

**Wrestling with Size:
Transforming Visions of Fat Women in Contemporary American and European Films**

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“Mistress Pygmy Hippo, Mistress Typhoon, Mistress She-Elephant, Mistress Giant Butterfly, Mistress Raging Bull, Mistress Mighty Walrus, Mistress Polar Bear, Mistress Sea Squid, Mistress Woolly-Mammoth, Mistress Great White Orca, Mistress Sea Cow....” (*Secret Society*, [2000]). What would motivate a woman to choose such a name to describe her virtues, to declare her athletic supremacy? Ten very large women do just this while studying the ancient Japanese sport of sumo in the film *Secret Society*.¹ Each of these sumo names signifies a natural force or creature of great size, bulk, and unstoppable power. By adopting such names the women reverse the usual derogatory association of the fat female body with animal names (pig, whale, hippo, etc.) and convert animal appellations into expressions of dignity, mastery, and inner/outer strength. This German-British co-production set in Yorkshire uses sumo as a lens through which to read fat, transfiguring the meanings and representations of fat women’s bodies.

In this article, I explore how *Secret Society* and other films offer new directions in representing the corpulent female body in American cinema and in European film co-productions.² As Kathleen LeBesco argues, fatness is not simply an aesthetic or a medical condition, but a political position.³ Thus we need to critically resist the stigmatization enacted

¹ In *Secret Society* Japanese male sumo wrestlers have similar sumo names, such as Volcano, Big Panda, and Big Oak, indicating that the names these women have adopted are not anomalous within the sumo culture. When the male wrestlers appear briefly at a competition against the women’s league during the climax of the film, their presence validates the legitimacy of the budding women sumo wrestlers.

² Within European co-productions, films with ties to German directors and or screenwriters contain several fat-positive portrayals.

³ LeBesco develops this argument in *Revolting Bodies?: The Struggle to Redefine Fat Identity*.

by moralizing and pathologizing narratives of fat.⁴ Not only do these narratives truncate the perception and representation of fat people, they also conflate fat stereotypes with gender stereotypes. First, I review the ways in which representations of the fat female body presented thus far have been limited by the stigmatizing narratives of fat. Secondly, I define what comprises a fat-positive portrayal. Thirdly, I examine successful possibilities for representing fat women without imposing the mainstream limitations on the fat body, using the films *Secret Society* and *Real Women Have Curves* (2002) as examples. Both are narrative films which tell the stories of large young women using narratives that are not bound by the conventional truncated roles for large female protagonists. Finally, I discuss potential consequences of showing fat-positive portrayals of corpulent women in film.

Susan Bordo, Kathleen LeBesco, and Amy Erdman Farrell have explored many ways in which the slender body is valued and the fat body vilified in American and European culture.⁵ Thin and fat take up positions in a binary that matches up with many other oppositional categories used in Western society to assign privilege and primacy to one side of the dyad. Other scholars have explored the narrative means by which fat representations are managed and controlled in media.⁶ Scholarship on links between fat and gender are growing. Indeed, scholarship examining fat men in film suggests that there are distinctly gendered tendencies in how fat men are portrayed vs. fat women. In film, fat men tend to have a wider range of possible roles than fat women (think of John Candy or Kevin James, who both play not only comic

⁴ Brenda A. Risch analyzes the moralizing and pathologizing narratives used to stigmatize fat bodies in her dissertation “*Reforming the Fat Woman: The Narrative Encoding of Size in Contemporary Feature-Length Film*.”

⁵ See Bordo’s *Unbearable Weight Feminism, Weight and Western Culture*. LeBesco’s *Bodies Out of Bounds: Fatness and Transgression* and Farrell’s *Fat Shame: Stigma and the Fat Body in American Culture*.

⁶ Feuer’s “Averting the Male Gaze: Visual Pleasure and Images of Fat Women.” Gringas’ *The Defeat of Imagination: Repressive Codes Governing our Media*, Risch’s *Reforming the Fat Woman: The Narrative Encoding of Size in Contemporary Feature-Length Film* and Tillery’s *Performing Fatness and the Cultural Negotiation of Body Size*.

characters, but also romantic leads), though by no means the same wide range of roles available to more conventionally attractive men.⁷ Despite this work outlining problematic representations of fat bodies, little scholarship has attempted to delineate what fat-positive characters and films would look like.

