From Books to Looks

_Journeying into Plus-Size Modeling_

As the elevator doors opened, the onslaught of hip-hop music and refracted spotlights reminded me that I was far from my ivy-covered home in Morningside Heights. With a quick breath in and a slight adjustment of posture, I headed straight to the reception desk, where a young man tethered to the desk by a telephone headset greeted me. In between answering calls, he shoved a clipboard into my hands with a terse “Fill this out, and give me your photos,” and pointed toward the waiting area to my right.

When confronted by a predator, wildlife experts recommend that you stand your ground and not allow the animal to sense your fear. Here, in one of New York City’s top modeling agencies, I felt like a helplessly naive sheep that wandered off into the wilderness. The fashion wolves were circling and I was in too deep to retreat.

Needless to say, I was out of my element and unprepared for what was to come. I had spent the last two years in mental pursuits, crafting theoretical arguments, and arguing over solutions to society’s major ills as a graduate student. On this day, instead, I was in the gateway to a realm of aesthetics, where the physical reigns. In thirty minutes and two subway lines, I went from books to looks.

This was my attempt to “go native,” as the anthropologist Clifford Geertz would say, into a world inhabited by beautiful people, but not just any beautiful people—beautiful fat people. Here I was, a sociology graduate student turned prospective model, waiting to meet with an agent.
who represented plus-size models. For professional reasons, I wanted to understand how this niche of plus-size modeling functioned within a larger fashion market that privileges the thin body. For personal reasons, I wanted validation from beauty professionals that I, too, was worthy to be among their ranks. After all, being a sociologist does not provide me with immunity against engendered cultural pressures on women to be attractive. We women, in western culture, are always evaluated on our bodies; I was used to the feeling of being judged on my looks.

Clutching the clipboard in my hands, I cautiously sauntered, in the highest heeled pumps that I owned, over to the plush charcoal leather couch. Look confident, like you are somebody. Already perched at one end of the couch was a plus-size woman dressed in head-to-toe black. She glared at me as I took a seat. By her side lay a black 9x12 portfolio. I was immediately struck by her porcelain skin and long, thick chestnut brown hair. Here, in this waiting room, I was already in the company of beauty. I flashed her one of my killer—because—it’s—so—saccharine smiles, but she ignored me. That brisk fall morning, we were the only two models for the agency’s open call.

As MTV blared on the flat-screen televisions mounted on the mirrored walls of the waiting area, I filled out my contact information and measurements on the form affixed to the clipboard. Bust, waist, hips, dress size, shoe size, height, eye color, hair color—my body, as the bass bounced around me, quantified and categorized. I returned the completed form to reception, along with a couple of snapshots my roommate took of me in a faux photo shoot in our living room.

I waited.

I could not help but stare at the size ten, five feet eight inch, sea blue–eyed, and golden honey blonde reflection before me. Questions of self-doubt popped into my mind, which I quickly rationalized away. Do I have what it takes to be a plus-size model? How hard could it be to strike a pose and walk down a fashion runway? I was a trained dancer with greater than average body awareness. I often walked in heels down the crowded streets of Manhattan. Am I pretty, tall, or curvy enough? I knew I
fulfilled the height requirement. I had a perfectly proportional hourglass frame. I was conventionally pretty and photogenic. What about my size? I never shopped in nor even entered a plus-size clothing store. Would my lack of familiarity with plus-size fashions and designers expose me as an imposter? While larger than a typical model who graces the glossy pages of fashion magazines, was I large enough to model as plus-size? Am I strong enough to confront my bodily insecurities? Am I prepared for what awaits me behind this wall? Sitting in that waiting room, I certainly thought I was. I believed my past experiences in the entertainment business would guide my current venture into fashion.

At the awkward and impressionable age of twelve, I was “discovered” by an acting coach and soon signed with a manager who sent me out on auditions in the New York City film and television circuit. I quickly booked my first acting job in an educational video and spent the next four years juggling a hectic, nonstop schedule of acting lessons, auditions, meetings with agents, film and video shoots, and, of course, school.

As a child actor, my coaches instructed me to enter the audition room with a blazing personality, to show wit and a high social aptitude. They taught me to analyze scripts for placement of the proper emotional inflection and to memorize lines. At castings, I answered questions directed to me with more than one-word responses, no matter how trivial the question. Through line delivery and conversational banter, I flaunted my purposefully peppy personality. Therefore, at this open call for a modeling agency, I fully intended to woo the agents with my dazzling personality and intelligence. According to my mental checklist, I was ready:

Personality—check.
Intelligence—check.
Professionalism—check.
Guts—check.
Physique—maybe.

Twenty minutes later, I heard my name. A young woman beckoned me into the recesses of the agency, or so I thought until she led me around the corner to a bench in the hallway. Without hesitation or the usual
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exchange of pleasantries, she asserted, “You are not what I need right now, but here is a list of three other agencies you can try,” and scribbled their names on the form on which I had earlier painstakingly bared the truths of my body. The agent made her decision based on the snapshots before she saw me in person, before she called me in, before she spoke to me. Struck by the depersonalized and sterile nature of the exchange, I could merely utter a question about the present status of the modeling market, to which I received another terse reply, “It’s slow.”

Strike one.

After a disappointing turn of events at the open call, I took the agent’s advice and preceded to blitzkrieg the recommended agencies from the list with my snapshots. Two days later, one agency returned my pictures as a sign of disinterest.

Strike two.

Another two days later, I received a call from the assistant to the director of an agency to schedule an appointment. “While I can’t promise anything,” explained the assistant, “we want to meet you. Bring more pictures—full length and headshots. No holding pets or hugging trees.”

“Really? People do that?” I inquired.

“You wouldn’t believe.”

Ball one. At least I had not struck out.

For the next few days, I watched what I ate in order to prevent bloating, kept to my exercise regimen, and scrubbed my face to foil possible eruptions before they surfaced, while maintaining my usual academic responsibilities. This newfound hypervigilance was all in the name of perfecting “my canvas.” I shifted my focus from mental pursuits within the ivy-covered walls of academia to physical ones.

Initially combing advertisements for plus-size models on agency websites, I bravely positioned myself as a hopeful model, attended agency open calls and castings for print and runway work. I soon began working freelance with one agency and then signed a modeling contract with a second. That first open call was the start of my ethnographic account of becoming a plus-size fashion model. I encountered, firsthand, the
struggle to rewrite the self, wherein a woman wittingly objectifies and to a necessary degree celebrates her body—a body of curves and solid flesh that is often an object of scorn in contemporary American society. With society regarding models as walking mannequins or passive hangers for clothes, I examined how it felt to be “just a body,” a body that was average in society but “plus size” in fashion.

