was also imminent. Again, *The Whale* captures Charlie's last week alive as he faces his impending fate and around the thirty-fifth time of watching him wrestle with his mortality, I began to see my death in the near future. At this point, Charlie's destiny and mine became intertwined. Gone was my life plan and trajectory, instead I imagined I'd die of fatness with little option for joy. My days were now filled with increased death anxiety[10] and my nights were bursting with fat death. I would wake up and check my blood pressure worried that it would be high; I bought an A1C[11] testing kit because I was concerned that my blood sugar was unregulated and that I had

[10] Clinically referred to as thanatophobia, death anxiety revolves around the fear of death and the dying process (Holland, 2023)

[11] The A1C test measures an individual's average blood sugar level over the course of three months (National Institute for Diabetes and Digestive and Kidney Diseases).

diabetes without my knowledge. It started to feel that there was no escaping the plot of *The Whale.*

Prior to this, I had always been aware that representation matters, but it was at this point I recognized that representation without humanity can provide direct impacts to one's mental, emotional, and physical wellbeing. The story of Charlie took over my mind cementing me to a deep depression while simultaneously predicting my end. When battling these oppressive emotions, I found the best approach is the community that Herndon highlights as possible. On darker days I would spend extra time on the phone with my mother and sister, or I would find some way to interact with friends (even if it was via virtual communications). These moments in time helped center me in the wide spectrum of life, rather than viewing the narrowly prescribed narrative of Charlie. I would like to be clear, these interactions did not change my entire perspective, rather, their support reminded me that the lived fat experience is one that is varied. Charlie's story is no more mine than it is anyone else's.

The author and creator of *Shrill*, Lindy West, wrote a review of *The Whale* where she criticizes the characterization of Charlie further. In this review titled "*The Whale* is not a masterpiece – it's a joyless, harmful fantasy of fat squalor", West points to the absurd characterization of fat people. In T*he Whale* Charlie is accompanied by a tub of mayonnaise while sitting on his couch or eating a Cheeto sandwich covered in ranch during a panic attack as a way to undermine potential humanity and instead prop Charlie's fatness up as a point of levity or even pity within his demise. At the end of the day, West points to the one-dimensional characterization of Charlie that just revolves around his fatness and revels in the construction of Charlie's misery. West attributes the failing of *The Whale* at least in part to its creation by playwright Samuel D. Hunter. "Hunter is not fat – he is a thin person with baggage around food

and body, an assuredly painful state that afflicts us all but does not offer meaningful insight into life (and such lives exist!) at 600 pounds (West, 2023).” West argues that there is no way that Hunter can raft an accurate narrative of the fat experience as he has never lived it. Instead, *The Whale* is just a form of misery media[12] that feeds on the deep-seated fatphobia that Hunter held rather than a true story that depicts the life of a fat person. It is in this anti-fat narrative that Hunter crafts fatness in an inhumane light. The final draft that Hunter was left with stripped humanity from Charlie and filled in the empty spaces with fat. Here, we are left with a human constructed out of fat as opposed to a human who is also fat.

Crafting a tragic character and story like Charlie’s can be done, but what are the repercussions? This film cultivates anti-fat and ableist ideals while simultaneously trying to work through queer grief. Uninformed audiences will inevitably digest this film and be impacted with its messaging. Unfortunately, many individuals will glean a negative image of fat bodies from the lens of Aronofsky and will then replicate at least the echoes of anti-fatness in future interactions. Knowing this, is it justifiable that this film has seen such acclaim and recognition? While one can argue that this is just a story, why is this the one that is told? With so few fat main characters that are not comedic relief, why does this character have to be one that is heavily coated in shame and pain? Why can’t fat representation show fat lives that carry a multitude of emotions like real life? Are fat people not allowed to have representation that is positive? Yes, sometimes there can be negative emotions tied to one’s fatness, but why must this be the only mode for empathy?

[12] Referring to a variation of misery literature, this genre focuses on trauma, abuse, or other enervating situations that the main character has to endure (Addley, 2007).