Stigmatizing Fat: The Moralizing and Pathologizing Narratives

The representation of fat bodies has a long tradition of stigma that has been seamlessly edited into the flow of popular media production. Within contemporary film, there are two dominant stigmatizing narratives of fat bodies. First, the moralizing narrative derives from the long tradition of evaluating difference using religiously-based standards. Despite numerous positive allusions to fat in the Bible as a sign of plenitude and blessing,⁸ many current American religious groups have retained Puritan ideals of denial. Echoing medieval Christian warnings against the seven deadly sins, virtues of temperance, chastity, and self-control are pitted against the sins of vice, lasciviousness, and gluttony.⁹ Character flaws such as laziness, slovenliness, and shiftiness are also ascribed to fat people as a result of the extreme lack of willpower (Bovey, 1994). These vices echo the moralizing components of class and racial difference ascribed to less powerful groups' bodies; indeed, the means of negatively marking differences overlap and duplicate one another. Moralizing narratives are applied in contemporary films that have no overt religious context, because these value judgments have become ubiquitous in American society. Moralizing narratives that stigmatize fat can be observed at work in films with

⁷ These issues are explored in Douglas' *The B.M.O.C.-Big Men on Celluloid: Images of Masculine Obesity in Popular American Film and Television* and Mosher's "Setting Free the Bears: Refiguring Fat Men on Television."

⁸ Examples: "The soul of the sluggard desireth, and hath nothing: but the soul of diligence shall be made fat." (Proverbs 13); "And the Lord shall guide thee continually, and satisfy thy soul in drought and make fat thy bones..." (Isaiah 58:11); "The liberal soul shall be made fat" (Proverbs 11:25).

⁹ For a detailed study of the seven deadly sins, see Morton Bloomfields's book, *The Seven Deadly Sins: An Introduction to the History of a Religious Concept, with Special Reference to Medieval English Literature*.

portrayals of fat people as criminals, the poor, and the insane. Fat female characters most often fit in the moralizing narratives in contemporary films as flawed sidekicks/mothers/sisters/wives who redeem themselves through their devotion to friends or family.¹⁰

The pathologizing narrative used to stigmatize fat stems from the propensity of medical perspectives to examine and mark deviations from the norm as dangerous, undesirable, and sick. The pathologizing narrative of fat advances two major etiologies of fat, one that focuses on psychological origins, and another that concentrates on pathophysiological origins. Both theoretical branches have their own set of “cures” for fat, which are respectively psychologically based (counseling or psychotherapy) or physically based (dieting, exercise, medication, or surgery). Health-motivated narratives of dieting and exercise often weave together pathologizing and moralizing narratives on the topic of willpower. Fat can be demonized because it is assumed to be under the control of the individual, and using mechanical methods of managing fat (exercise, food restriction) is believed to be effective though there is significant research that contradicts this idea.¹¹ Similarly, the pathologizing narrative can be used to apply assumptions about a fat person’s lack of mental balance or fitness, and fat people can be labeled as depressed, neurotic, or eating-disordered based only on their size, suggesting a mental cause of overeating that requires psychological intervention. In one such example the film *America’s Sweethearts* (2002) stars Julia Roberts as “Kiki” the eating disordered, fat sister of a movie star. Not only does she lose weight to find love, but when this love goes awry, she indulges in a massive eating binge. These moralizing and pathologizing narratives are present

¹⁰ Examples include the character of Becky (best friend) in *Sleepless in Seattle*, Gina (best friend) in *Beautiful Girls*, Jackie (sister) in *Selena* or Meg (mom) in *Angus*. There is also a niche for casting fat actresses as nuns, eg. *Sister Act*, *Sister Act II*, *The Dress Code*.

¹¹ For discussions of the futility of dieting see: Garner and Wooley “Confronting the Failure of Behavioral and Dietary Treatments for Obesity” or Wilson in “Behavioral Treatments of Obesity: Thirty Years and Counting.”

even in the most fat positive films currently extant. However, the degree to which and the means by which contemporary films have begun to resist these judgments of the fat body varies.

What is a Fat-Positive Film?