What Is Fat?

As feminist philosopher Susan Bordo states in her seminal work on the impact of popular culture on the female body, *Unbearable Weight: Feminism, Western Culture, and the Body*, “no body can escape either the imprint of culture or its gendered meanings.” The fat body is part of this evaluative cultural lens. But what qualifies as a “fat body”? Historians and anthropologists note that fat is constantly renegotiated in culture. Specifically, our contemporary social stigma of fat is an artifact of the work of nineteenth-century dietary reformers, such as William Banting and Sylvester Graham, who demonized excess flesh as an undesirable physical state that speaks to the individual’s personal failings. As historian Amy Erdman Farrell documents in *Fat Shame: Stigma and the Fat Body in American Culture*, a cultural anxiety over fatness developed in response to concerns over social status, not health. For nineteenth – and early twentieth-century thinkers, fatness was proof of one’s inferiority. Thus, the social stigma of fat served to control and civilize American bodies. Early in the twentieth century, life insurance mortality studies correlated fatness with increased mortality risk and spurred a public health debate whose legacy continues.

Given the concern over improving the health of communities through education and promotion of healthy lifestyles, healthcare professionals developed a preoccupation with the quantification of fatness. The development of height and weight tables produced a new way of classifying bodies into “underweight,” “overweight,” and “normal” weight categories. Today, the medical community takes precise body measurements
through use of the body mass index (BMI), which relies on a calculation based on an individual’s height and weight, in order to define “overweight” and “obese” weight statuses. This classification scheme, however, is not entirely a by-product of unbiased scientific knowledge. The boundaries between “normal,” “overweight,” and “obese” are subject to revision. The move toward a system of classification based on body weight was driven by the life insurance industry during the first half of the twentieth century with the creation and subsequent modifications of height and weight tables. These tables, based on the interaction between actuarial knowledge and historically specific cultural opinions, introduced the notion of “ideal” weight and became a means for practicing social regulation of weight. While the use of the BMI standard for weight classification is not arbitrary, the specified boundaries between one category and another are not absolute, nor are the measurements applicable to all bodies.

From dietary reforms to actuaries and physicians, fat earned a bad reputation within mainstream America. The word “fat,” itself, is a culturally loaded, derogatory term. Yet, as a cultural fact, fat is not universally scorned. A fat body is not always a maligned one. For example, Nigerian Arabs idealize the fat body, where, through a practice of forced food consumption beginning in childhood, women work to become fat in order to hasten their marriageability. They consider rolls of fat, stretch marks, and large behinds desirable and sexy. Within the hip-hop culture in the United States, a contingent of male artists celebrates fat as the physical embodiment of success. Rappers such as Big Pun, Fat Joe, and Biggie Smalls throw their weight around as a sign of their hypermasculine power. They wear loose, baggy clothes to visually expand their size and take up more space. With a switch of the letter “F” to “PH,” the hip-hop community reclaims the term “phat,” which references a full, rich body that is desirable and sexualized. Additional terms have emerged to describe this larger body, including “thick” and “curvy,” to reflect its more prized status within various ethnic and racial communities.
The nature of size in America is muddled by both medical and cultural discourses. In popular discourse, the terms “fat,” “plus size,” and “overweight/obese” are often used interchangeably. This is problematic because of the historical and cultural specificity of these terms, which refer to three specific and debatable dimensions of weight. While medical professionals quantify overweight and obese status, fatness is harder to measure. Frankly, fat means different things to different people.

In the modeling industry, determining fatness relies on a viewer’s subjective evaluation of another’s body. For example, fashion professionals often have strict and often extreme bodily standards. In April 2009, designer label Ralph Lauren fired model Filippa Hamilton for being too fat. At the time, Hamilton was five feet ten inches tall, weighed one hundred twenty pounds, and wore a woman’s size four. While the casual observer viewed her as thin, a fashion professional argued that she was fat. Two other well-known models, Coco Rocha, whom the industry considered “too big” for high fashion at a size four, and Gemma Ward lost work opportunities due to weight gain because they could not fit into the common sample size—a size zero—used for garments in magazine shoots and the runway. These cases reveal the range of meanings associated with “fat.” Fashion has one standard and medicine another.

For the purposes of this book, I define the fat body as any body that is beyond the norm within the context of fashion, i.e., plus size. Typically, the industry considers anything over a woman’s size eight as “plus size.” Therefore, according to fashion, these plus-size models are fat.

As the average reader could surmise from a single glance at magazine photos of plus-size models, the basic definition of “plus size” in modeling does not match the cultural image of a fat woman. Most casual observers of plus-size models would probably not even perceive them as “plus size,” let alone fat. Indeed, many of these models are of “average” size and weight; retail industry experts estimate that the average American woman weighs approximately one hundred sixty pounds and wears a size fourteen. They are “average” to the ordinary consumer, but, in sharp contrast, they are “plus size” to the fashion industry.
Size four model Filippa Hamilton alleged designer label Ralph Lauren fired her because she was deemed too fat.
What Is Plus Size?

Similar to “fat,” “overweight,” and “obese,” plus size is not measured in absolute terms. There is some inconsistency in the categorization of plus size between the modeling and retail clothing industries, which I discuss further in chapter 3. In light of this variation, when discussing plus size, I refer to the retail fashion category defined by the industry itself. Without standardized sizing practices and the added complication of vanity sizing (i.e., size inflation), a static dimensional form of plus size does not exist. Across the booking boards at modeling agencies, plus-size models, too, do not fit a particular mold. This is in sharp contrast to “straight-size” fashion models, whose dimensions must fall within clearly established guidelines.  

While plus size, itself, is a fluid construction that has been created and shaped over time, for the sake of argument, I use the baseline for the quantification of plus size as the woman’s clothing size ten, based on the scale used in modeling agencies with plus-size divisions. This practice within modeling agencies does not line up with the retail clothing definition of plus size. In clothing retail, plus-size retailers generally start their merchandise at a size fourteen and run through size twenty-four. Super-size apparel begins at size twenty-six or 4X to 6X. Table 1.1 lists the range of measurements associated with retail clothing sizes.