With the continual emotional suppression of fat representation within media, it can feel hard for a fat person to embrace their own feelings. One may begin to wonder, "are these emotions meant for me?" To dive into the negative emotions around one's own fatness, I turn to J. Logan Smilges. Smilges discusses the bad emotions and feelings that can accompany disability within his work *Crip Negativity* (2023). Here, Smilges interrogates society's evaluation of disability, arguing that disability is only considered when it comes to access. Instead of disability being an identity that impacts every interaction in the world, it is often reduced to whether the disabled have access. Smilges coins the term crip[13] negativity to address this alternative dimension that disability plays in society. "Crip negativity is the phrase I use to describe bad crip feelings felt cripply" (8). This phrase holds three definitions to Smilges: the bad feelings that disabled people feel, how these feelings are felt, and a skepticism towards the access lens of disability. In this text Smilges uses "crip" as a noun and a verb by recognizing crips as disabled individuals and cripping as a process of disrupting the traditional ableist perspective. Smilges crips negativity to trouble these bad feelings that disabled individuals feel while simultaneously critiquing those who work against the disability identity. Smilges places crip negativity in-between the hope for a brighter more equitable future and the hopelessness of abandoning the future (24). Here, crip negativity works to recognize the negative thoughts and feelings that are related to disability and the causes of these emotions.

When working from fatness as a disability, crip negativity gives name to bad feelings that can be associated with fatness. To clarify, this does not seek to recognize the emotions that Charlie's destructive representation conjured within me, rather an acknowledgement of the bad

[13] This is a reclamation of a term that used to be used in a derogatory manner toward disabled individuals. This has now become a methodology for analyzing disability within Critical Disability Studies (Smilges, 9).

feelings that can be felt from being fat in society. Sometimes it can suck to be fat, and that can be just as important to validate. This can range vastly from receiving a cruel stare when boarding an airplane to the lack of sex appeal when it comes to fatness. In many ways, society tries to regulate the ways that fat people can act or emote by creating stereotypes in which to box bodies. From the funny fat guy to the sad fat recluse, there are positions that fat people are allowed to occupy. This is more heavily scrutinized when it comes to negative emotions such as sadness, depression or even anger. Fat people are caught in a hard situation where any expression of negativity towards fatness, points to the possibility that society is right, and fatness is a burden that needs to be eliminated. This negativity feels like a plea of guilt for fat people and vindication for thin people. Once that negativity shows then thin individuals can announce that these fat people were warned of the horrors of fat, yet they did not listen. I think that it is powerful to acknowledge that sometimes being fat can have negative impacts and that that is at least partially driven by an ideal bodymind[14] and pressure for all bodies to conform.

While crafting this work, I also found myself fighting how perceptions of fatness have ruled my social behaviors. *The Whale* works to construct an image of fat bodies and enforce that there are certain things that fat individuals should not entertain. It was in my examination of Charlie that I realized these social perceptions were simultaneously ruling the ways in which I lived my life. With this, I made a list of all of the things I refuse to do because of my fatness, such as shaving my facial hair or wearing a tank top. While these tasks may seem trivial, I began to see how much the societal views of fatness were impacting my actions and what other people were most comfortable with. On days that it was scorching hot, I would sit in my 2008 Honda

[14] This is a term used within Critical Disability studies to refer to the unified relationship between the body and the mind and how they can work as one (Price 2014)

CRV with no air conditioning wearing at least a T-shirt hoping for a breeze. For me, wearing a tank top outside was out of the question. If I did this, everyone would see the fat on my arms and know I was fat. I was worried this would then be my whole personality to others. I was worried that I would walk down the halls of my college campus, and someone might think: "Wow, look at their gigantic fat arms. I bet they don't go hungry." While I have never had anyone come up to me in society and say these things verbatim, these messages get conveyed through lingering glances or the flash of a frown looking in my direction. This same feeling crept in regarding my facial hair. Prior to this past year, it had been years since my face was cleanly shaven. I hate my double-chin and lack of jawline due to the fatness in my face. I see these people on my social media with sculpted faces and the endless comments fawning over the sharp features, feeling that there is no way my face of fat can be attractive or even seen as stomachable.