Fat-positive films differ from films that simply include representation of large characters in several important ways. Fat-positive films allow corpulent characters to experience a full range of human experience and do not artificially close off part of life (such as romance, sex, adventure, or action) with the assumption that such experiences are not available to fat individuals. The fundamental elements of a fat-positive film include the following: 1) depictions of fat main characters that are not vehicles for conformity to mainstream body conventions; 2) a plot that challenges fat stereotypes; 3) a visual aesthetic not bound by negative conventions of showing the fat body. Every fat-positive film may not contain all three characteristics to the same degree or with the same finesse. My definition allows a wide scope for the description and development of fat-positive characters, plots, and films without being so broad that it includes putatively positive stereotypical representations, such as the “fat best friend” whose life is shown as secondary.

Most of the existing films that include fat main characters conform to and re-emphasize the existing prejudices about fat. Why then is depicting a fat character a main indicator that a film is fat-positive? The number of films that focus on the stories of fat characters, especially fat women, is so few, that situating a fat character at the heart of a narrative is still a powerful beginning for questioning size privilege. Films that have affirming narratives about fat characters are fat-positive when they feature large characters who have a full range of human reaction and expression, and do not limit corpulent women to stereotypical fat character roles as

maternal, nurturing, criminal, insane, ditzy, desperate, unloved, self-sacrificing, or asexual. However, because positive stereotypes about fat people exist, featuring a fat supporting character (such as the fat, chipper best friend) is not enough to guarantee that the film will be fat-positive. While such representations do allow fat woman to be seen, they deny the plausibility that a fat woman could be the main subject of the narrative. Films that offer such fat characters such as *Sleepless in Seattle* (1993), *America's Sweethearts* (2002), or *What Women Want* (2000) reinforce perceptions of fat women, allowing only very limited options for them, and surreptitiously support the negative stereotypes of fat women as acceptable friends or supportive family members, but not love interests or active protagonists.

The main character's obesity is not an automatic sign of any particular characteristic, virtue, vice, or behavior; and her fat will not determine her fate in fat positive films. In addition, a fat-affirmative film does not indicate that a character's attitude toward her size is the result of a mental illness (depression, anxiety) where she must be healed to create a happy ending or fail to be healed to produce a tragic outcome.

By the same token, a film that includes a fat-positive character is not necessarily a fat-positive film when the overall narrative is tied to very conventional ideas of desirability and gendered stereotypes with one token character who is fat, but accepted as beautiful or desirable.¹² Often such a character has another compensating characteristic that explains the contradiction between desirability and fat, such an "other" racial identity or an outstanding talent. For

¹² While some viewers may use fat-positive characters to develop fat-positive readings of otherwise oppressive films, here I focus on films that have narratives that do not limit or stereotype their fat characters.

example the character of Gloria in *Waiting to Exhale* fits this trend because her attractiveness is ascribed to an African-American aesthetic that embraces large women.¹³

What then does a fat-positive narrative look like? In a fat-positive narrative, fat-positive characters work through situations that are not limited to problems raised by their size. The story's events do not necessarily focus on their weight and are not resolved by changing their weight or appearance. A fat character in a fat-positive film may encounter negative attitudes or problems based on her weight; however, those problems cannot be the only (or primary) ones she confronts. Thus, fat-positive films include situations for large protagonists that are more nuanced and complex than losing weight or reacting to one's weight, allowing facets of their lives other than their size to take center stage.

One approach for a fat-positive narrative may be that it presents fat-derogatory stereotypes or situations and then confronts these stereotypes to begin unraveling them. As part of a plot that deconstructs fat stereotypes, fat characters may experience and respond to hazing, harassment, social invisibility or other negative treatment. Fat-positive characters may also struggle with internalized fat-phobia and show an uneven regard for their large bodies.

Of course, a film plot, character, or visual aesthetic need not exhibit all three of the elements named above in order to be deemed fat-positive; and fat-positive elements may exist in films that are not fat-friendly—for example a fat-positive character may appear in a film that is not generally fat-affirmative (e.g., *Sixty-six* in *Leaving Normal*) or a fat-positive aesthetic may be present in a film whose plot is not wholly fat-affirmative (*Zuckerbaby*). Now I will turn to an examination of films that include fat characters, but are unevenly fat-positive.

