

BIRDS AND BACKS:
A SCHOLARLY EXPLORATION
OF WRITING, PERFORMANCE,
AND BODY IMAGE

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by
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The undersigned, appointed by the dean of the Graduate School, have examined the dissertation entitled

BIRDS AND BACKS:
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AND BODY IMAGE

presented by Melissa Jackson Burns,

a candidate for the degree of doctor of philosophy of theatre,

and hereby certify that, in their opinion, it is worthy of acceptance.

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Dr. Kevin Brown

Dr. Catherine Gleason

Dr. Elaine Lawless

For James and Cyndi Lauper.
You are my home and my muses.

For you, Mom, for the last 35 years of friendship.

I hope you like it.

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Chapter 1: A Bird is Born

The Bird Takes the Stage

(Tooka, a human bird, enters a dark, empty stage. A single spotlight comes up on her.

She smiles at her audience invitingly.)

TOOKA: Hello, everyone. Bring your chairs closer. It's time for a tale, to be told in the form of a dissertation. Sit back and relax. It's going to be a long flight. It's okay to be scared. I get scared sometimes, too. But we'll do this together. Come on. Let's go.

(Tooka, who is a master of ceremonies, gestures behind her. A red curtain appears and then rises, taking the audience members, readers of this dissertation, into their own imaginations. The play begins.)

Prologue: The Bird Emerges

It is late at night. James and I are driving down the road, with me at the wheel. We are both tired, having driven our way from Iowa to Oklahoma in one stretch, and we are finding our town and hopefully our hotel. I am a fan of booking hotels online, though when we take this trip I have not yet discovered my favorite website, bringfido.com, which lists dog-friendly hotels in the area of choice. Of course, we opted to leave Cyndi Lauper with my mom for this trip, because we still live in Texas, near enough to drive up the highway to my mom's house and leave Cyndi in her care. Tomorrow, we will go to the Cherokee Nation and research my heritage, unaware at this point that I will not be able to find my ancestors in the sparse library but will still take a rewarding tour of the grounds during our visit.

I am tired and fussy. I probably should not be driving, but I wanted us to get there faster so I took the wheel and have been speeding as much as I dare, which is not much.

We already exited the main highway and threw our coins into the toll collector, an action that flooded me with memories of watching my mother throw her own coins into those baskets during our yearly road trips from Iowa to Oklahoma and Texas.

We are now driving down a dark two-lane highway, no streetlamps to guide our way, the headlights illuminating the dark trees on either side of the road. There is a feeling of isolation, of mystery on this highway, but there is also something comforting about the mystery held in those dark trees as we speed past. Despite my tendency to go on journeys like this one in search of answers, I take solace in knowing that I will never have all the answers.

Finally, we make a turn and find ourselves on a road that is illuminated by lights, driving into the city where we will stay the night before heading out in the morning to research my heritage. My fatigue settles in my body, making me jittery and restless. Now that we are almost there, I feel mean and fussier than ever. We still have at least fifteen minutes to go before we reach our destination, and those fifteen minutes seem interminable.

Then it happens. Having no other outlet for being fussy, mean, and tired, I do the only thing I can do. I pull the hood of my short-sleeved sweatshirt up over my head, hunch down over the wheel, and bare my teeth. A bird, not yet named, has emerged at this late hour. James looks over at me and chuckles. I respond by hunching further down in my hood, biting my teeth together in a temporary release of the exhausted tension I am holding in my body.

He exclaims, "You're a bird!"

I am a bird.

It is the summer of 2013. I am struggling to complete a script for a class entitled Writing for Performance. I sat down with my advisor weeks ago and discussed my writing project for the class. I started a journey with body image earlier in the summer, as a result of enrolling in Eat for Life, a mindful eating class offered at Mizzou. I am enrolled in an online section, which means I have missed the instructor's in person spiel about the "problem of obesity" inspiring her to create the class and have been left to decide for myself why taking a class about eating is important to me.

At the beginning of this mindful eating class, I read about the ill effects of dieting and, scared for my health, let go of dieting, and days later suspended my membership to Weight Watchers after deciding that I could not keep telling myself that being in Weight Watchers is different from being on a diet. Truthfully, I enrolled in the mindful eating class because I wanted to, yet again, lose weight and hoped to make that weight loss permanent this time. I had cycled through diets for over decade, forcing and punishing my body into a size four, sometimes a size six, before regaining the weight after months of keeping it off.

I vividly remember calling my mother from a fitting room after a "successful" diet and gushing about being able to squeeze myself into a pair of plaid pants reading size three. That diet was three years before I went on a different diet and spent several months eating 1,000 calories per day and exercising at the gym for over two hours most days before deciding to stop that program because I felt a terrible weight of exhaustion, constantly weighing me down, and suspected it was because I was not eating enough. That was the diet that resulted in my proudly wearing a size three and showing off my

body in a bikini, simultaneously fretting about my health because my menstrual cycle was absent for five months. The doctor who saw me was unconcerned and simply put me on birth control, not at all worried about my nutrition or exercise habits because I still fit into the “normal” range on the BMI chart, a chart which I did not realize at the time proves “a poor predictor of the current or future health of individuals” (Burgard 49). I would see a different doctor eleven years later for fertility, who would refuse to run any tests and would suggest I get weight loss surgery as a healthy solution for having an irregular cycle, again because of the position of my weight on a BMI chart.

While I felt I had learned my lesson about extreme dieting habits years before I enrolled in the mindful eating class, it was my dream to lose weight and again be a size six. In my fantasy, after becoming a svelte instructor, all my students in acting classes would respect me, show up on time, and show up to every class. I would finally have the magic secret to weight loss, and of course, health.

As I delved into the mindful eating class, I realized that what I needed, more than working on nutrition or the way I eat, was to work on my own body image. I am an artist, so I realized that the most useful thing I could do with that work would be to share it with an audience. After that epiphany, I met with my advisor and discussed my project. Once we met, I went home to begin the lonely and exhilarating process of writing an initial draft of a solo script.

