

The focus of my work in final project is an exploration of what it means to be fat. I conducted my research by sifting through my own memories as a fat individual and by reading/listening to the personal memoirs of others. I struggle with my body image daily, whether that is manifested through the dread of looking at myself in the mirror or the horror that my jeans no longer fit. Through the process of work during the final project, I found I wanted to share these experiences, which I have never discussed publically prior to Oxbow.

In my animation, I study the experience in which I discovered I was fat and what that meant to a second grader. Through hand drawn animation, I go into the most distinct and challenging aspects of that memory. This medium gives me the perfect platform to create narrative piece.

I seek to explain that fat is not defined as an excess amount of weight. Being fat means living with a collection of horrible memories that eat at your self-confidence - every time your massive thighs got stuck in a pair of jeans in a changing room, every uncomfortable doctor's visit, the list goes on. Despite all of these heavy memories, as a fat person you continue to move forward.

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## **Abstract**

Though our population is largely composed of overweight and obese individuals, there still remains a looming stigma around the word “fat” especially among our American media. In this paper, I will explore what it means to be “fat” through my own personal memoir and through the works of others such as *There Once Was a Fat Girl*, a novel by Cynthia Baxter. Martha Norwicki, Baxter’s main character, is a self conscious “fat” girl living in New York City, eventually she decides to lose weight whereupon she is offered two incredible jobs and is now wanted by two guys. Thus, Baxter is telling her readers that being fat means you will be unsuccessful and unwanted. However, I disagree. I believe being fat, in addition to having an excess amount of fat, means your very existence is built upon and overcoming memories that eat away at your self image. I am built from countless memories of doctor’s visits, BMI’s, and school tauntings. While these memories have destroyed every ounce of my self confidence in the past, they now serve as my foundation. They are the basis of my every move, every word, and every thought.

## The F-Word

As reported by the U.S Department of Health and Human Services, “More than 2 in 3 adults are considered to be overweight or obese” (Overweight and Obesity Statistics). Meaning, out of the estimated 316,128,839 adults currently living in America over 210,752,559 people are overweight or obese. Though our population is largely composed of overweight and obese individuals, there still remains a looming stigma around the word “fat”. There is believed to be so much power behind the word. Crops would perish, disease would run rampant, and destruction would ensue if this single syllable adjective were to pass through my lips. At the mention that an individual may be fat, family, friends, and parents come rushing to the aid armed with “Of course not! You’re so pretty” and “No! You look fantastic!” Victims of the “f-word” may convince themselves that their friends are right, they are not fat they are beautiful! However, family, friends, parents, and f-word victims themselves fail to realize that fat is not synonymous with ugly. Extra back rolls and bulging tummies, thick thighs and double chins all are features equally as beautiful as flat stomachs and thigh gaps. Why are 210,752,559 people dismissed as ugly because of an extra 10, 20, 30 , 40, 50 lb, etc? Regardless of eating habits or the daily amount of exercise a person receives, they still deserve respect and love for their body. Unfortunately, due to the stigma surrounding the word fat, overweight and obese individuals are often portrayed horribly by media who further perpetuate the idea that fat = ugly.

A prime example of such a tragedy is found in the novel *There Once was a Fat Girl* by Cynthia Baxter. The fiction book details the life of Martha Norwicki, a 5’4 145lb woman living in New York City. Martha is self-conscious about her weight and has tried countless diet plans in hopes of losing a few pounds, however each result in a purge of delicious sweets and fried foods. Due to her large size, Martha is deserted by her boyfriend, Eddie, one night after making him a large meal and is turned down for a job opportunity. Right away, Baxter makes it incredibly clear to the reader that being fat will leave you lonely and unsuccessful. In the first chapter, Martha’s appearance is even described as, “The twenty-five extra pounds could have be cleverly concealed, remedied somehow” (Baxter 10). By writing this, Baxter is stating that fat individuals need to be fixed. Marie Ospina, a writer for Bustle Magazine, states “As a fat woman, there are several truths that have been engrained into my psyche since the day my visible belly outline became impossible to conceal. Amongst them, the "fact" that fat women do not deserve to wear bodycon dresses or sexy lingerie. Furthermore, their sole goal when it comes to fashion should be to try their very best to *not* look fat. Plus Size Fashion rules indicate only solid prints and baggy things are to be purchased. And we must be grateful to these items, for they slim us down and make us more attractive (or better yet, less revolting) to those around us.” (What Happened When I Wore A Low-Rise Bikini). Certain people should not be forbidden from wearing specific clothes or colors simply because of excess weight and others should not be given the power to dictate what others can and cannot wear. Ospina goes on to state that “Just because we've been taught that "fat" is just about the worst thing a person can be (with weight often being prioritized over actual, integral character), doesn't mean we *should* have been taught that. And it doesn't have to mean we live our lives hidden under sack dresses (unless that's what *we* want to do, on our own terms, and not out of fear)” (9 Outfits That Prove Plus Size Women Can Wear Any "Trend" Because Fashion Has No Size.).