¹³ Other examples include Mae West's characters, whose attractiveness is due to her sexy savvy and bodacious exploitation of her voluptuous body. However, such examples based on seductive personality have faded in contemporary mainstream film.

Early Fat-Positive Films

A variety of German filmmakers have produced films with fat positive elements, including *Zuckerbaby* (1985) produced in Germany, *Bagdad Café* (1988) produced in the US as a European/US coproduction, *Secret Society* (2000) produced in Great Britain with a German director/writer, and *Problemzone Mann* (2002) produced in Germany for German television. Because there has not been a strict linear and chronological development of size acceptance in German/European co-productions, I consider three of these early fat-positive films in order of least fat-positive to most fat-positive in this section, with the fourth considered in the next section.

These four films all give center stage to fat female protagonists, but the degree to which those protagonists inhabit fat-positive plot varies. *Problemzone Mann* presents Cleo, a fat woman who adamantly refuses to believe that she is ugly. She is successful, active and healthy, though constantly pestered by her mother's criticism of her body size and insistence that she is not complete without a man. Cleo's compulsively consumes junk food out of frustration with her mother's fat-phobic behavior, and the filmmakers never resolve Cleo's ostensible eating disorder with any complexity, even after she has obtained the heterosexual relationship her mother so values. Thus the film's bingeing scene appears to be a ritual inclusion of a fat stereotype—that all fat people have disordered eating. Despite this pathologizing stereotype this film expresses fat-positive sentiments, criticizes exercise-obsessed, fat-phobic Vic (Cleo's love interest), and develops a promising plot.

Moving to a more substantially fat-positive film, I consider *Bagdad Café*. The plot of *Bagdad Café* recounts the story of Jasmin, a large German woman visiting the desert southwest

of the United States. It is notable for allowing the fat woman to develop relationships in which size is not a central problem. In a particularly refreshing fat-positive plot development, Rudy Cox, a local artist, comes to consider Jasmin his muse and paints pictures celebrating her large body in varying states of undress. Such appreciation for the fat female form is unusual and affirms Jasmin's identity as a member of the Bagdad Café community.

Bagdad Café ventures too far in the use of stereotypical representations of fat by positioning Jasmin as a Hausfrau or "Putzfrau"¹⁴. For example, while Jasmin struggles to establish her role in the café family, there are two scenes of her cleaning the establishment. In one, director Percy Adlon includes a humorous vision of Jasmin "ethnically marked" in her Bavarian traveling outfit dusting the café's elevated outdoor sign. Her "German" standards of cleanliness lead her to sort through years of automotive repair detritus and finish by scrubbing the floor on hands and knees with a shot of her large behind wagging back and forth. These scenes explicitly position Jasmin in a fat stereotype which conflates sizeism, racism, and sexism.

These scenes also position Jasmin as articulating herself through actions alone rather than words, bringing up binary associations of woman with body and man with mind. The consequences of such stereotyping for a fat woman are usually much more negative than for a slender woman, because of the social privilege attached to slender appearance. The conflation of such a strongly gendered stereotype with a fat stereotype, complicated by a national or "ethnic" stereotype, undermines *Bagdad Café's* overall fat-positive framing of Jasmin.

In Aldon's earlier strongly fat-positive film set in Munich Germany, *Zuckerbaby*, the fat female protagonist, who remains unnamed throughout the film, is revolutionary in her unabashed

¹⁴ "Hausfrau" translates as homemaker and "Putzfrau" as cleaning lady. My characterization of the German housewife stereotype is not meant as an exhaustive definition, rather as a general indication of the sexist ideology from which it springs, which values women for their service to family and in upholding values of cleanliness and order as part of a maternal, nurturing, asexual role.

embrace of sexuality, and in the narrative and visual connection between sexuality and the sensuality of food. The fat female protagonist has a makeover, a process which films often use to signal a stereotypical way to represent an improving self-image; however, an analysis of the stylistic elements of the film reveals that her physical transformation is an expression of a spiritual awakening—a return to the land of the living. Following this makeover, the relationship *Zuckerbaby's* female protagonist forges with her lover Huber, a subway train driver, is certainly revolutionary in its frank confidence in the physical magnetism between the two of them, but it never develops beyond mere trysting. It is perfectly fat-positive for a large woman to enjoy a romantic fling with an attractive partner, but the deep emotional transformations expressed in the style of the film are not balanced with a corresponding progressive development in the relationship. A tantrum by Huber's slender wife about the affair proves sufficient to ruin the rapport between Huber and his lover.