Now I struggle. I have done my research. I have looked up facts about dieting, body image, eating disorders, and anything else I feel will help me with writing my script. Yet, when it comes time to write, I am at a loss. I write. I start with a few paragraphs, written in what I think could be my voice as a performer, though I rarely

perform as myself; even as a senior in college, in my last semester, I performed as a series of characters in my Solo Performance class. The results of my initial writing efforts feel like someone else, whom I am trying to transform into me. I eventually begin incorporating another character into my writing, though this character too feels removed from me. What follows is my first attempt to write a script that captures my experiences and focuses on the importance of my experience as a fat woman who spent several years dieting:

I had a terrible experience last night. Do you ever have that moment, when you look up at the mirror, and you think, yuck? Well, that happened to me. I looked up, and I thought, yuck. Now, maybe it's because I was tired. Maybe it's because I wasn't feeling great. Or maybe I'm just starting to hear those things that I tell myself but don't realize I'm telling myself, because it's not politically correct to have a bad body image.

What is politically correct? To tell myself I think I'm beautiful? But it's not politically correct to be overweight and still think I'm beautiful. Maybe the only option is to be thin. Be thin or die. Or in some cases, be thin and die. That's the only right answer. I enjoy judging my judgments. Deep inside, I tell myself I'm too big. Outside, I tell myself that's not the correct thing to think, and I cover it. Well, I just want to fit into my cute clothes. Well, I just want to be healthy. Well, this and that.

Piano music - ?

Play the piano music at certain points in the performance.

(Maybe wear something skimpy or do a striptease. I'm not sure exactly what to do to show that I'm trying to love my body. How to show my body shape?)

It's always a race when I eat. I try not to eat too much, so I watch what other people eat. Will I eat less? Let's hope so. I definitely shouldn't eat more. Ooh, it's a triumph when I do eat less. Oh yes, eat less. I might not be slender, but I can pack it away less than you can. Who knows, maybe I'll eat less than my slender friend. But if I eat more, that's okay. I can eat more than a tiny person. That's acceptable. That's allowed. I just have to keep it all in perspective. Watch what other people are eating and adjust my intake accordingly. How fast can I eat and still not eat more than someone who's way taller than I am? Didn't you know that taller people need more food? It's a rule. I don't know where it came from, but it must be a law of nature. Taller people are allowed to eat more. Not me. I'm 5'2", so I'm stuck with the small portions. Tsk, tsk. Maybe if I don't eat during the day, I can splurge tonight. Maybe I can eat "normal" food instead of the fat-free, sugar-free crap I've stuffed into the pantry.

You know, at meetings they're all the time talking about how the fat-free stuff tastes just as good. The popcorn *without* butter tastes even better. (*Take out a bag of Jiffy Pop low-cal popcorn.*) Mmmmmmmmm. Tasty cardboard. I just love eating paper. Best stuff ever. (*Throw some out at the audience.*) Tastes good, huh? (*Reveal something truly delicious.*) What about this? Hm? You know, at a certain company where you keep a close eye on your weight – wink, wink – the ladies like to talk about how they've lost their taste for things like this. Really? Because I think it tastes delicious. (*Takes a bite, ecstasy.*)

(*Takes out a drawing.*) This is what I'm really supposed to look like. (*Stands next to drawing.*) These were my measurements when I was, what, 23? I was malnourished, sure, but I wasn't (*whispers*) anorexic. I thought I was being healthy and getting enough

food. The so-called nutrition experts at the place I was going told me I was eating enough and being really healthy. Hence, that was the truth. Ah, but the clothes. I was stylish. In fact, I've spent almost ten years trying to get back into those clothes.

(Brings out various articles of clothing.)

Ooh, the fashions on the new millennium. Fabulous, no? If only I could wear this coral top again. Or these tan pants. Or these lace up pants that I probably wore twice.

Dance – showing off my body (?).

As I dance: I don't feel fat. Some people would call me fat. Hell, some people called me fat back in the third grade, when my thighs were barely touching. How can a little girl be fat, anyway? Isn't that before, you know, before everything is set? Before you even develop your womanly wiles? By the way, how could I be expected to be skinny *and* have big boobs? I mean, really. Isn't that what we see all the time on the TV? Skinny ladies with big boobs. It's not cool. Breasts are made of fat, did you know that? Mine were smaller back when I was smaller. That's the way it works. Society needs to pick its poison. Or maybe society needs to just stop talking about women's bodies like we're in some sort of contest. Seems to me that genetics is going to win that contest. I didn't work for this nose. I got it from my mom and dad. Same with the eyes. Didn't work a day for these either. So how can it be competition? For that matter, I didn't even work for my brains. I'm proud of them, to a point, but I didn't earn being smart. I work hard, so I earn a lot, but my basic intelligence is not something I worked for. So why, back before I met my husband, did men all the time tell me on a date that I was beautiful and smart, sounding all meaningful. "You're beautiful, you know that?" "You're smart." Those compliments never impressed me, because, well, I never worked for any of that. The way

I look, my intelligence, that's all just natural. And would there be something wrong with me if I didn't have this IQ, or look the way I do? I hope not, but I'm sure a lot of guys wouldn't have been so friendly. That Moroccan acrobat wouldn't have done his tricks in the circus for me. Long story. Or not so long. So, I went to Adventureland with my family and my best friend the summer after I graduated high school, and I was walking with my friend, and this man approached us and asked me to dinner, claiming that he saw me in the audience at the circus and did his tricks for me. I had no idea how to speak his language, so I told him I was flattered, and I have no idea to this day if that word is easily translatable or if it's routinely taught in ESL courses. I was a pretty little 18-year-old, with a midriff baring top. Of course he did his tricks for me, because that's what he was supposed to do. It would not have been correct for him to invite someone with a beautiful heart (I have a beautiful heart too, but there's no way he could have seen that without X-ray vision) and perform for that person's inner beauty.

MADAME COROLLA: Well, hello! It's your old friend, Madame Corolla. Look at all of you, looking so nice. You might be wondering why I'm here at the show. Well, I don't mind telling you. I'm stopping by to give you some tips for looking even nicer than you do right now! Isn't that exciting? Hm? Can I hear some applause? (*Response based on whether there is applause and how much*)

And now for some tips. Let's see, can I get some music? Yes? Thank you.

(*Bouncy music*) Ooh, that's peppy. Now. How many of you like to look nice? Show of hands? Looks about right. Well, here are some of my top secret tips: #1. Always smile. Sounds easy, right? Well, it's not. I mean, smile at everyone, including numero uno.

When you look in the mirror, smile. It does the soul good. If you can't be nice to yourself, how can you look nice to everybody else? Exactly. #2. Say nice things.