Generally, plus-size models range from a woman’s clothing size ten to size eighteen and need to be a minimum height of five feet eight inches, with a usual maximum of six feet tall; however, most of the plus-size models in the top modeling agencies are size ten to size fourteen. A combination of bust, waist, and hip measurements determine a model’s size, as illustrated in table 1.2. Her measurements need to be in proportion, whereas her hip and waist measurements are at least ten inches apart. For example, the industry standard for a size fourteen model is 44–34–44 inches; few models match this standard exactly. Bodies vary, so the measurements in the table represent the most common measurements associated with each size.
TABLE 1.1 Retail Clothing Size Chart

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Size 14</th>
<th>Size 16</th>
<th>Size 18</th>
<th>Size 20</th>
<th>Size 22</th>
<th>Size 24</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Bust</td>
<td>40-42&quot;</td>
<td>42-44&quot;</td>
<td>44-46&quot;</td>
<td>46-48&quot;</td>
<td>48-50&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Waist</td>
<td>33.5-35&quot;</td>
<td>35.5-37&quot;</td>
<td>37.5-39&quot;</td>
<td>39.5-41&quot;</td>
<td>41.5-43&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hip</td>
<td>42-44.5&quot;</td>
<td>44-46.5&quot;</td>
<td>46-48.5&quot;</td>
<td>48-50.5&quot;</td>
<td>50-52.5&quot;</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

TABLE 1.2 Model Size Chart

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Size 10</th>
<th>Size 12</th>
<th>Size 14</th>
<th>Size 16</th>
<th>Size 18</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Bust</td>
<td>34C</td>
<td>36C</td>
<td>36C</td>
<td>36DD</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Waist</td>
<td>28&quot;</td>
<td>30&quot;</td>
<td>32&quot;</td>
<td>36&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hip</td>
<td>40&quot;</td>
<td>42&quot;</td>
<td>44&quot;</td>
<td>46&quot;</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Controlling Images of Fatness

Presently, our collective fascination with fat, or the “obesity epidemic,” as it is sometimes called, points us toward a body that needs to be tamed and maintained. Evening news anchors remind us that we are in the middle of a fat crisis. Articles debating treatments and preventive measures needed to tackle this much-maligned state of weight inundate newspapers and magazines. Morning and daytime talk shows, such as The Dr. Oz Show and The Doctors, feature entire episodes on the dangers associated with fatness. Both former President George W. Bush and First Lady Michelle Obama promote national programs, such as his Healthier US and her Let’s Move! initiatives, to combat Americans’ expanding waistbands.

In popular culture, the 2008 Pixar film, Wall-E, portrays the dire consequences of technological dependence on our physical bodies, where we become fat and lazy folk who sit glued to our television screens. In the film, humans feed on fast food, have robots cater to them, and hover around on chaise lounges to the detriment of their own muscles that have atrophied to the point of immobility. While this is an exaggeration...
for movie effect, and plus-size models do not match that level of fatness, these popular images perpetuate fat myths and reaffirm contemporary bodily aesthetics. For example, in the film, the advertisements for the latest red- or blue-centric fashions contained slender models instead of more representative fat ones. Even in the Wall-E universe where everyone is fat, the fashion models must be thin. Culture, via media, medicine, and state actions, legitimizes ideologies that privilege the thin body and shed an unflattering spotlight on the fat body.

This negative reading of the fat body not only dominates the flurry of images inhabiting the media landscape, but also manifests itself as weight bias in everyday lived experience. As empirical studies have shown in detail, we equate fatness with a lack of self-discipline, laziness, and even stupidity. Experimental studies on weight bias point to the pervasiveness of negative attitudes toward fat in multiple settings including employment, education, healthcare, and the media, which impact the impressions and expectations others have for fat individuals. Contemporary American society discriminates against fat, a point made clear in one study where even fat respondents showed an implicit preference for thin people, as well as an implicit stereotyping of fat people as lazy. Likewise, in a study of health professionals, obesity specialists exhibited significant anti-fat bias, associating the stereotypes of “lazy,” “stupid,” and “worthless” with fat people.

Contemporary scholars in the field of fat studies, such as Pattie Thomas in her sociological memoir Taking Up Space: How Eating Well and Exercising Regularly Changed My Life, aim to confront many of these myths. Some of these include the belief that those who are fat are unhealthy, androgynous, asexual, incompetent, jolly, lazy, ugly, and bitchy. Those who are fat suffer from a mental illness. Fat is unwanted or a defect, a symbol of gluttonous obsessions, unmanaged desires, and moral and physical decay. The fat body is one that is out of control and takes up too much space. Fat is evidence of a failed body project. These controlling images of fat are rife with moralistic innuendos that place blame on the individual and ignore culture’s impact on constructing bodily ideals.
For the everyday fat woman, these controlling images of fat impact her relationship with, first, a body that the culture teaches her to scorn and, second, other people who see only her fat. According to sociologist Erving Goffman, the physical body is a manageable material resource that also mediates the relationship between self and social identity, with social identity defined as the reconciliation between how individuals see themselves and how society sees them. Physical appearance tells us about people, i.e., who they are and how we can expect them to act. While Goffman maintains that a certain level of human agency is required in the management of the body, it is society that attributes meaning to the body, which then opens individuals to categorization and classification. Stigma, therefore, is the reflection of society’s views and prejudices. In the case of the plus-size model, the presence of “too much” flesh is stigmatizing. Having failed to meet the expectation of a normative thin feminine aesthetic, plus-size models face prejudice and discrimination. They then have the option to either accept their stigmatized state of fatness or do something about it. These plus-size models reject the negative social construction of fatness. They seek to fit into the domain of fashion and overhaul its presentation of fat—a presentation that is inconsistent, at best.

Within fashion, the fat body is nearly invisible and relegated to the niche market of plus size. In rare exceptions when larger bodies do appear in fashion magazines, the images often fetishize the fat body or assign it to a special “curvy” issue as a sales marketing feature. For example, a top plus-size model, Crystal Renn, was the subject in an editorial spread shot by photographer Terry Richardson for Vogue Paris's 90th anniversary issue in 2010. In this fashion editorial, Richardson photographed Crystal Renn engaged in a gluttonous feast consisting of platters full of bloody meats, squid, chicken, piles of spaghetti, an abundance of grapes, and a massive wedge of cheese. This series of images depicts a plus-size model doing what many traditional fashion models cannot—eat. Here, the photos reveal a fat woman at the height of sensual pleasure—satisfying her massive appetite. A defiant Crystal shoves food down her throat; yet, the excess of food elicits disgust from the audience.
Images of plus-size models often fetishize the fat body. Here, plus-size model Crystal Renn engages in a gluttonous feast of spaghetti in Terry Richardson’s fashion editorial in *Vogue Paris*, October 2010.
In contrast to fetishizing the fat body, two magazines attempted to use glamour to appeal to a larger audience. Tucked near the back of Glamour Magazine’s September 2009 issue was an image of plus-size model Lizzie Miller. The photograph showed her smiling and casually sitting in her underwear. The image itself was only a three-inch square but made quite the impression on readers because it exposed her “normal” belly and stretch marks. In response to a boost in sales and a flood of encouraging emails where readers clamored to see more women with “normal” bodies within the pages of the magazine, the editors of Glamour followed up with a photo spread featuring a number of naked plus-size models in their November 2009 issue. The models were Kate Dillon, Ashley Graham, Amy Lemons, Lizzie Miller, Crystal Renn, Jennie Runk, and Anansa Sims. PLUS Model Magazine also featured models Emma Meyer, Laura Johnson, Liris Crosse, Wyinetka, and Ivory Kalber in the nude in its October 2012 issue, which was aimed at confronting the topic of body shaming.