The ambiguity with which both *Bagdad Café* and *Zuckerbaby* end engenders divergent readings of the degree to which each film is fat-positive. In *Bagdad Café*, Jasmin's indefinite answer to Rudy's marriage proposal leaves her options open and allows her to retain control of the situation, and hence her body. *Zuckerbaby's* ambiguous ending scene where the protagonist stands at a subway platform can be read as a prelude to suicide, to resuming her affair with Huber, or to a new affair. In one possible interpretation, the scene hints that because the woman is fat, she may end her life instead of continuing to explore her sensual/sexual enjoyment of food and deepening a romantic and sexual bond with a partner. Similarly, if the ending scene is read as a prelude to resuming her affair on Huber's terms, the film also leads to a less-than-fat-positive interpretation of accepting a relationship defined by Huber's slender wife's tolerance. However, if the protagonist is beginning the cycle of seduction with a new man, *Zuckerbaby's*

meaning changes into one which does not require its fat protagonist to die or endlessly re-engage with an unsatisfactory relationship. Thus, the fat-positivity quotient of a film can vary depending on the reading of the ending.

Transforming Visions of Fat

Writers and directors have begun to produce stories that radically expand the possibilities for fat-positive female portrayals beyond such early efforts. *Real Women Have Curves*, an American film written and directed by first timer Patricia Cardoso, presents America Ferrera in her feature length star debut, and introduces Latina actresses (such as Lupe Ontiveros and Ingrid Oliu) to a wider audience.¹⁵ The film chronicles 18-year-old Ana Garcia's (America Ferrera) struggles to reconcile her Mexican-American ethnic identity and traditions with the goals and values she has learned as part of mainstream American culture growing up in Los Angeles. Another film, *Secret Society*, directed by German Imogene Kimmel and co-written with British artist Catriona McGowan, is a European co-production. *Secret Society* recounts the transformation of the young Yorkshire everywoman Daisy Braithwaite from a shy, nervous, fat woman into a self-assured sumo goddess.

Both films revolutionize the way in which the fat female body is interpreted, but neither makes the mistake of reducing the fat female protagonist's struggles to simple binary situations. Ana and Daisy face complex situations in which they experience both denigration and affirmation of their fat bodies. The difficulties Ana and Daisy face do not simply shrug off their fat; weight loss or a makeover will not solve their problems. Both protagonists must make complicated choices and struggle to choose between compromising and standing up for their principles as embodied women. As representations of young large women, these films happen to

¹⁵ *Real Women Have Curves* is based on the play by Josefina López.

tell comparably uplifting stories, but do so using vastly different material. It is important to note that fat-positive films are not necessarily uplifting narratives or happy endings, though it is necessary for a fat-positive film to avoid storylines that reduce a character to stereotypical ciphers of race, class, gender, sexuality, etc. or to fat stereotypes.

Real Women Have Curves features a large protagonist who rebels against social strictures about her body size, sexuality, autonomy, and goals. As the story of a young adult, the narrative does not follow this revolution to completion, but marks its jumping off point. Ana's rejection of a negative body image also encourages a multi-generational group of fat women to love and accept their bodies. Although the film uses characteristic conflicts between a teenaged daughter transitioning to adult life and her mother, it does not reduce these conflicts to simple binary situations with clear "right" and "wrong" viewpoints; rather, the film expresses the varied positions Ana Garcia, her sister Estela (Ingrid Oliu) and her mother, Carmen (Lupe Ontiveros) have about different topics of conflict.

Real Women Have Curves demonstrates that a fat character does not have to be nice in order to be fat-positive, nor that every obese character in a film must be fat-affirmative for the film to be fat-positive overall. At 18, Ana exhibits a sullenness and frustration that would be annoying in any character. Her attitude, largely indicative of youthful impatience, is tempered by her genuine bond with her family; she may sulk or disagree vehemently, but does not simply discount the opinions of other family members. Ana's main source of irritation arises from disagreements with her mother's traditional attitudes about Ana's future aspirations, her body, and her sexuality.