Song on the bass:

4 counts

End of script

Everything in that script is true of how I feel at this moment, struggling to write this solo script, yet there is something shallow about it, something that does not quite scratch the surface of my experience. Something about it feels contrived, or perhaps like I am using my own thoughts and feelings to channel someone else's perspective. I think maybe the problem is that my own voice is not so original, but maybe the problem is that my own voice is entangled with the characters I invent and perform every day of my existence, and leaving those characters on the sidelines cuts out a fundamental part of who I am as a person and as an artist.

I rest. I do more research. I buy a box of Twinkies and a box of Hostess cupcakes as part of my exploration of what I like about particular foods; it is an outward action that reflects my commitment to no longer denying myself certain foods because they are "bad." This is part of the process that the authors of *Intuitive Eating* and Geneen Roth, in *Breaking Free from Emotional Eating*, suggest I undertake to learn to listen to my body. Roth describes her experience eating only chocolate chips cookies for two weeks (Roth 17-20), and in *Intuitive Eating* a client named Annie goes through "her red licorice phase, her Pop-Tarts phase, and her mashed potato phase" as she learns to make peace with food (Tribole and Resch 84). By eating these foods, I should crave them less and less because they will no longer be forbidden. I also eat these treats to deal with my stress about

opening myself up to difficult feelings as I go deeper into the complicated mess that is my body image, still maintaining the habit of emotional eating that I learned from a culture entrenched in the denial of dieting and the overindulgence of consumerism. I take a break and play with my Yorkshire terrier, Cyndi Lauper. She is proof that emotion is an integral part of eating; she reserves her own eating for the times when she is happiest, when James and I are both home with her. Unlike her, I have trained my body to not eat when I am hungry, and a mere month after I have given up dieting, I am still in the habit of waiting too long to eat, thus starving myself, and nervously eating food when my body does not want it. What I have not yet learned is that, though I am convinced I am simply eating for stress, my body biologically craves the sugar and fat in these treats precisely because I have dieted for so long and denied it the nutrients it needs (Bacon, Chapter 3). It does not trust me to keep my promise and not starve it yet again, so it cries out for foods that will sustain it through famine and help me gain weight to protect against future famines. I eat for all these reasons, my body soothed by the protection against starvation and my mind quieting as my body does. I am unaware at this moment that it will take another two years before my body becomes accustomed to regularly being fed and I realize I no longer crave foods like this when I am stressed, my cravings falling in direct proportion to the lessening of the frequency with which I wait too long to eat.

I rest. I do more research. The deadline for turning in a ten-minute script looms closer.

My fingers hover over the keyboard. I type a title, delete it, and try another title. Something is missing.

I sit back and tap my fingers on the laptop desk. I need to write using characters. After my first attempt, I know that I need these characters to find the words that I cannot find on my own. They will dig into my soul and rip out the things I cannot bring myself to access, and those things will spill out of their mouths. Yet those characters are silent, refusing to speak. Something is missing.

A gentle voice whispers to me. She is half-formed; she has not yet been given the space to speak. She slowly takes shape out of disjointed ideas. Her body moves like the velociraptor I have transformed into and performed multiple times since I was 17, to the delight of my mother. Her speech develops partly out of the country bumpkin character I developed on my honeymoon and partly out of the serious baby character I use to make James laugh when it is just the two of us. Her manner is sweet and without judgment. She naively, or maybe not so naively, believes the best of everyone and everything. She morphs into a bird, her call mimicking my own call for cookies during the most stressful moments of my first spring semester in my PhD program, when there were days that the only time I would allow myself to not work on my classwork was the time spent enjoying hot delivered cookies and cookie sandwiches. There were nights when I would trudge up the stairs from the garage, calling “tookiiiiieeeeeees.”

I begin typing. The bird speaks. She is the Tooka bird. She is me. I am a bird.

Introduction, Part 2: Writing Becomes Performance, Performance Becomes Writing

I wrote a ten-minute script that summer that featured a bird named Tooka. I continued work with the ten-minute script I wrote in the summer of 2013, writing new scripts and eventually creating a full-length script featuring Tooka, the bird character who expressed my thoughts about and shared my experiences of body image and dieting. I

performed the full-length solo performance “Bird Song” on March 2 and March 4, 2016. As I took the stage, I felt exhilarated and terrified. Owning a stage for a full hour was something I had never done. I was ecstatic to have the opportunity and to have such a central role in the creative process as the writer and sole performer, but underneath the excitement was anxiety.

The anxiety I felt was directly tied to the piece’s importance; I was speaking, not only about my own experiences with body image and dieting, but about body acceptance or lack thereof in my culture and the impact this lack of acceptance often has on individual health. I also felt anxiety about putting my body, a fat body, onstage and revealing my acceptance of that body and my rejection of the dieting that had been a part of my life until I began my recovery from it four years ago. My body is not the norm for theatrical productions; not only would I be taking the stage for an hour, I would be taking more physical space than deemed acceptable for female bodies (Bordo 187-191, Bartky 74), especially those on stage. I would be exposing myself to possible criticism for displaying this body and announcing my intention to stop pursuing diets and stop trying to change my body. For one full hour, I owned the stage and performed my own political act, by performing my story, demanding my space, and daring to reveal that I am happy with my life now, free of dieting and the mental and physical anguish that accompanied that dieting.

*No, you were a lot smaller then. You looked **good**.*

Have you been eating peanut brittle?

We're worried about you. We think you've gained weight.

I think she doesn't want the cake because of what we said to her.

Excuse me. I don't want to offend you, but... I've seen a lot of girls come in here, and some of them are pretty, you know, but you...you kinda built like a sista. You got that nice...

Her boobs are bigger. Must be all the hormones from that birth control.

Are you sure you haven't lost too much weight? You're awfully small.

Girl, look at you. Svelte!

My name is Tooka, and I'm a tooka bird.

In my work with body image, I have embodied those voices I had not previously allowed to speak. I filter my history through memory, then filter it further through character and performance. The audience sees my experience through a degree of abstraction. Sometimes my characters speak the plain truth of what I have experienced. Sometimes my experiences are filtered through abstracted characters and experiences – magnified, even grotesque personas, and the theatricality of the stage.

In my writing for solo performance, I do not simply use my own voice as Melissa. I become Tooka, a bird who has the same issues with body image and dieting that I do, yet has a strong voice, which I do not always have, with which to tell her story. My character is both me and not me, or not not me (Schechner 112), a liminal representation of my own struggles and development. I filter my own experiences through a character who is based in both fiction and reality, a bird who is human yet is still a bird.