As it becomes clear to Martha that being fat is a crime, she decides to join a weight loss group named Thin. Inc. Here she makes several friends who are also struggling with their weight and are desperately trying to lose weight. After a long conversation via telephone, Martha’s

friend, Judy, ends the conversation with “Don’t forget not to eat!” (Baxter 113). By writing this, Baxter is stating that fat people need to completely stop eating in order to become skinny/beautiful and is encouraging life threatening anorexia. Marie Ospina states, “The human relationship with food is a complex thing. In essence, we’re constantly made to feel guilty for eating. Or, in other words, for doing something that’s required for basic human survival” (This International No Diet Day Photo Is Awesome So Here Are 7 Other Reason Should Never Have to Justify Eating). Fat people deserve the basic human right to food. No one over 120 lbs should be restrained from eating the nutrition their body not only deserves but also needs.

While *There Once Was a Fat Girl* contains a plethora of fatphobia, I unfortunately do not possess the time nor the page limit for such an analysis. However, Cynthia Baxter’s novel and its poor portrayal of what it means to be fat has prompted me to describe my own experience through personal memoir.

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I was first called the f-word in second grade. First grade had drifted by without a touch of self-consciousness and remains the only memory I have where I was not hyper focused on the rolls of my stomach. As it is required for many schools across America, I had to visit my pediatrician to ensure I was in good health. With both my Mother and Father working, my grandmother was the only family member available to take me to the pediatrician. The air of the waiting room smelled vaguely of sterile tongue depressors. In my memory, no one was waiting in the room with us. My grandmother and I sit alone on wooden chairs with navy blue cushion. My grandmother mindlessly flipped through a magazine and I contemplated whether or not I was young enough to go inside the plastic playhouse. A lot of admiration went into this play house- its pastel pink walls with flowers imprinted on them, the small shutters with individual shingles half opened. After a few minutes of waiting, a nurse in bright scrubs mispronounced my name and my grandmother and I followed her down a series of hallways that appeared to be constructed in no particular order. The doors seemed to be out of numerical order, going from three to seventeen and twelve to two. After wandering through a maze of various offices and examination rooms, I found room “seven.” I sat down on a navy blue examination table covered partly by white opaque paper. The walls were covered in navy blue carpet. At the very top of every wall, perhaps in hopes it would distract children during a shot, was a wallpaper border with a parade of colorful animals. Eventually, a nurse emerged from the hallway and requested I step into a new room for measurements. I was calm and happy to comply.

My new room was a back corner towards the front desk. From across the hall I could hear the screams of a small boy getting his blood drawn for the first time. Doctors and nurses rushed passed me. The sense of urgency was distinct in every step. The nurse called my attention towards the scale. I shook off my shoes and aligned my back with the wall. A small mechanism was slid down to the top of my head. The nurse apathetically recorded my height, ready to move on towards the next test. I stood on top the scale, my feet ached slightly from the cross hatching pattern on the top of the scale. My eyes became permanently fixated on the numbers flying by the spinning scale. I had never before assigned any kind of worth to my weight, but watching those numbers grow and grow seemed horribly wrong to me. This moment lasted a lifetime. The scale continued to spin quicker with every passing number. Seventy pounds became eighty pounds. Eighty pounds became ninety pounds. I passed 0 twice. I didn’t even know that was possible. Had I broken the scale? Was I now going to be dragged away to a fat camp for the rest of my life? I could no longer distinguish numbers and when the spinning finally came to a halt, its final destination was unseen. The nurse, unaware of my disturbed state, looked over my

shoulder to record my measurement. A small frown formed on her forehead, it remained as she checked to see if she had read incorrectly. She hadn't.

The walk back to my examination room was quiet. Where there once were screams and frantic doctors, now was silence loomed throughout the entire office. Though the nurse had not left my side since recording my weight, I sensed that the entire office knew. Every doctor, every patient, every nurse, and every parent glared at my pudgy arms. The moment the scale passed zero a second time burned in my mind. Everyone knew. Everyone knew. Everyone knew. I eventually returned to where my grandmother sat peacefully reading a magazine. Her every move, every word, every breath knew my secret. I was shaking. I sat on the examination table and awaited for the doctor to return. My breaths became shorter and shorter. Every passing minute was a moment closer to knowing how fat I was.