The mission of fat activists and scholars, like Thomas, Farrell, and the plus-size models who are the focus of this book, is to challenge contemporary bodily aesthetics that privilege the thin body and to demonstrate that fat can be desirable, sexual, and healthy. Instead of these fetishized, sensationalized, or what one of the plus-size models described as the pre-existing “happy fat chick” image, where a fat woman distracts attention away from her body with a smile that hides any self-loathing, plus-size models want to be captured in images that are edgier and sexier, evoking the pinup girls from the 1950s. They work to reclaim the pejorative term—fat—with pride. They want to exert control over the cultural discourse on fatness much in the same manner that existing controlling images of fatness have dominated their lived experience. I join them and hope this book serves as a call to speak about the very bodies that are ridiculed, marginalized, silenced, and made invisible in our culture.

This book sheds light on the struggle of a minority group working within an occupational structure that privileges a thin body type. Plus-size models fight to get out from the margins and into the mainstream
fashion market. Their challenge is to maintain their authentic voice as fat women amidst a stream of voiceless bodies that flow in and out of fashion’s ranks.

As plus-size models engage in a *coup d'état* of normative feminine bodily aesthetics, can they topple the tyrannous reign of slenderness in fashion? To effectively alter contemporary bodily aesthetics and the controlling images that follow, these models need to go beyond achieving increased visibility in the field but to also take ownership of those images. Instead of conforming to fashion’s demands, they need to direct them. Their sheer visibility in the fashion marketplace is not enough because of the engendered nature of bodies and the threat of disembodiment.

**Disembodied Feminine Bodies**

Western consumer culture increasingly views the body as an individual project and primary site for the construction of both gender and class identity. Women, in particular, experience their bodies as not solely for their pleasure and amusement but as under the constant gaze of others, i.e., a body-for-others experience. Our culture places a high premium on the look and shape of women’s bodies, as they are visible signs of moral status, gender and sexuality, race and ethnicity, and class position.

Because of the structures and organizations of modern American society, the dominant class, that is, a privileged group with high social and economic capital, establishes and maintains a bodily aesthetic in order to reinforce class distinctions. Sociologist Pierre Bourdieu argues that deliberate modifications to the body, the ultimate “materialization of class taste,” serve to manufacture visible class distinctions. This is done by way of bodily forms, modes of dress, and even mannerisms. Members of a dominant class place a high value on beauty because they possess the very resources needed to achieve it—time and money. They strive to improve their bodies and appearance in order to visually manifest their superiority to those who are ruled by needs, not wants. Body image, therefore, is more than a subjective representation of the self but
also infused with a calculated objective. For example, a woman, aspiring for membership in the dominant class, may invest in physical improvements and follow a “cult of health” in order to make herself look like the dominant class.26

Increasingly, women have gone from being judged on their “good works” to being judged on their “good looks.” As feminist philosopher Sandra Bartky argues, the dominant culture specifically constructs the female body as an object to be watched, whereby women discipline themselves in order to achieve modern-day aesthetics. Trapped in a narcissistic world of images, women monitor, invest in, and manipulate their bodies, with beauty as the primary goal. In The Beauty Myth, Naomi Wolf argues that “beauty” does not objectively or universally exist. Rather, it is a political tool used to repress women and, thus, maintain masculine domination, as evidenced by the strict bodily standards imposed by cultural institutions such as fashion and the greater magnitude of body projects aimed at women. Western consumer culture directs more attention to the looks of women’s bodies than men’s. In the pursuit of beauty, women engage in body regimes to cultivate their physiques at the disproportionate expense of their time, money, and other interests.

Wolf speaks of this cycle of cosmetics, beauty aids, diets, and exercise fanaticism that serves to imprison women in their bodies, bodies that continually require new products and procedures to repair any possible “imperfections.” The nature of these regimes, however, is culturally specific. While white, upper-class women in the United States may limit their caloric intake and undergo cosmetic procedures such as liposuction to remove unwanted fat, some mothers in Mauritania force-feed their young daughters in order to gain fat and make them more attractive.27 In a study of ethnic and racial differences in weight-loss behaviors among adolescent girls in the United States, African American girls were less likely to engage in weight-loss behaviors than the white girls in the study.28 This difference is more striking in light of the corresponding finding that both underweight and normal weight white adolescent girls were twice as likely as African American girls of similar weight
status to indicate attempts to lose weight. These patterns of behavior are commonly attributed to differences in cultural standards for acceptable weight among various racial and ethnic groups. Trends in cosmetic procedures also reveal racial and ethnic differences in what is considered ideal; for example, Dominican women request to have their buttocks lifted and Italian women want their knees reshaped.

Western consumer culture, aided by the fashion, cosmetic, and medical industries, perpetuates a normalized discontentment toward women’s bodies by constructing an ideal that is far from the normal, natural body. In the domain of fashion, a white feminine aesthetic that values extreme thinness is the standard. When non-white models do grace the fashion runway, often it is in the context of adding a little “flavor” or diversity to the show; the focus is on their exoticism. This also occurs in popular film, where filmmakers place greater emphasis on the breasts, hips, and buttocks of Latina and African American actresses. These bodies, signifying a racialized exotic sexuality, are meant to contrast with the normative, thin white bodies. In fashion, this image of beauty reproduces hegemonic ideas of gender, sexuality, race, and class.