This dissertation documents both the effects of writing these scripts on myself and those around me, and the methods I used and will again use to create scripts based on two cultures – one to which I previously belonged, the culture of dieters, and one to which I am still new, the culture of body positivity.

I am a bird

You can't tell me

That I can't be

A bird

A tiny, tiny bird

A medium bird

A big, big bird

You cannot tell me

You cannot say

That I can't be

A bird

An Insider Perspective

As a former dieter who has made the decision to live in my current body, I offer a unique perspective with my autoethnographic performances and writing. I have moved from occasionally living in a thin body to accepting and learning to constantly live in a fat body. My experiences, which inform my playwriting and my autoethnography, represent the opposite experience from those about which we hear in the news and advertising for companies such as Weight Watchers and Jenny Craig.

My research into the usual narrative concerning dieting has included reading articles (Lockford, Heyes), watching television commercials, attending meetings at Weight Watchers, receiving weight loss counseling with various programs, and reading materials from Weight Watchers, Jenny Craig, the Diet Center, Quick Weight Loss Center, and online SlimFast program. There exists a common narrative that is learned and

repeated and advertised, a common trope that many people would refer to as a weight loss journey. As a dieter, I often shared information about and gloried in my own weight loss journey. The usual story unfolds in the following way:

A woman is unhappy with herself and with her weight. In fact, this woman is unhealthy because her weight is classified as overweight or obese according to the widely-recognized BMI charts used by doctors and weight loss programs. She has tried everything to change her weight, to change her life, and nothing has worked – until now. This same woman who has been struggling with her weight, to no avail, discovers the magic product or program, be it Weight Watchers, Jenny Craig, Nutrisystem, or any number of other diet programs. Suddenly, she is losing the weight. She is happy. She wants to tell her whole family and all her friends about her wonderful, healthy, glamorous new life as a thin person. She made the change. She *is* the change.

I lived that same story, multiple times. However, I come from the perspective of someone who broke from the cycle of regaining weight and reliving the weight loss success story. I found a new ending to the story, an ending in which I decided that my health was more important than being thin. I made the difficult decision to put my health and well-being first, forfeiting my chance at living through future cycles of the weight loss success story. My journey to becoming a healthier person has necessitated a different ending, one that does not rely on a miracle diet, or more accurately, bottles of Coke Zero and box after box of frozen diet dinners. As Le'a Kent describes her own story, I also “found a way to think and live my fat body in the present” (Kent 131). I can contribute to this perspective in Fat Studies, as well as widening the discussion of bodies in Performance Studies to include a discussion of the fat body in performance, through

sharing my experience and research, both stemming from and continuing to inspire my own creation of solo performance.

In "*Young Gifted and Fat: Performing Transweight Identities*," Sharrell Lockett describes her move from living in a fat body to living in a thin body, and her subsequent struggle to truly inhabit this new body. Unlike Lockett, my experience was not that of someone who eventually dieted down to and remained a smaller size. I have been various sizes throughout my life. As a child and adolescent, I was plus-sized. I then spent fourteen years of my life – from age 17 to age 31 – perpetually dieting and weight cycling. The times I was not dieting were brief rests, during which I overate to compensate for not having eaten enough during the previous months/years.

My dieting experience was not unique, and countless other women and girls are encouraged to live those same experiences. Each time I turn on the television in a place that has cable (we only use commercial-free services like Netflix in my own home), I am bombarded by commercials for processed meat foods and commercials for weight loss programs. The weight loss industry receives a lot of money each year, enabling those frequent advertisements. Given the power of the diet industry, the number of women and girls who pay money to follow plans that leave them undernourished and unhappy, and the constant bombardment of messages from the media and advertisements about the importance of maintaining a thin body, it is imperative that discussions such as the one in this dissertation occur. In this autoethnography, I use my own experience to identify and explicate the culture surrounding fat bodies, as well as research that provides theoretical understandings of the ways in which we view fat bodies in performance. I write narratively about my own experiences, utilize playwriting to present autoethnographic

scenes from my life, and provide analyses of my own experiences and relevant literature. My autoethnographic research, in which I talk about my own experiences and the ethnographic research I have done, addresses: my experiences living in a fat body and dieting; my own process writing a script and utilizing characters and metaphor in solo performance; and the process of rehearsing and performing “Bird Song.”

Through my playwriting, performances, and autoethnography, I am creating scholarship that utilizes Theatre, Performance Studies, and Folklore. I use specific theories from Performance Studies throughout this dissertation, providing transitions between chapters. I use methods of gathering ethnographic research from Folklore, including: ethnographic research involving groups of dieters and non-dieters; and autoethnographic research that includes my own experiences and use of media to gain knowledge, both as a researcher and as a former dieter. Theatre provides theoretical and practical knowledge that underpins my discussion of the writing process. Additionally, autoethnography as a method is firmly grounded in Performance Studies and has roots in Folklore. My research contributes to and, in some ways, creates a cross-disciplinary perspective on body image in solo performance. My perspective and personal experience enrich my scholarship, enabling me to approach writing about this topic in a way that is specific to my knowledge, both academic and personal.

This dissertation contributes to both Fat Studies and Performance Studies by filling a hole in each. The Fat Studies literature includes information about the performance of fatness, onstage and offstage, but writing about the performance of fatness in solo performance will contribute something new to the field. My contribution to Performance Studies is two-fold and involves: the documentation of writing and

performing a solo piece in which I use metaphor and tell my stories through a main character, Tooka, never breaking character from this bird based on me; and the contribution to Performance Studies of research that focuses on the fat female body in performance.

My Identities

In making my work reflexive, I actively acknowledge my own position as a fat white woman. My perspective is not *the* perspective, nor is my experience universal, though I do believe there is something universal to be found in my performance of the personal. As Adams et al. express, “I do my best to account for my identities, limitations, and perspectives and show readers that while I use my experiences to offer insight into cultural experiences, the way I make sense of these experiences is not the *only* way to make sense of them” (Adams et al. 30).

As a middle class academic, I am part of an extremely privileged class. Additionally, I have power and privilege as a white woman, yet I am also marginalized for being a woman and further marginalized for being a fat woman. Because of the precarious position I am in as a marginalized voice taking center stage in my own work, it is important to incorporate reflexivity in another way described in Adams et al.:

Reflexivity consists of turning back on our experiences, identities, and relationships in order to consider how they influence our present work.