I found myself wanting to challenge these personal taboos as they seemed to be symptoms of the larger systemic ideals surrounding fat bodies. Standing in my bathroom, I began uncovering my face and looking at a part of me that I felt the need to hide. It was in this act that my mind flashed to the scene where Charlie was showering and shaving (*The Whale*, 19:50-20:20) While looking in the mirror, I saw Charlie standing in front of me preparing to meet his estranged daughter, holding hope when no hope should be found. Suddenly, this seemingly insignificant act conjured a deep connection between Charlie and me. Instead of this being a fleeting scene within a larger narrative, I now saw this as a moment of fat rebellion. This act was no longer just a part of his hygiene routine but transformed into a moment where I saw Charlie actually situated in his fatness. Here, he displayed a grounded experience with which I could fervently connect in respect to my fatness. This holds even greater value as this act has taken place after his prescribed death sentence. Even after being told that he will die very soon, Charlie

partakes in this act of fat rebellion by shaving his face and presenting himself in his unobstructed fatness.

It is important to note that this brief glimpse that caused a spark of recognition was not a moment specifically cultivated to explore fatness. In this fleeting clip, we see Charlie bring a razor to his face and start to clear the shaving cream. There is nothing provocative or explicitly charged within this moment, just a fat man that is showing the world his fat face. This is in juxtaposition with scenes that are charged with extra care and cinematic attention such as when directly prior in the shower scene when Charlie's naked body was on display or when Charlie is masturbating in the beginning of the film. I hypothesize that this scene is not shown with the same care as other scenes due to the creative team's lack of lived fat experience. The core team that brought the narrative and actions of Charlie to life was Samuel Hunter (playwright), Darren Aronofsky (director), Matthew Libatique (scene choreographer), and Brendan Fraser (actor). All of these individuals are thin (NBC Los Angeles, 2022) (West, 2023). This means that they have never felt key emotions that can be attached to fatness. This is not to state that all fat individuals experience the same treatment, rather that there are certain experiences and systemic ideals that a majority of fat individuals have to face. This creative team has not dealt with fat rolls that caused intense chaffing or being told that they must buy two plane tickets in order to accommodate their one body. With this in mind, they can only work from stereotypes or presumptions of the fat experience. This is what culminated in the tightly cinematographic scenes that focus on telling Charlie's fatness in the most visceral methods possible. It is as if the team had sat down and discussed what they imagined would be the most embarrassing or strongest experiences for fat people. From here, they took the shame of sex and body image and focused intently on this potential discomfort for fat bodies. In the creation of *The Whale*, the team fails to capture

moments that hold accurate meaning for fat bodies and opts for provocative shots that cause a deep catharsis for its thin audiences. Instead of seeking accurate depictions of the lived fat experience, they pivot to the consolation of thin viewers and add an extra layer of padding to Brendan Fraser's fat suit. After all, what is more captivating or interesting than a body that is bigger than possible?

The first time that I watched *The Whale*, my breath was taken away. Until that moment I had never seen the story of a fat body that was not built to exude comedic stereotypes. I was hesitantly excited when starting this film as I knew it was of the drama genre. Finally, I would be able to see a fat protagonist that was taken seriously. Much to my dismay and pain, Charlie's story was one of absurd extremities rather than a serious tale. Throughout the film Charlie exhibits an interaction between the fat, queer, and disabled identities. While all three of these identities were present, *The Whale* fails to actively engage with these identities further than applying them to a tragic and traumatic backstory. In fact, rather than create a narrative of intense empathy surrounding fatness, *The Whale* instead works to provide insidious representation of fat bodies that condemns fat individuals to an impending death due to their lack of control. The impact of this film left an intense impression of fat viewers as Gay and West note in their reviews, but both of these authors present the question of this film's place in society. Just because a film can be made does not mean that it should, and *The Whale* delivers on that conclusion. Where this film could have generated a greater understanding of the fat experience, the creative team sought to focus on fatness as a spectacle rather than the person. Knowing that anti-fat representations in the media will continue to evolve, I think that *The Whale* can serve as newer litmus test for how anti-fat ideals can be saturated within human interest stories that are promoted as moments of empathy.

In reflecting on *The Whale*, I cannot help but feel disappointed and almost outraged with the representation that was displayed through the characterization and story of Charlie. Audiences received this harrowing tale of fat mortality told through a cramped set, dark lighting, and an immensely padded suit. Why must the tale shown before us be so coated within a tragic tone? As I sat in this question, I could not help but contemplate what a re-imagining of this plot would be. When infused with fat liberation, could this film play out differently?