As a cultural producer with global reach, fashion serves as a “cosmetic panopticon,” shaping norms and expectations of physical appearance across the spectrums of race, sexuality, and class. In this cosmetic panopticon, many women experience a pressure to achieve this ideal at the risk of cultural rejection. They become objects in their own projects of becoming. As evidenced by the escalation of techniques aimed at manipulating the physical body devised by the cosmetic, weight-loss, and medical industries, this cosmetic panopticon rewards compliance with a thin ideal and intensifies the horrors of a fleshy existence. Therefore, these women begin to hold themselves accountable for the proper display of their bodies before the fashion police chastise them for their personal failings. They toil over their bodies because they have internalized the sense that fashion watches and judges them for their ability to match the ideal aesthetic. With fashion billboards and magazine editorials as their (th)inspiration, these women often find themselves working toward
unattainable goals of perfection, for the icons they aspire to emulate are carefully constructed and manipulated by the brush strokes of master aestheticians and computer technicians. Still, many keep trying, like hamsters on a wheel, because failure comes at a price to one’s self-esteem and perceived social position.

Feeling pressured to “measure up” to this ideal, women may monitor their caloric consumption and partake in ritualized physical exertions in efforts to mold their bodies into a desired shape. If they do not possess a thin physique, they, at the very least, admit to undergoing a process of transformation into a thinner, more normative frame, for example, ordering a diet soda instead of a regular one as proof that they are watching their figure, or purchasing garments in a smaller size as motivation for their efforts to lose weight. Many women work full-time to become thin. Their efforts range from wearing control top pantyhose to rein in unsightly lumps to more extreme measures such as pursuing cosmetic procedures at all economic and emotional costs.

The body is integral to the process of producing and reproducing identity, but this obsession with the physical leads to a separation of the mind from the body. In this cosmetic panopticon where we are watched, sociologist Marcia Millman argues that all women are prone to disembodiment because “they are taught to regard their bodies as passive objects others should admire.” For example, how often do we hear, “My body hates me!” or, rather, at the final reveal after weeks of invasive cosmetic surgeries on television programs such as The Swan and Extreme Makeover, the phrase, “I am finally the person whom I felt I was on the inside.” In such cases, there appears to be a sharp disconnect between the self and the body, and, as a result, these individuals embark on grueling quests to forge an alliance between the two as they work to conform to cultural body ideals.

This disembodiment intensifies in the fat body, where the fat woman resorts to only “living from the neck up.” While the thin woman can admire and adore her “normative” body, the fat woman often views her body as an autonomous and uncooperative “thing” that she lives with,
distracts attention away from, or tries to change. Her body becomes an object of revulsion. Ultimately, the fat woman creates distance between her self and her failed body.

This form of disembodiment is also common among cosmetic surgery patients, as Virginia Blum writes in her book, *Flesh Wounds: The Culture of Cosmetic Surgery*: “The ‘you’ who feels ugly is linked to the defective piece but is also imaginatively separable. Partly, this double effect of your body that is both ‘you’ and replaceable feels like a split right down the center of your identity. I am my body and yet I own my body.” Women who perceive their bodies to be flawed attempt to disconnect from their bodies in order to shield themselves from the pain associated with living in non-normative bodies that fail to match contemporary standards of beauty. This alienation from their physical bodies is a response to a hunger not based on biological needs but rather social pressures.

Disembodiment can also occur among women in communities and cultures that value the fat body, as their curvy bodies are hypersexualized and objectified for the pleasure of others. While treasured, they become disembodied, sexual objects. They are reduced to breasts, hips, and booties.

A New Fat Aesthetic?

In response to this engendered objectification that alienates fat bodies, scholars in the field of fat studies call for a reclamation of one’s embodiment as a form of resistance against the cultural stigma of fat. This queering of fat bodies is aimed at challenging discursive constructions of fatness, allowing a fat person to “come out” as proud and authentically embodied. Fat activists and scholars desire to reinscribe fatness with more positive meanings and present a counter discourse.

As studies of burlesque and theater performers argue, fat women may achieve this liberation from stigma through the physical performance of fat. Performance, itself, reveals and redefines fatness. For example, a burlesque performer reclaim her sexual agency on the stage. Her
performance “functions to support a new, positive vision of fat sexual embodiment.”

If it is to have a lasting effect, however, according to fat activist and communications scholar Kathleen LeBesco, a truly liberated performance sexualizes and beautifies the fat body without relying on thin aesthetics. This is problematic because, as cultural theorist Samantha Murray argues, fat women continue to live out, and thus reify, the dictates of dominant body ideologies that they have internalized. According to Murray, “fat politics still privileges the thin body and attempts to imitate it. As fat girls, we still want to know what it is to be thin, even if we do not want to alter our fat.” With fat pool parties and lingerie parties, “we simply reverse the kind of response that fat bodies elicit within a dominant heteronormative framework” and “reproduce the obsession with the visible and the power of aesthetic ideals.” We still judge women on the basis of looks, not content. We still sexualize and objectify women’s bodies, reducing them to breasts and other body parts.

The editorial spread in V Magazine’s January 2010 issue, featuring plus-size model Crystal Renn and straight-size model Jacquelyn Jablonski, illustrates this problematic in the theatricality of fatness. The two women modeled alongside each other in identical outfits and similar poses—virtual copies of one another except one is slightly larger than the other. There is no counter aesthetic—just imitation.

Plus-size models play an integral role in negotiating and manipulating cultural interpretations and expectations of women’s bodies. In the case of these models, the dominant culture assumes that these fat women are suffering from the “sin by omission,” failing to keep up with culturally ascribed, necessary bodily devotional practices. Such regimented practices are crucial because, as sociologist Anthony Giddens explains, in the modern era, we are held responsible and accountable for the design of our own bodies. Following his logic, by all accounts, these women should be hiding in shame. However, they continue to flaunt their curves and strut down fashion runways with pride and gusto. They celebrate the same curves that many other women try to eliminate. Plus-size models
provide us with a visual representation of solid flesh that the cultural discourse tries to make invisible.

Plus-size models do liberate themselves from the stigma of fat and embrace their bodies; however, what happens when they are not on the runway but, rather, on an ordinary sidewalk on a city street? Do these fat women still experience this sense of liberation? Do they embody their model personas while living day-to-day in the “real” world? Does this celebration of fat achieve embodiment and create a new “fat aesthetic”? 