Reflexivity also asks us to explicitly acknowledge our research in relation to power; as Bernadette Calafell explains, reflexivity means “skillfully and artfully recreating the details of lived experiences and one’s space or implication” in control, contradiction, and privilege. (29)

Incorporating both previous definitions of reflexivity, I acknowledge my own positionality as a fat white woman and the relation of that position to the systems of power that surround me. I also explore the differences in my experiences as a fat woman and my past experiences as a (temporarily) thin woman. As a thin woman, I experienced power and privilege that I do not currently enjoy, yet I was marginalized in other ways. For example, as a fat woman or a thin woman, I experience street harassment; only the specific words of that harassment have changed. I explore these experiences and my identity both in my writing of this dissertation and in the script of “Bird Song.”

Why “Fat”

Performance work in the academy subverts the mind/body split even while it appears to exist on the physical end of that inappropriate binary, because performance is at once physical and intellectual, visceral and cerebral. However, the work that is revered in the academy separates the mind from the body and seems to negate, or at least ignore, overt physicality. (Jones, *sista docta* 60)

I began the work in this dissertation as a performance, a fully embodied experience. My body was on display for the audience. Though there was no nudity in my solo performance, I did not attempt to hide my shape from the audience. I attempt to maintain an embodied experience for my reader as I write this dissertation.

My experience as a scholar, instead of being divorced from my body, is rooted in my physical experience of the world around me. This physical experience is constantly with me, affecting the ways in which I work. As Robert Jensen asserts in *The End of Patriarchy: Radical Feminism for Men*, I “need not sacrifice rigor to pay attention to [my] emotional, embodied life and what it teaches [me]” (2). I maintain active

acknowledgement of my body and its role in my experiences throughout this dissertation, without sacrificing rigor. I argue that using autoethnography as methodology requires that I acknowledge and pay attention to my embodied experience.

My body size manifests and affects my scholarship in more than one way. Because my legs are short, I must spend five or ten minutes more walking to class or to the library than I would with long legs. It is these short legs that I fold underneath me as I sit cross legged at home or in my study carrel to carry out the scholarly task of writing my dissertation, because none of the chairs at the school are short enough for me to be able to comfortably rest my feet on the ground. My feet either do not touch the ground or barely rest on the floor, making an uncomfortable slope from my hips down my knees. I frequently take the time to switch my legs, because staying with one leg on top for too long becomes painful and stiffens my joints. Likewise, for the three and a half years during which I took classes in my doctoral program, I spent each class sitting with my legs underneath me, frequently switching to relieve stiffness. During meetings, I try to keep at least one foot either on the floor or dangling, so that I can appear more professional. On rainy days, I sit with my legs down and my feet balanced on my toes to help my knees rest at a higher angle. The times that I forget to do this, I get my pants wet with my feet and must teach or take classes with wet pants.

I have the luxury of my legs being of a small enough girth that I can, indeed, fold them underneath me as I sit in most of the chairs at my school. Yet, my size necessitates decisions about how to sit in several situations. If I fold my legs underneath me in a lap desk, will I have room to bring the desk down over my lap? Would it be better in a

narrow chair to sit with my legs down, my feet balanced on my toes to keep my knees higher, to keep my feet from dangling over the edges of the chair along with my hips?

As my shortness affects my navigation of academia, so does my fatness. It is important I acknowledge my body in my writing, because I am writing about my own performance in that body and because that body is constantly affecting my scholarship in ways that are big and small. As I seek to position my own body in my writing, I need words to describe that body. It is unlikely that anyone would argue with my choosing to use the word “short” to describe myself. At 5’2”, many people would say that I am objectively a short person. My choice to describe my body as fat, a decision influenced by my research in Fat Studies and meant to be another objective descriptor, is likely to meet with at least some protest, given the negative connotation my culture gives the word. Yet, I choose to use this word as a descriptor.

One of my most vivid memories from middle school is a conversation my eighth-grade English teacher had with some of the boys in my class. I do not recall the subject we were studying that day, nor do I recall the reason the conversation began. I was sitting at my desk, uncomfortable in my body, believing that I was overweight; if anyone had asked me over what weight, I would have declared 125 pounds as the weight I was over, having decided in the fifth grade that that would be my ideal body weight, an ideal I would chase for decades and weigh for periods of years or months.

The conversation, whether spurred by something we had read or simply the result of a meandering conversation, turned to what terminology was best to use to describe a body like mine and like my teacher’s. As an adult who has delved into Fat Studies, I would now simply say fat, but as a girl who had been taught that fat was the worst thing a

person could be, I hated the word. My teacher assured the class that “obese” was the worst term they could use. In my head, I disagreed. I was unaware of the uses of the word “obese,” and I did not watch the news enough to encounter the word there. I was convinced that the term was a neutral word to describe the human body, much as I was convinced that the word “thin” was neutral, while “skinny” carried with it a connotation of being too thin. I did not share my thoughts aloud, nor was I invited to share my opinion. Despite being a girl who was affected by the conversation and the decisions being made about language, I was not involved in it. The only people talking were my teacher, who was a woman in her 30s or 40s, and a small group of boys, most if not all of whom were athletes with thin bodies.

Eventually, the teacher and the group of boys decided that “big-boned” was the nicest way to describe her body type, and ostensibly my own body. Yet, I could not claim that adjective, because I do not have particularly big bones. My rib cage is sizable compared with the rest of my body, but I am a 5’2” woman, and at the time of the conversation I was probably 5’1”. I cannot and could not claim big bones, because I do not have them. At my thinnest as a woman in my 20s, I could overlap my thumb and pinkie finger when I wrapped my fingers around my wrist, which according to magazine and Internet quizzes meant that I did indeed have a small frame.

At least a decade after this conversation in my English classroom, I listened to a similar conversation my brother was having, though I do not remember who else was there for the conversation. It may have been one of the many one-sided conversations we have had over the years, during which he makes jokes and seeks my approval, which I usually freely give. It is likely that someone else was partaking in the conversation,

because he did not turn to me expectantly, waiting for me to laugh, which was of course the desired response. He began listing words that are nice words to use for women's bodies when they are fat. He ended with a delighted declaration that "zaftig" was a great word, both in meaning and in the way it sounded, and added with a wink that one of my friends in particular would certainly fit that description.