While mentally perusing Charlie's narrative, I could not help but think of two alternative plots that could have provided positive fat representation. The first story that came to fruition was one previously mentioned within chapter 2 of this thesis. I could not help but shake the intimate connection present between Charlie and Liz. Throughout the film, Charlie and Liz share a myriad of personal moments and we continually see Liz act as Charlie's caregiver. Though they interact through the duration of the film, it feels like so much of their relationship was left out of the movie. Were they always this close or did Alan's death truly bring them closer together? Does Liz have a life outside of Charlie's house?

In this dreaming, I began to imagine an alternative film that focuses on a fat man's last week as he is cared for by a loved one. This movie could explore changes in Charlie's ability and Liz's love. Until the very end of The Whale, Liz is there to weather the storms that Charlie faces with his fatness. Every other character uses Charlie's life as a pit stop within their own narrative, but Liz returns time and again as if Charlie is a second home. Exploring the bond between Charlie and Liz could provide such a profound version of representation that is mostly left out of the equation. It feels as though most films use caregivers as props or background dressing and refuses to acknowledge that they are people who share a deep connection with the individual(s) they care for. I think that a film that traverses this relationship and how it blurs into extended

family and grief could be extremely beneficial and cathartic for audiences. Liz and Charlie are both still working through the grief and loss of Alan. During this final recorded week, the two could connect on where they are within the grieving process and maybe even look to coming to terms with that loss. I imagine Liz and Charlie performing a eulogy of sorts as they reminisce on Alan and their real emotions rather than just going through the motions. With this, I see a beautiful story where Charlie is coming to terms with his mortality while also recognizing the love that has occurred throughout his life.

Simultaneously, I saw another path where literary genius takes place. Charlie has a rich and deep love of writing and words. He works as a professor teaching writing and literary techniques online. Additionally, every time that Charlie faces cardiac issues, he has someone recite Ellie's essay on *Moby Dick*. Though writing is present everywhere in *The Whale*, Charlie's love for the subject is seemingly absent. Audiences never see or hear about Charlie's own writing; it is as if his written voice is erased. What if *The Whale* instead turned to his voice? In facing his impending mortality, what if Charlie began writing about his love, his fatness, and any advice to leave behind. With this, I see a heartbreaking yet deep story where Charlie recaps his life in voiceover narrative as audience's flash to him feverishly writing and even dictating to Liz at times. This could end in a touching scene where Liz gets the book published and the proceeds get her a new truck (in reference to her truck breaking down earlier in the film). My vision of this version takes on the format of a book such as *Tuesdays with Morrie*[15]. While critics might argue that facing mortality due to ALS versus heart failure is different, I think that that view is representative of anti-fat ideals. Arguing this would suggest that death due to ALS is somehow

[15] This book recounts a student meeting with his older professor every Tuesday as his professor's ALS slowly progressed (Albom, 1997).

more valid than the death that Charlie faced. While this would, still include the sad ending for Charlie, I think that it would give the character more dimension and humanity than the current iteration.

Both of the alternative narratives that I have suggested above keep the general plot of Charlie's impending death intact, however, both serve as more fleshed-out characterizations of Charlie. These stories hold a theme of love that feels almost dormant within the current iteration of *The Whale*. Though these lead with love, it is important to note that they would still need to be created with the fat experience in mind. Only then can there be genuine moments of connection between the screen and audiences. I think that with these genuine fat connections, then there can be fat community building between the film and audiences as a whole. Using television shows like *Huge* and *Shrill*, we see that community building is not only possible for fat spaces, but it is palpable through the screen at times. I think that imbuing *The Whale* with fat community and the fat lived experience could generate representation that does not harm fat bodies, but actually improves societal understanding of fat people. This knowledge of fat community and coalition building is largely missing from media across a multitude of mediums. Though we may never know what a different iteration of *The Whale* could have held, I think that the grievous missteps and outright anti-fat ideals of Darren Aronofsky and Samuel D. Hunter give us reference for how media representation can have disastrous and even caustic effects

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