Building on previous research that has only looked at the staged performance of fat, I focus, instead, on the “backstage” aesthetic labor process. This specific labor process involves all the different types of work a model does, e.g., a combination of affective, emotional, and physical labor, which contributes to her transformation from woman to model. This analysis expands our understanding of aesthetic labor as (1) an
ongoing production of the body that (2) depends on preexisting aesthetic ideals that (3) perpetuate women’s sense of disembodiment. Instead of presenting a counter aesthetic, I find that plus-size models rely on a labor process driven by thin aesthetics, whereby they emulate a work ethic of self-discipline, strength, and diligence in order to craft an image. They develop a repertoire of specialized techniques to increase their “model physical capital.” Technologies of control, such as a tape measure, legitimate and normalize this management of the body capital through corporeal discipline. In cultivating themselves according to the demands of their profession, plus-size models engage in engendered body projects that not only control their fat but also reinforce their sense of disembodiment.

By tracing the extension of this labor process beyond the confines of modeling work and into the everyday lived experience of a model, I reveal that, within the theatricality of fatness in modeling, thin aesthetics drive the aesthetic labor process and call into question whether plus-size models can reclaim their embodiment through this craft. Using participant observation and interviews, I document an intensive aesthetic labor process, whereby these models continually develop their bodies according to the demands of their fashion employers. They change their bodies to fit a preexisting image of beauty rather than being empowered in a way that allows them to alter the image to fit their bodies.

A Personal Investigation

Before I crossed the threshold of the agency that brisk autumn morning, I had virtually no experience in modeling. Sure, at sixteen, I modeled in a back-to-school fashion show at a department store sponsored by Seventeen magazine, but that was a one-time event and a quick jaunt down a makeshift runway in a suburban mall. I had also been a child actor, but I soon learned that, while acting and modeling are alike in terms of the need to transform yourself into a character for the camera, different skills are used to achieve this goal. In acting, I used my body and voice. In modeling, I was voiceless.
Years later, without much preparation or strategic planning, I began my journey into modeling the same way many of the plus-size models I would meet began their journeys—hurling oneself at the mercy of an agent at an open call. I did not have an advantage or an insider connection to guarantee my access. I never took modeling classes where they teach new models how to pose and walk down the runway. I was on my own, alone. It was a huge gamble that, ultimately, paid off, since there was no guarantee that I would be accepted into the modeling fold.

My plucky decision to enter the field as an active participant, rather than a traditional bystander who conducts interviews with those who are involved and watches as events unfold from a safe distance, occurred in a quasi-Archimedean fashion while running on a treadmill—the modern-day bathtub in our body-centric culture. During the fifth virtual lap, I had an idea. *Eureka, I will investigate modeling by being a model!*

Admittedly, I was hesitant at first. Working under the assumption that plus-size models range in size based on plus-size clothing sizes, I did not consider myself as “plus-size”; yet, when I compared myself to pictures of straight- and plus-size models, my body was closer to those of the plus-size ones. It was not until I began looking up information on open calls at modeling agencies in New York City that I learned that my body, at a size ten, could possibly fit the plus-size model mold. I wrestled with the label associated with the possibility of becoming a “plus-size” model. I did not appreciate the cultural baggage that came with the term “plus size.” At my present size, I felt neither fat nor thin, but, rather, average. I realized that the fashion industry, as a cultural institution, has power to influence perceptions of bodies and define beauty. For example, after my agent told me that I looked smaller in photographs, I developed insecurity about my size. As a child actor, I was told that I was too big and tall. Now as a model, I was too small. The fashion industry pushes the boundaries of size, with “straight-size” models at a size zero and “plus-size” models beginning at smaller and smaller sizes. Also, I did not know if I had the self-confidence to parade my body with its imperfections in front of fashion’s tastemakers. Could I stop fixating on my perceived flaws and, instead, flaunt my body?
All these concerns aside, I knew that I needed to be a part of the action in order to understand both the subtle and blatant demands placed on these women. In this field where flesh is sold, the body is my primary form of evidence and starting point for this ethnographic investigation concerning identity and discipline. This fieldwork involved embracing the embodied skills of my subject.

As such, this personal account of the lived body “under construction” offers new direction in the developing field of carnal sociology, as developed by sociologist Loïc Wacquant. To illustrate, both Wacquant and feminist scholar and sociologist Kandi Stinson offer personal narratives to highlight the embodied experience of disciplining the body under the guidance of organizations centered on the body, whether undergoing strenuous physical training to fight in the boxing ring or containing the visceral shame of stepping on the scale at a weight-loss meeting.

In *Body and Soul: Notebooks of an Apprentice Boxer*, Wacquant makes the leap in methodological theorization and trains as a boxer at an urban gym on Chicago’s South Side to capture a form of discipline practiced within an African American community. Wacquant details how a boxer’s work extends past the confines of a gym. His level of sacrifice and bodily surveillance involves private matters, such as monitoring food intake, sleep, and sexual activity, and requires a collective teamwork from fellow boxers, coaches, and family members. The boxer becomes “inhabited by the game he inhabits.”

In *Women and Dieting Culture: Inside a Commercial Weight Loss Group*, Stinson, by participating in an international, commercial weight-loss organization for two years as a paying member, examines how women continually construct meaning and experiences of weight loss amidst a backdrop of cultural prejudice against fatness. Essentially, Stinson attempts to understand what it means to try to lose weight by actively and publicly participating in a program that emphasizes lifestyle modification and individual willpower.

As ethnographic studies such as these demonstrate, the fluidity of idealized constructions of embodiment that emerges in ethnographic investigations requires acknowledgment of a body that we no longer view as an
object but as an event. In Kathy Davis’s argument on embodied subjec-
tivity, bodies are not simply objects determined by culture but rather are
situated in culture as part of the process of negotiating and re-negotiating
self-identity. As individuals, we, our bodies, are vehicles of meaning.

Similarly, I took the perspective of the insider, going beyond the tradi-
tional ethnographic approach of observation to step into the role of my sub-
ject. I walked in a model’s shoes, from castings to photo shoots to the runway.
In this approach, my body became a “tool for inquiry” and a “primary vec-
tor of knowledge” as I learned how to walk and pose and transformed from
a woman into a fashion model. As this study of modeling shows, fashion
places emphasis on what the body can do and what it looks like while doing
it. Thus, a plus-size model engages in an aesthetic labor process that involves
a high degree of self-surveillance and corporal discipline. It is this reflexive
process of “becoming” that only an ethnographic method can capture.