As a child in middle school, I thought the term "obese" must be neutral, because doctors use that term. If anyone could be expected to treat body size neutrally, as simply another fact of existence, I assumed those people must be doctors. I now know that the term is not neutral, nor is the term "overweight." As an adult, I have seen numerous television news spots and online articles warning the public about the "obesity epidemic" and searching for ways to end it. "Obesity" is touted as a dire health concern, something to be avoided and dismantled, even if that dismantling involves risky weight loss surgery. BMI charts, still used in the doctors' offices I visit, declare me obese and suggest that my healthy or "normal" weight would be in the range of what I weighed for brief periods of time when I dieted. These same BMI charts allowed salespeople in diet programs to assure me that I could weigh as little as 104 pounds and still be quite healthy. The classifications "overweight" and "obese" encouraged and maybe even drove me to continue dieting and ignoring my body's signals in favor of attempting to achieve a certain weight. These medicalized terms contribute to fat discrimination and fat phobia. In the *Fat Studies Reader*, Marilyn Wann states in the Foreword: "Calling fat people 'obese' medicalizes human diversity. Medicalizing diversity inspires a misplaced search for a 'cure' for naturally occurring difference" (xiii). Wann further asserts that

“Overweight” is inherently anti-fat. It implies an extreme goal: instead of a bell curve distribution of human weights, it calls for a lone, towering, unlikely bar graph with everyone occupying the same (thin) weights. If a word like “overweight” is acceptable and even preferable, then weight prejudice becomes accepted and preferred. (xii)

These two quotes highlight the importance of using a word that is not medicalized and does not compare some bodies with others. As a dieter, I frequently referred to my own body as overweight, and it was only in giving up dieting and improving my body image that I could begin to use and accept the word fat; using the word fat also worked to destigmatize its associations for me, allowing me to accept my body as both fat and healthy.

Why should I describe my body size in this dissertation? I could write as though disembodied, never mentioning the reality of the body I live in, and never using any descriptor of my body size. Does the reader need to know that I am short, or am white, or have blue eyes, or have curly hair, or am fat?

The reader needs to know these things, because as a performer on the stage in “Bird Song,” I embodied all these physical characteristics for my audience. My body is an essential part of my performance work, not only because I speak about my experiences working with my own body image and trying to escape dieting, but because I use my body in everything I do on stage. I am visible for the audience. My costume in “Bird Song,” while not particularly form fitting or revealing, did not hang loosely from my body or conceal my shape from the audience. The audience could see me, and I could see

them. There was no escaping the fact of my body when I put myself in front of an audience.

I also must be constantly aware of my size as I make my way through the world, because everyday items such as clothes and desks are made for bodies that are thinner than mine. I live in a culture which sends signals, through the construction of things that I must regularly use, that my body simply does not fit. In department stores, women's clothing sizes in my range are labeled "plus size," and in some stores size 10 and up are all considered plus size. Chairs and desks which are made for bodies that are a certain size and smaller indicate that manufacturers do not acknowledge the existence of a diversity of body sizes. For these reasons, talking about my body without acknowledging my size would be to ignore a large chunk of my experience as a human, to forcibly separate my experience from my physicality, when the two are intertwined. I do not have the luxury of ignoring my size, because my culture is physically set up to frequently remind me of my body and my body size. To move toward size acceptance, the diversity of body sizes must be acknowledged, and naming my own size is part of my role in that movement. While the idea that body size defines people is an idea and not necessarily a fact, considering the constantly changing standards for the normal body size, that idea affects fat bodies in real ways.

I am working against assumptions about my body by mentioning my body size. Mobley argues,

Thus, American audiences have become so accustomed to the slender, homogenous beauty aesthetic as proliferated in mass media that any body that strays outside that parameter interferes with the viewer's notion of what is

believable – or what is realistic. Therefore, the only neutral female body in representation, or perhaps more accurately, the only “realistic” body in representation is the slender, dainty, hyperfeminine white woman. (180)

Audiences might consider a thin body to be the default or the norm, much as manufacturers and clothing designers seem to ignore the existence of fat bodies. A reader could too easily imagine my body as thin when reading and imagining my performing body in space, given how many thin bodies are presented as the norm in various media and often in theatrical spaces.

There are two main arguments I have encountered in Fat Studies for using the word “fat.” One of these ideas is that by using the word “fat,” people with fat bodies reclaim the word and begin to destigmatize the fat body. The way that the word is often avoided implies that being fat is terrible, something that should be avoided and certainly not openly discussed. Refusal to use the word “fat” has contributed to making the fat body itself taboo. Marilyn Wann explains in her Foreword to *The Fat Studies Reader*:

In fat studies, there is respect for the political project of reclaiming the word *fat*, both as the preferred neutral adjective (i.e., short/tall, young/old, fat/thin) and also as a preferred term of political identity. There is nothing negative or rude in the word *fat* unless someone makes the effort to put it there; using the word *fat* as a descriptor (not a discriminator) can help dispel prejudice. Seemingly well-meaning euphemisms like “heavy,” “plump,” “husky,” and so forth put a falsely positive spin on a negative view of fatness. (xii)

One of the main reasons I have chosen to identify my body as fat in this dissertation is because it is treated as a dirty word, and I have been privy to conversations in which

words were chosen so that calling someone fat could be avoided, yet the fat body was still objectified and treated as grotesque as decisions about language were made by people looking at the fat body, not by fat people. The other main argument I have encountered for using the word “fat” is that it is the best option for describing the fat body to avoid medical associations. Terms like “obese” and “overweight” are medical terms that pathologize fatness, making it a disease to be eradicated instead of simply another body size in the spectrum of sizes. In this dissertation, I call myself fat just as I call myself short, with no suggestion that my size is unhealthy or abnormal.

Positive Results: A Survey

Part of the research I conducted in preparation for this dissertation was an electronic survey that I sent to audience members of “Bird Song” who opted in with their email addresses. To collect email addresses of willing participants, my director created slips of paper expressing my interest in hearing about audience members’ experiences of the show, with spaces for filling in names and email addresses. After the run of my solo show was complete, I collected all the slips audience members had placed in the little black box in the lobby, as well as those slips a few audience members placed in my hands after my performance. I collected 16 names and email addresses, and I emailed electronic survey links to these volunteers. Seven audience members participated in the survey.

The questions I asked in the survey were as follows:

1. What were your initial thoughts and reactions when you saw Bird Song?
2. A week later, what are your thoughts and reactions now to Bird Song?
3. Did seeing Bird Song inspire you to think more about your own experiences and situation? If so, how?