Ana, her mother, and her sister are all fat to different degrees. Despite her own size, Carmen often scolds Ana, telling her that she is too fat and should lose weight. As a

stereotypical Latina mother, Carmen's primary concern is to secure a good marriage for Ana and see that she has children. Ana has other priorities and scoffs at the old fashioned values of virginity until marriage and the primacy of husband, household, and children. She does not, however, believe that such relationships are unimportant; rather, she has additional goals that differ from those of her mother's generation.

Carmen believes in a style of mothering is captured in her saying, "It is because I love you that I make your life so miserable." Carmen often denigrates Ana's body, both privately and in public. She often pokes at her daughter's belly, calls her "Gordita" (fatty), and comments on how ugly Ana's fat is. In one scene Carmen grabs Ana's breasts and lifts them up as if weighing them and remarks, "Huge, they're huge! They must weight 10 kilos each." These fat-phobic comments and actions are accompanied by constant pressure to focus Ana's life toward working in Estela's dressmaking factory, finding a suitable husband, and bearing children. Despite Carmen's extremely critical attitude towards Ana's body, Ana likes her physical form and size.

Ana's positive regard for her body and lack of appearance-based obsession is expressed in her attire. Ana wears the snug, casual clothing popular among teenagers—jeans or capris, t-shirts, and sandals. The camera presents her body frankly. Although the shot framing shows all areas of Ana's body at different points during the film, there are no gratuitous "fat shots" emphasizing her hips or belly. Her nascent sexuality is treated respectfully: in a scene where she meets a young man for a first date, he stares at her breasts, and the camera shows a corresponding headless torso close-up, but this is not a repeated theme throughout the film. The dialogue in this scene indicates that Ana and her date are aware of the negative aspects of physical objectification.

Ana's positive body image also translates into a healthy feeling of responsibility and control over her sexuality. For example, when she has sex for the first time, she selects a partner outside of her own ethnic group, and thus avoids many of the cultural expectations that she finds so onerous. Jimmy (Brian Sites), a white senior she knows from high school, is gentle, sweet, and considerate. He considers Ana beautiful, and though he is attracted to her, he does not push to have sex. When Ana decides that she is ready, they do become sexual. In this scene, Jimmy turns out the light after both take off their shirts. The frame is black for a second, and then Ana says, "Wait. Turn the lights on. I want you to see my body." She gets up and gazes frankly at herself in the mirror. Ana determines the pace of their relationship and insists that he acknowledge her body as it is.

Ana's attitude, nevertheless, is not callous or indifferent. When she returns home after having sex with Jimmy, she admires her body in the bathroom mirror, gazing up and down the image of her breasts and torso in the mirror in sensual delight. She looks satisfied and appreciative of her physical form. When her mother catches sight of Ana looking at her body, she accuses Ana of having lost her virginity. "You are not only fat, you are a puta" (whore)." As they fight, Ana denies her mother's judgment. She vehemently replies, "There is more to me than what is between my legs." Ana's sexual encounter and her response to her mother's reaction indicate her active resistance to culturally-sanctioned control over the young female body in the Latina/o community and the ways that fat is associated with sexuality.

Ana most directly confronts her mother and challenges her community's restrictive values regarding body size and shape and abandons normative propriety when she removes her shirt because of the steamy temperature in Estela's dressmaking factory. Carmen's outrage over Ana taking off her shirt provokes an argument about fat, shame, body size, and self-esteem. A

discussion develops between Ana, Carmen, and their fat coworkers. They talk about their bodies and their relative sizes and each woman (except Carmen) ends up peeling off clothing to prove that she has more cellulite or worse stretch marks. Visually, the women are constructed as fat. The playful atmosphere of this scene does not ameliorate the self-deprecating nature of the women's initial comments as they exhibit their large bodies. Ana, however, rejects their self-assessments as fat and ugly and is supported by Pancha (Soledad St. Hilaire), the largest woman. Pancha has also dissented from these norms earlier in the film when Pancha repeats her grandmother's saying "There's no better dressing than meat on the bones." Ana's dissenting voice, coupled with outrage over slender-to-average size Rosali (Lourdes Perez) claiming she is fat because of the cellulite on her thighs and belly, prompts the larger women to reject Carmen's negative assessments.