I drew on the physical experience of the plus-size model as fashion
professionals measured, clothed, styled, posed, and photographed me. I
experienced the rejection and omnipresent gaze. For many of the women
I would meet, they depended on this work to craft their own identities
and bolster their self-esteem that had been beaten down by the social
stigma of fat. I could relate to their surmounting pressures because I,
too, had something important at stake—the completion of a successful
research project. This common drive to succeed, irrespective of its roots,
propelled me through the insecurity and objectification we experienced
as models. I anchored my investigation in the concrete everyday life of a
model in order to understand how they conceive of and operate within
a system that, unfortunately, seeks to serve the interests of a client over
that of a model. As a result, this is a visceral insider account that engages
both the physical and mental nature of modeling.43

Pounding the Pavement in Stilettos

Armed with my “book” and stack of “comp cards,” I actively pursued
modeling work in New York City, recognized as one of the world’s
leading fashion capitals and home to many leading designers and modeling agencies. Given its overall prominence in fashion, New York City is also home to many top plus-size modeling agencies. To capture the voices of plus-size models, I entered their unpredictable schedule of “go-sees,” castings, open calls, fittings, photo shots, and runway rehearsals.

For those unfamiliar with modeling jargon, at a go-see, a client, such as a fashion designer, magazine editor, or art director, requests to see a variety of models for an upcoming job opportunity. In contrast, at a casting, the client requests to meet a particular model. Agents and/or bookers arrange both go-sees and castings. In large agencies, agents are responsible for directing the overall career trajectory of the models, while bookers handle the day-to-day scheduling of models and billings details with clients. In small agencies, often there are no bookers—agents fulfill the responsibilities of a booker. At open calls, on the other hand, a client will see whomever shows up at the advertised time and place.

At these meetings, the model typically shows her “book,” or portfolio of pictures and tear sheets showing the work she has done, to the client. Depending on the nature of the modeling job (i.e., whether it is for print, runway, or trying on sample sizes for designers), the model may be measured and asked to pose for a few shots or demonstrate her runway walk. Before leaving, the model leaves the client her “comp card,” or 5x7-inch composite card with her headshot on the front and a series of body display shots on the back, which also lists her personal statistics (i.e., height, dress size, bust, waist, and hip measurements, shoe size, hair color, and eye color) and contact information of the agency representing the model.

Combining participant observation and interviews, I met working plus-size models while waiting at castings and jobs (also referred to as “bookings”) and kept detailed field notes. Due to the physical nature of modeling work, I was unable to record observations as they occurred in real time. I carried an inconspicuous, black leather journal with me to all my appointments, but I soon learned that modeling and writing are mutually exclusive activities. I found it a challenge to take notes while having makeup applied to my face or my hair curled, teased, and sprayed.
At the end of a casting session, fitting, or shoot, I retreated to a nearby coffee shop and wrote extensive field notes, relying upon my memory to reconstruct events and conversations.

While in a casting session or on the job, I was unable to conduct formal interviews with models due to the unpredictability of wait times to see clients. Instead, I engaged in informal conversation with them while we waited and then invited them to participate in an open-ended, semi-structured interview either after the casting or at a later scheduled date and time. We met over coffee at a local coffee shop and talked for, at times, close to two hours. In this manner, I gathered a snowball sample of thirty-five plus-size models (see table 1.3). 

The plus-size models interviewed for this study worked in a variety of areas. They worked in commercial and catalog print, promoting clothing and products on billboards, buses, magazines, and newspapers. Many worked in showrooms, promoting new fashion designs for clothing buyers at a department store or boutique, and on the runway during designer fashion shows or on-air telecasts for the local news and daytime programs. Twelve of the women worked as fit models. In fit modeling, a designer or clothing manufacturer hires a model to try on garments at various stages of production to determine the fit and appearance of the pieces on a live person. The models self-reported their sizes to me, which ranged from ten to twenty-two with an average size of sixteen. The women ranged in age from eighteen to thirty-four, with an average age of twenty-seven. These plus-size models were older and larger than average straight-size fashion models, who model between the ages of fourteen and twenty-four and normally retire from modeling by the time plus-size women start their own modeling careers. Modeling agencies routinely represented plus-size models as young as sixteen to more mature women in their forties and beyond. These older models generally worked in the areas of fit modeling. Of the thirty-five participants, seventeen identified as white, twelve as black, three as Latina, and three with a mixed-race/ethnic background. Most had some level of college education and worked outside the modeling industry in some capacity.
### Table 1.3 Interviewee Characteristics of Plus-Size Models

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Size</th>
<th>Ethnicity</th>
<th>Type of Work</th>
</tr>
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<td>18</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
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<td>27</td>
<td>10/12</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Commercial Print</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alice</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>14/16</td>
<td>Black</td>
<td>Showroom/Runway</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alyssa</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>Black</td>
<td>Showroom/Runway</td>
</tr>
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<td>Becky</td>
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<td>14</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bettina</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>Black</td>
<td>Showroom/Runway</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Caroline</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>Black/Latina</td>
<td>Commercial Print/Runway/Showroom</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>White</td>
<td>Commercial Print</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chris</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>14/16</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Commercial Print/Fit</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dana</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>Black</td>
<td>Runway/Showroom</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>16</td>
<td>Black</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Debra</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>Black</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ella</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>16/18</td>
<td>Latina</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gail</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Holly</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Commercial Print/Showroom/Runway</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jackie</td>
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<td>16</td>
<td>Latina</td>
<td>Showroom/Runway</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Janice</td>
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<td>White</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Joelle</td>
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<td>White</td>
<td>Commercial Print/Fit</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kay</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lea</td>
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<td>Livia</td>
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<td>12</td>
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<tr>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mary</td>
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</tr>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nicole</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rachel</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>White</td>
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</tr>
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<td>Randa</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>10/12</td>
<td>White</td>
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<td>Samantha</td>
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<td>Fit</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sarah</td>
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<td>14/16</td>
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</tr>
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<td>30</td>
<td>14/16</td>
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<td>Stephanie</td>
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<td>Black/Latina</td>
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<td>Wendy</td>
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<td>18</td>
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<td>Showroom/Runway</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Willa</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>14/16</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Commercial Print/Fit</td>
</tr>
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<td>Yvonne</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>16/18</td>
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<td>Commercial Print/Fit/Runway</td>
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</table>
As soon as I mentioned that I was a sociologist studying plus-size models, many of the women perked up and began disclosing their proverbial war stories. At first, some models did not believe that I was a sociologist, since appearance-wise, I seemed to fit in with the crowd. In a follow-up exchange, one model confessed, “I really thought you were joking for the first five minutes of our conversation.” More than a few models, upon hearing I was “really” a sociologist, would encourage me to start modeling full-time. A makeup artist at a runway show was convinced I was a professional since, in her words, I was “bea-u-ti-ful” and had a fierce walk. Naturally, all of this positive enforcement (which incidentally only came from fellow models or stylists and never from any of the agents who represented me) encouraged me to continue my research through periods when I was not booking work and agents stopped sending me out on castings.