After an eternity of waiting, my doctor emerged from the hallway. She was tall with short blonde hair and carrying a clipboard. I felt as though I was seconds away from a life threatening diagnosis. She glided through questions with ease. "How much water do you have each day?" "What time do you go to bed?" With every new question my stomach sank lower into my abdomen. I felt as though every doctor and nurse were outside, ear to door, awaiting to hear the exact number of my weight. Finally, my doctor arrived at my BMI chart. She paused a minute. Her face leaned forward, attempting to get a closer look at my weight. The silence was unbearable. Carefully, so as not to detonate the sensitive mine that was me in the room, she began, "Well, you're not fat, but..." I curled my toes into my feet until the pain and pressure subsided and I only felt numbness. My grandmother began speaking for me. She told my doctor endless stories of the crap I ate and joyfully agreed on my fatness. "She doesn't do any sports or exercise and spends her day eating grilled cheese sandwiches" my grandmother said condescendingly. She laughed. And Laughed. My presence in the room no longer mattered. I had vanished at the mention of my weight and now only my grandmother and doctor spoke. The risk of future heart disease and diabetes was hung over my head until I could finally muster enough fear and self-hatred to jump on a treadmill.  
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A few years later filled with growing self loathing, my peers at St. Peter's Grade school began to notice my extra pounds. Before fifth grade, it was something that could be easily hidden. Tucked away under a loose dress or concealed by a large jacket. At the start of the new school year, however, female students at St. Peter's were required to wear skirts. Jackets inside of classrooms were forbidden. Suddenly, the fortress I made of jackets and dresses to conceal my fat had been demolished and was replaced by a tight fitting school-approved skirt. I was ashamed the boys and girls at school would discover that while they wore size five skirts and pants, I had made my way up into size twelve and fourteen. I wanted desperately to drop the excess seven or nine sizes and join my peers in the "small" section of the children's clothing department, to pick out the clothing hangers with a green "S" just below each hook.

My mother and grandmother accompanied me as we shopped for my new school uniform. There were rows upon rows of various plaids, each representing an unfamiliar school. Black, red, and green plaid towards the left. Yellow, red, and blue towards the right. We were navigating a jungle of plaid. We eventually found my navy blue, red, and white plaid. My mother tossed skirts attached with black hangers over to my general area. The sound of plastic hitting plastic. Mothers rushed around the store with their children trailing behind. Metal hangers quickly slid to one side of the rack. Soon, my arms were filled with skirts of varying sizes and I headed towards the changing room. I let the hangers fall from my arms onto the carpet. I knew

none of these would fit. Even if I somehow lost 10lbs in this dressing room, the zipper would barely make it above my hip. I watched myself in the mirror. Stained shirt, knee length shorts, crocs. My unkempt hair was greasy towards the top but wildy uncombed at its ends. I began to criticize everything I saw. The shape and size of my eyes. My large, doughy nose. The odd contrast between my upper and lower lip. With every new scrutinized insecurity, my eyes filled with tears and I found myself weeping on the floor of a changing room in a Dennis Uniform. My mother stood outside possibly unaware of my emotional state, but asked if any of the skirts fit. I found the largest skirt and quickly zipped up the back, ripping a few seams in the process. I could barely breathe but it meant I didn't have to go a size up. I could be skinny.

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The first month of school in fifth grade came with some ease. My classmates were rowdy but mainly ignored my presence. My main concerns were math tests and who I was inviting to my sleepover on Friday. The football team began to meet late September. The team was composed of boys who would slip paperclips into teachers' coffee mugs and treat gym class as an Olympic event.

The teachers surrounding the playground signaled the end of recess. My friends and I pulled away from the rock wall that also doubled as our secret hideout for secret-sharing and new crush-confessions. The playground was silent other than the dispirited steps of my peers as they abandoned their monkey-bars for classroom desks. I caught sight of my classmates climbing up the parking lot towards the main office. None of their stomachs poured over their skirts or pants like mine did. Their arms did not wiggle whenever they raised their hand to answer a question in class. I drew in as much air as I could. I held my breath. My stomach shrank to the size of "acceptable." I fell in line behind my friends and headed towards class. I held my breath past the main office, in the halls of the second and third graders, past the nurse's office, and eventually into my classroom. I only breathed when I knew no one was watching me.

Sensing my newfound insecurity, the boys at school began watching me while I ate, as if my digestion was some form of free entertainment. I began lunch with my peanut butter and jelly sandwich. Naturally, the crusts were cut off and the peanut butter to jelly ratio was perfection. I enjoyed eating. While I waited for my friends to join me at our usual table, I noticed a few tables away some of my classmates followed my every move. Their faces could barely restrain their giddy grins. Their laughter was barely stifled. I stuffed my sandwich back into my lunchbox. One of them blew a kiss towards my direction and the table erupted into laughter.