4. Have you noticed any changes in the way you think about your own body, nutrition, body image, or dieting over the past week? Are these changes connected to seeing Bird Song?
5. Is there anything else you would like to share about your own experiences or your reactions to Bird Song?

In my last two questions, 6 and 7, I provided participants with the opportunity to name themselves or not, and the opportunity to agree or not to have their words directly quoted.

Looking at the survey research I collected, I find myself ever more hopeful that solo performance holds possibilities for improving body image and changing the ways in which my culture talks about and views women's bodies. My journey with this set of solo performances and other scripts could provide a template for exploring body image and learning acceptance and appreciation of the body. One survey participant reported:

Honestly, I have been trying to "diet" since January in the hopes of becoming some beautiful goddess by the time I go to Florida this summer. I had convinced myself that in order to be comfortable at a beach, I needed to improve my appearance. However, seeing Bird Song led me to evaluate my goals and allowed me to come to the realization that 20 extra pounds don't determine my confidence level. I'm not going to be miserable at the beach if I don't lose weight. Body insecurity is an internal struggle, and no change to physical appearance will fix that. Everyone will always have something they are insecure about, and the only way to overcome those thoughts is to learn to accept that they don't change who you are. (Survey response, March 2016)

Reactions like the one quoted above highlight the importance of these performances and writing about them. I share with Jill Dolan the “belief that theatre does something, that it makes a difference in the world even by changing one mind or touching one heart” (*The Feminist Spectator in Action* 10). Though there was one anomalous participant whose mind seemed decidedly unchanged and heart untouched, six of the seven survey participants expressed that they had been touched by my performance, were rethinking something vital, or both.

A Theoretical Lens

Performance is theory. It need not be written *about* in order for its theory to be present. . . . Performance may be theorized about, but the theory of the performance is imbedded in the performance itself, “flaws” and all. The provocative question is not “What theory created this performance?” but “What theory is revealed through this performance?” (Jones, *sista docta* 55)

In this dissertation, as I seek to discover the theory that I can find in my own performance, I also draw on others’ theories to find and illuminate the theory embodied in my performance of “Bird Song,” as well as in the pages of this dissertation. I use theory to bridge the divide between practice and theory, between body and mind (Jones, *sista docta*).

I draw primarily from two Performance Studies theorists in my analysis of my own performance and writing in this dissertation. In using these two theorists, I seek to find the theory in my performance and analyze my performance through theory. I also use theory to discuss the ways in which my solo performance is my own contribution to a revolutionary move toward acceptance of all bodies.

The first Performance Studies theorist whose work I draw from is Rebecca Schneider. Her book *The Explicit Body in Performance* offers a lens through which to view the female body in performance. Schneider investigates a range of performances that use the female body explicitly in performance. In her introduction, Schneider explains her use of the term “explicit:”

Social symbolism organizes bodies by markings, relegating them male body, female body, colored body, white body, and so on, and the weight of historical social significances ascribed to bodily markings has literal impact upon *particular* bodies bearing those marks. Making any body explicit *as socially marked*, and foregrounding the historical, political, cultural, and economic issues involved in its marking, is a strategy at the base of many contemporary feminist explicit body works. Manipulating the body itself as *mise en scene*, such artists make *their own bodies* explicit as the stage, canvas, or screen across which social agendas of privilege and disprivilege have been manipulated. (20)

For most of her book, Schneider’s work maintains a focus on the thin white female body made explicit, though she does dedicate a chapter to discussing the work of other body types and other races. I maintain a singular focus on the fat female body (my own body) in performance; however, I use Schneider’s theoretical work to investigate and analyze my own autoethnographic performance and writing.

The second theorist whose theories inform the analyses in this dissertation is Jill Dolan. I draw from her theoretical work in *Utopia in Performance*, comparing my own work and analyzing it with the idea of utopian performatives, as described in Dolan’s introduction:

Utopian performatives persuade us that beyond this “now” of material oppression and unequal power relations lives a future that might be different, one whose potential we can feel as we’re seared by the promise of a present that gestures toward a better later. The affective and ideological “doings” we see and feel demonstrated in utopian performatives also critically rehearse civic engagement that could be effective in the wider public and political realm. (7)

I offer to my audience in performance, and to my reader in this dissertation, the promise of a better future, a future in which bodies are accepted regardless of size. While we have far to go to reach that reality, in performance and writing I suggest ways forward to move toward that better future. I also offer rehearsals for a revolution of body acceptance in my written work and performance work. Throughout this dissertation, I investigate what my own utopian performatives signal and how I have structured and enacted those performatives.

A Methodological Lens

In this dissertation, I take inspiration from other performers’ ethnographic and autoethnographic writing about their performance. Joni L. Jones’s article, “The Self as Other: Creating the Role of Joni The Ethnographer for *Broken Circles*,” as an accompanying piece to her performed ethnography, outlines her process in creating her ethnographic performance and her process of writing her autoethnographic article. For the performance she recounts in her article, Jones completed ethnographic research in Africa and wrote a script for performance. Jones performed in the show she scripted, playing the characters she had written based on her research and research participants, while another actress played Joni. She describes the process of choosing to have another

actress represent her onstage and the ethical implications of stepping back from her own perspective to focus on the participants in her ethnographic research. Though my solo performance focused on my own experiences, I also discuss my process and the ethics of including interactions with family, friends, and acquaintances in my performance and in my writing.

In “From Page to Stage: The Making of *Sweet Tea*,” E. Patrick Johnson discusses the process of collecting oral histories and deciding to channel them into a solo performance. He briefly introduces the article with a short explanation of the way that began in what he calls the field of oral interpretation. He describes his training: “What oral interpretation did, then, was formalize into an academic methodology what I had been doing as part of my ‘cultural’ training. Drawing on the literary properties of poetry and the narrative conventions of fiction to bring literature to life on the stage provided a blueprint for how to mine texts for their performative possibilities” (248). I incorporate elements of fiction writing in my autoethnography, and these elements converge with the ethnographic elements in my dissertation.

Johnson introduces the published version of *Sweet Tea: Black Gay Men of the South* with an introductory chapter, presenting his reasoning for collecting and publishing the stories and including some analytical notes regarding themes. He also outlines the structure of the book and his methods for both collecting stories and writing the book. He centers each main chapter around a discussion of a theme, with large chunks of verbatim interviews, a method which he explains in the introduction: “While I offer critical analysis and interpretation of the narrators’ stories, I, for the most part, allow them to speak in their own words. It is important to me that my ‘academic’ voice be placed in the

background in this regard” (19). Johnson’s work provides a model for letting my creative work speak and building analysis around that voice, instead of trying to mold everything, including participants’ words, to fit my analysis.