The presentation of the range and types of fat in this scene is revolutionary in terms of the depiction of female size in narrative film. *Real Women Have Curves* comprises an empowering vision of corpulent women embracing their fat and critiquing the social norms that constrict their self-identities and mark their bodies as ugly. Their rebellion and open acceptance of fat represents another side of Latina culture which appreciates the well-rounded female form, and such cultural celebrations have marked many responses to the film. In addition, in Ana's role as a young woman whose life experiences have allowed her to adopt a more liberated attitude towards her body, Ana acts as a catalyst for the other women. The power of her fat-positive presence revolutionizes not only their thinking but also that of the viewer.

Secret Society chronicles the story of how another young fat woman develops the skills to balance her own integrity and autonomy with a committed relationship to a man. She learns, through sumo wrestling, to embrace her size as a source of power and strength rather than as one

of social vulnerability or inferiority. The director and writer Imogen Kimmel creates a protagonist who overcomes many of the common stereotypes applied to fat women. Daisy (Charlotte Brittain), the main character, experiences ridicule, persecution, sexual objectification, and is seen as a sexual threat. When Daisy joins a group of large women studying sumo, she begins to develop an inner strength that later enables her to overcome adversity. The sumo wrestlers of *Secret Society* use physical exercises as well as competition names¹⁶, meditation, and ritual to not only prepare themselves as sumo athletes, but to heal their scars from social prejudice and fat phobia.

The sumo women all work at a local frozen food factory, and they form an elite group within this context. Other workers make snide comments about “the fatties,” but the tone of their remarks indicates that they are jealous and feel left out. The thin female factory workers perceive that because the fat women are aligned with the factory boss, Marlene (Annette Badland), they have power that thin workers do not. In addition, the fat sumo women exude self-confidence and camaraderie rather than the shame and isolation that the thinner factory employees have come to expect from fat women. The thin workers use cattiness and bitterness to hide their feelings and to cling to the social power of appearance dominance.

The entire sumo environment re-positions fat. From the posters on the walls of the training hall, which consist of either inspirational physical/mental precepts (strength, balance, will) or pragmatic mottos with illustrated instructions on sumo moves, such as “Make Your Fat Functional,” sumo training actively emphasizes the positive powers of the women’s size. Sumo requires Daisy to conform to certain emotional and physical ideals, but they are so far outside of traditional Western standards for women that Daisy does not find them degrading (as she does

¹⁶ See list at beginning of article.

mainstream feminine ideals). Because the art of sumo requires each athlete to take herself seriously and treat others with respect, the fat women feel they are participating in a discipline that affects them positively. In sumo, these women have found an opportunity to focus on their own development and nurturance, rather than that of others. They encourage each other's athletic progress with group exercise, healthy competition, and supportive/centering group rituals. The sumo women's activities are not inhibited by the need to hide their fat bodies. They take communal saunas, train in form-fitting leotards, and perform group ceremonies that require the baring of their bodies. Their initiation for new members, for example, includes ritual submersion in a lake with the initiated springing out of the water to bare her breasts to the group. These women gain personal dignity and an appreciation of how their size can equal strength rather than weakness. Sumo philosophy encourages the women to accept their bodies as a source of strength, and deprograms them from fat phobia.

Many of the sumo women also attend a special local club event call "Big Girls" night. This is a monthly gathering of the large women in the area to dance, sing, and socialize together in an air of joyful celebration. The women who attend range in size from plump to supersize, and are all dressed in elegant eveningwear. During this scene the sumo boss Marlene points out a famous fat actress, Beth Traylor (Liz Riley), to Daisy. Marlene recounts that Traylor was thin for years and could never find work, but once she gained weight, she had plenty of jobs. This fat success story is part of the celebratory and positive lesson of the evening—fat women can be beautiful, happy, and powerful.

The "Big Girls" scene also provides a balance for the presentation of sumo. It visually demonstrates that hundreds of women have discarded the shackles of prejudice and shame that keep fat women hidden at home in baggy, drab clothes. Though Marlene and her cadre have

achieved this self-confidence through sumo, other women present have found their own paths to self-respect. Marlene demonstrates that sumo is a tool that she has found useful, but that there are other ways for fat women to live fulfilling, joyful lives. By including this scene, the film encourages self-acceptance but avoids glorifying sumo as the answer to all fat women's problems.