For weeks, the same group of people followed me during recess. During lunch. In between classes. One person in particular, Sam Nulton, always trailed behind me, sarcastically asking me how I got to be so beautiful everyday<sup>1</sup>. He made "kissy faces" at me. Blew me kisses. I always heard the word "beautiful" with an army of harsh laughter followed behind it. I was so confused. I wanted to laugh with them. I wanted to be a part of their every joke. When they surrounded me in the hallway during class as I walked towards the water fountain, I wanted so badly to laugh, to be a part of whatever they had. I got my wish in the next month. My closest friend, Ellie, learned the source of their joke and finally... maybe... I could laugh with them.

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<sup>1</sup> " In a recent national survey of overweight sixth graders, 24 percent of the boys and 30 percent of the girls experienced daily teasing, bullying or rejection because of their size. The number doubles for overweight high school students with 58 percent of boys and 63 percent of girls experiencing daily teasing, bullying or rejection because of their size" (Stevelos). Unfortunately, bullying is not an uncommon experience for young fat individuals.

I gripped the edge of the lunch table. Literally sitting on the edge of my seat, I was the epitome of anxious. My lunchbox sat below me, still packed with today's lunch. My sandwich bag hadn't even been opened. I waited for what felt like years for my friend to appear from the long lunch line. Eventually, she emerged carrying a pale green lunch tray topped with indistinguishable substance that could be considered "food." She was perfectly calm. Resting a napkin on her lap, she dipped her spoon into today's lunch and took a small bite. I couldn't wait any longer. I wanted to laugh.

She shared with me that during football practice, they talked about me. They scrutinized every inch of my face. Noticing that his team had not even begun the required 5 laps around the field, the football Coach strided over and playfully asked if "Caterina was Sam's [Nulton] girlfriend". Everyone, including Coach, erupted into laughter and continued to dissect my every insecurity. Their next meeting, one of the team members brought a yearbook to practice. They poked and prodded at every picture, but spent extra time to laugh at my fourth grade double chin. They found more pictures of me. Full sized pictures featuring my thick legs. They huddled around the yearbook, laughing to themselves, forgetting about football practice entirely. Laughing so hard at their own jokes, they fell over onto the ground or leaned on one another for support. Once Ellie finished, my face had grown completely white. The cafeteria was silent. I don't remember anyone signaling the end of lunchtime, the sound of the speaker delivering daily news, or the other members at our table. My nails dug into my legs, puncturing my thin layer of skin. Underneath the protection of the lunch table, my legs began to bleed. Ellie noticed my state of shock and carelessly commented "Oh, get over it, Cat. It's just a joke." I wanted to laugh.

The joke evolved into Sam and his friends grabbing my hand as we passed each other in the halls, forcing me to briefly hold hands with them. Sam pulled me into hugs while his friends could barely breath from laughing too much. I lived in fear of every time our eyes met across the classroom. Every touch, whether it was from my friends or my parents, reminded me of him. The joke continued to evolve beyond 5th grade into 6th, 7th and 8th. With every new form the joke took, I was always met with a "Oh get over it, Cat. It's just a joke." Sam began to follow me home. I saw him in the mirror, almost like my shadow. He appeared in my fat rolls and under my double chin. He ate every meal with me too. I heard his laughter in every bite of my breakfast. I could see him in the corner of my eye as I had dinner with my parents.

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Years later after my graduation of grade school and escape from my tormentors, I began my journey towards self acceptance. Over the summer after my freshman year, I began the month of June with my mind set on returning to school in the fall with a "beautiful, healthy" body. My friend Gaby shared my goal of wanting to lose weight and joined me in signing up for a gym membership. We began meeting after my summer speech class at the YMCA for forty-five minutes or an hour. Gaby and I followed a loose routine for a little over a week until one Thursday afternoon in late June. For years leading up to this moment, I had avoided mirrors at all costs. I would turn my head towards the side as I washed my hands in a retail store restroom. At my local YMCA, I retained this old habit despite the myriad of mirrors that lined each wall. I would simply keep my eyes fixated on my ipod resting on the treadmill or keep my eyes glued to a nearby T.V. However, once I filled my water bottle, began my playlist, and set my treadmill pace to 8 mph, I looked up from my ipod and nearby T.V to watch my reflection. My feet pounded on the treadmill track furiously. My thighs moved fluidly with every step. Strands of hair escaped the confines of my bun in every direction. My shirt was stained. My gaze lingered. I

couldn't pull myself away from my reflection not because of a wild infatuation with myself but because I could actually stand to look at my body for the first time in years. I didn't return to the gym again. From this moment onwards, I strived to find beauty and if not at least acceptance in every pound of fat.

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Though these memories and many others still haunt me to this day, I realize that I am built from every single one. Every Doctor's visit. Every time Sam reached for my hand as I passed him in the hallway. They have redefined the word "fat" to me. Though initially I believed fat to be synonymous with ugly, I now understand that being fat is the ability to overcome these memories. These memories are now the basis for my every move, every word, and every thought.

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