While getting participants for interviews took nominal effort, fitting into a plus-size model crowd posed its challenges. Often I entered a casting and realized that the other plus-size models grossly outmatched me in terms of experience and amount of curves. Physically, at a size ten, I was at the “small” end of plus size. I assumed that my curves would grant me access into the community since my size was not too far off from plus size; instead, I often experienced the alienating effects, not of stigma but, something that I did not expect, “thin privilege.”

At one particular open casting call for a fledgling design firm that catered to a much edgier version of Ashley Stewart’s clientele, I was, in blatantly descriptive terms, the “token skinny white chick.” Coupling my “smaller” stature with the fact that I was racially and ethnically in the minority, my usual role as marginal insider shifted to that of an outsider amidst a roomful of glares from the other models. Even the two designers who were at the casting questioned my presence at the casting. One quizzes me, “What attracted you to this line? Which is your favorite item?” Having peeked at their website before arriving at the casting, I was able to fudge a response, but I knew I was not convincing. I sensed that they were trying to gauge my interest in their fashions since I was not
their intended audience, i.e., “trendy, urban plus-size women” who wear a size twelve or larger. My chosen outfit for the day—jeans and a plain blouse—was not a dramatic explosion of style. I did not represent their “eccentric, anti-ordinary” fashion. I was, in fact, too ordinary. Needless to say, I did not get that job.

Attending castings and open calls, I noticed racial differences in my fellow attendees. If I was at a casting arranged by my agency, most of the other models were white, with a few light-skinned African American and Latina models. At open casting calls, the reverse was true—the majority of models were African American and Latinas with a handful of white models. I could not figure out the basis for this trend until I visited several agencies. When interviewing agents at their offices, I observed their “boards,” i.e., shelves lined with the comp cards of the models the agency represented. These boards pointed toward the presence of multiple markets within the fashion industry, markets defined by size and divided by race.

It was not simply a model’s body size and shape that determined her ability to find representation with an agency, which in turn led to job opportunities. Her racial and ethnic status was also key to determining the quantity and quality of work available to her. High-profile modeling agencies, with access to high-status clients and generously paying jobs, preferred to work with models on the smaller size spectrum of “plus size.” They also happen to be predominantly white or light-skinned. This excluded the growing number of prospective African American and Latina models. So, these women and those who wore larger than a size sixteen settled for representation with less prestigious, boutique style agencies that had limited access to clients or, if not signed, attended one open casting to the next in search of work. This racial and size division explained the difference in types of models that attended my castings and open calls.

At these open casting calls where I was the minority, I grew accustomed to the stares and whispers from the other models; however, my token status ultimately served as an advantage. Given that several models
did not perceive me as their competition for the job, they were intrigued by my presence and agreed to participate in my study. In the company of these women, I was considered too thin. I had entered some sort of twilight zone where I went from “average” to “plus” to “small” in an afternoon.

Through the Plus-Size Looking Glass

Like Alice, I peered into the plus-size looking glass to find a fantastical world governed by strict aesthetic rules. According to its logic, I was no longer considered an average body type but, rather, “plus size.” I followed a path where my body was measured, objectified, and paraded before the public. This book follows the everyday production process within modeling agencies that began with my entrance into the field and concluded with my transformation into a product of constructed images that idealized a larger body.

In chapter 2, I present the faces of plus-size beauty. I discuss their backgrounds and entrance into modeling, as well as their career prospects and modeling ambitions. Chapter 3 presents a discussion of the nature of size in a fashion industry that is clouded by inconsistency and confusion. What is considered plus size in modeling does not exactly fall into the same categorical schema in general retail practice nor match the cultural image of a plus-size woman. Highlighting the cases of the models Velvet D’Amour, Whitney Thompson, and Crystal Renn, I show that there is more variation among plus-size models in terms of both body type and size when compared to the strict body standard of straight-size models.

An examination of the social construction of beauty cannot begin and end with the models themselves. Such an investigation would fail to capture the complete aesthetic labor process involved in constructing an image. The models’ agents and clients dictate each step of the production of beauty. In chapter 4, I document an intensive aesthetic labor process, whereby these models continually developed their bodies according to
the demands of their fashion employers. In modeling, an inch here or there really does matter. These models face intense pressures from their agents to alter their bodies. In order to work in fashion, they utilize their bodies as capital and embark on a variety of body projects at the risk of losing work opportunities and agency representation. Chapter 5 discusses the agents themselves, the fashion gatekeepers who are responsible for a model's career.

While models are subject to the corporeal demands from their agents, clothing designers dictate fashion trends and aesthetics. In chapter 6, I explore the products of modeling work—the images conveyed in retail marketing campaigns—and a new crop of designers who, themselves, identify as plus-size. This burgeoning field of plus-size designers that self-identify as plus-size women, offer the unique case of establishing a clothing market of and for their own. As plus-size women, they hold the key to challenging contemporary bodily aesthetics that privilege the thin body.

Chapter 7 explores the impact these various plus-size fashion professionals—the models, agents, and designers—have on cultural representations of fat bodies. The fashion machine hides the backstage labor process from consumers, who never see the physical labors a model endures to fit an image dictated by fashion professionals. Fashion also ignores health concerns. Instead, consumers receive a commercial image of a “plus-size” beauty—joyful, desirable, and free from bodily imperfections.

By examining the complete aesthetic labor process—both the front stage and backstage behaviors—and the relationships between these cultural producers, I show that a plus-size model’s performance does not result in the reclamation of her embodiment. Yes, the plus-size model challenges contemporary bodily aesthetics that privilege the thin body, demonstrates that fat can be sexy, and feels empowered while doing it. At the individual level, she succeeds in overcoming years of self-loathing and shame over her body. Furthermore, the entrepreneurial designers who identify as plus size do envision a new aesthetic for fat women. However, the day-to-day interactions between a plus-size model and her
agent reveal the model’s lack of control in the construction of the image of beauty. At the institutional level, the fashion industry perpetuates her objectification. A plus-size model conforms to an image created by fashion’s tastemakers. Her body fits within narrowly defined parameters of their choosing. Ultimately, she molds her body to fit an image instead of molding an image of beauty to fit her body. Within this occupational structure, she is voiceless and disembodied.

In this book, I give her a voice and try to recognize her body on its own terms.