For Daisy, sumo's biggest impact is to help her reevaluate the balance of power and respect in her relationships. Shortly after joining the group, Daisy begins to actively reject fat-phobic behavior. When her mother calls Daisy's home to badger her about following a new diet, she replies vehemently, "Mom, you are never going to be happy with how I look, no matter how much I weigh." This interchange sums up their mother-daughter relationship, illustrating that her mother judges Daisy's worth based on her conformity to traditional female beauty standards. Daisy's husband Ken (Lee Ross) expresses superficial support when he mocks Daisy's mother's carping during the phone conversation, reinforcing how much he disagrees with the idea that Daisy needs to lose weight. When Daisy hangs up, Ken immediately asks her why she is so late in coming home and exhibits jealousy about her time spent at work. Prompted by this incident, Daisy reconsiders their relationship and decides to speak up about one of his "artistic" money-making projects that makes her uncomfortable.

Ken loves how Daisy looks and expresses sexual and emotional attraction to her; yet he also responds to her beauty by trying to commodify it. Daisy is reticent about her husband's schemes to paint her breast like a field mouse's face and sell postcards of it to tourists, but she acquiesces to let him take preliminary photos. Encouraged by her experience with sumo to demand to be treated with respect, Daisy confronts her husband, telling him that she does not want him to take more photos of her nude breast. Ken argues with her and then withdraws. In a

sullen sulk, Ken hangs out with friends, binge-drinking, smoking pot, and absorbing paranoid theories about alien invasions via fat big-breasted women. Daisy, worried by his estrangement, relents, reluctantly agreeing to let him take more photos. Her reservations about this decision show what she has learned from her sumo lessons. To pass the time while Ken paints her breast for a postcard production photo session, Daisy meditates. She enters a deep trancelike state from which he cannot wake her. Through meditation Daisy has made the objectification that bothered her irrelevant.

Daisy's inner retreat and implied discovery of a true inner focus profoundly frightens Ken, and he fits her behavior into a misogynistic, paranoid theory of alien invasion via the "transmutation" of human women into aliens. While Daisy grows more confident and self-assured, Ken becomes more insecure and dysfunctional. The film's conflict is resolved by Daisy showing Ken that she is willing to take his projects seriously, and in turn, he is willing to support her involvement in sumo wrestling.

Secret Society places its fat female protagonist in situations where she must negotiate her desires and strike a compromise. It places issues of power and autonomy at the center of the narrative and shows Daisy's size is connected to these conflicts, rather than positing that her fat is the source of her problems. *Secret Society* does not simply reverse the negative stereotypes of fat, nor does it provide easy solutions for Daisy's problems. The film emphasizes the importance of individual effort and consciousness-raising, as well as group support and action in achieving tangible change. Sumo is not represented as a panacea for fat-phobia; rather, Daisy gains the skills and support from the sumo group to succeed. Daisy and the other sumo women present strong, physically active bodies with which they seriously pursue their own enrichment. What could be more fat-positive?

The Power of Re-envisioning Fat

The current state of the representation of fat determines in part how alternative visions of fat may develop. Since filmmakers are just beginning to depict fat female characters outside of very strict stereotypes, several subsequent stages may be necessary before well-rounded fat-positive films are created. For example, in terms of camera work, much more innovative composition needs to be done in order to flesh out the representations of the fat female form. A new aesthetic needs to be developed in film that normalizes, celebrates, questions, and eroticizes the corpulent female form.

Positive representations of the fat female body, such as those in *Real Women Have Curves* and *Secret Society*, begin to rectify a significant omission in current representations of large women in film. By broadening the possible roles available to large actresses, all viewers benefit by experiencing a fuller representation of the human experience. Individual fat viewers exposed to fat-positive portrayals stand to gain insight and empowerment for their own lives. Encouraging positive mindsets about the fat body empowers large individuals to focus on developing their individual power and strength which can be channeled towards improving the general health and lives of other people. Ultimately, breaking down the lines of fat and skinny strengthens a nuanced understanding of the world, rather than reinforcing the conventional binary categories. By engaging audiences worldwide, fat-positive films will spark further development of the representational potential of the fat female body.

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