Autoethnography as Method

I use autoethnography as a method of discovery and investigation; simultaneously, autoethnography is my primary method of expressing what I have discovered and investigated. As a solo performer, I used my own body in my autoethnographic venture on the stage. Not only was I exposing my body to other people’s judgements, I was also engaging in “risky business,” as M. Heather Carver describes in the introduction to *Voices Made Flesh*:

Women’s autobiographical performance is risky business. Autobiographical performance is inherently fraught with the complexities of the relationship between history and representation – between what happened and what is remembered and performed. . . . The many challenges in creating autobiographical works are multiplied as women begin to speak the unspoken and to embody the selves previously unperformed for audiences. (15)

While I would consider my performance autoethnographic instead of autobiographical, these same complexities came into play as I wrote and rehearsed the piece. As Tooka, I spoke several truths I had previously not dared to express aloud and embodied parts of my self I had only allowed a select few to see in real life. At the same time that I spoke truth, I dealt with my own memory of events and, in some cases, loved ones’ differing perspectives of what had occurred in situations that inspired sections of “Bird Song.” As a playwright, I decided that whether everything was accurately represented in my show

was important, but that speaking a larger truth was more important, which led me to write a variety of characters, use metaphors, and alter events slightly from what I remembered in telling them to the audience.

My research relies heavily on my own experiences, as a person who has dieted and worked with her own body image, and as a playwright/performer. I combine personal and academic research in this autoethnography. The field of autoethnography offers qualitative research in which the “I” is actively acknowledged and used to enrich the research, as I do in this dissertation. My knowledge of cultural norms as a former member of several dieting communities forms the foundation of my playwriting for this dissertation, and it forms the foundation for my discussion of the dieting culture in which I actively participated for 14 years, which I discuss in Chapter 2.

By using autoethnography, I draw on my own experiences as a former dieter to make statements about the larger culture of which I am a part. One of the main goals of my autoethnography, in performance and in writing, is “[d]emonstrating the power, craft, and responsibilities of stories and storytelling” (Adams et. al 102, 103). Because my project involves telling stories with solo performance, the methodology of autoethnography fits well with my research.

In “Performing Autoethnography: An Embodied Methodological Praxis,” Tami Spry describes autoethnographic performance in the following way: “Autoethnographic performance is the convergence of the ‘autobiographic impulse’ and the ‘ethnographic moment’ represented through movement and language in performance” (Spry 727). This short yet loaded description of autoethnography provides a way to think through what

autoethnography is, how it relates to ethnography, and how it is used in writing and performance.

What is the ethnographic moment? To address this question, I first turn to ethnography. Ethnography involves the study of culture and people, primarily through observations of and participation in that culture. These studies can involve attendance at a cultural group's events, interviews with participants from that culture, reciprocal ethnography (Lawless, "Women's Life Stories and Reciprocal Ethnography as Feminist and Emergent"), and any other methods the ethnographer decides to use to directly observe that culture. The result of this study is some sort of recording and reporting of findings about that cultural, or folk, group.

There has been a shift in the field of ethnography, from studying folk groups and reporting on them as an expert, analyzing their culture and deciding on meanings, to taking a more reflexive approach by positioning the self within the ethnography and acknowledging the biases and possible differences in meaning making between the group's members and the ethnographer. Early ethnographies presented reports of groups as though their analysis equaled absolute truth, in some cases sounding like textbook accounts of cultural practices. At the reflexive end of the spectrum, Ruth Behar suggests in her book *The Vulnerable Observer* that the ethnographer should be emotionally invested in her work and openly acknowledge her own position and reactions regarding the folk group she is studying, with the caveat that the researcher should continue to make informed decisions based on when and why the acknowledgement of an emotional reaction would work in an ethnography.

Autoethnography could then be a logical part of the spectrum of ethnography; it would fall on the reflexive end of the ethnographic spectrum, going so far as to include the self within the group being studied. It would include some expression of ethnographic research that includes the self. Autobiographical material by itself would not make a performance or performative writing piece an autoethnography. The inclusion of the study of and reflection about culture is an essential part of autoethnography, given its roots in ethnography.

In *Autoethnography*, Adams et al. trace the history of the term “autoethnography;” this history includes the attempt to define the type of ethnography an ethnographer would perform when studying, analyzing, and reporting on a group to which they belong. The first use they cite of the term auto-ethnography is in 1975, to describe an ethnography focusing on one’s own social or cultural group. In their brief account of the terminology, they cite three different ethnographers in the 1970s – Karl Heider, Walter Goldschmidt, and David Hayano – who used the terms auto-ethnography (Heider and Hayano) and self-ethnography (Goldschmidt). “At the end of the [1980s], scholars began to apply the term ‘autoethnography’ to work that explored the interplay of introspective, personally engaged selves and cultural beliefs, practices, systems, and experiences” (Adams et al. 17). The authors describe the move of autoethnography from its roots in ethnography to a reflexive form of writing focused on the autoethnographer’s own story and place in their culture.

Besides including a study and analysis of one’s own culture, autoethnography includes autobiographical information and epiphanies – the “autobiographic impulse” that Spry cites in her writing. In “Autoethnography: An Introduction,” Ellis et al. speak

about the epiphanies inherent in both autobiography and autoethnography. The main difference is that the epiphanies expressed in autoethnography are not exclusively based on personal experience; these epiphanies are directly related to the performer or writer's membership to one or more groups and cultures. The epiphanies I explore in this dissertation and explored in "Bird Song" are likewise directly related to my current and former membership to multiple groups.

The discussion of the writer's writing and research process often comprises an important part of autoethnographic writing, as it does in ethnography. This allows the writer to position herself within the work, and it also allows the writer to explore her process of writing the piece as part of the autoethnographic account. I would argue that this description of the process of writing autoethnography has two purposes. First, this description addresses ethical concerns in writing autoethnography, because the author must then share their procedures in researching and writing the piece, and share any obstacles they encountered and subsequent solutions, as well as acknowledge their own positionality in relationship to the work and cultural groups discussed in the work.

In *Body, Paper, Stage: Writing and Performing Autoethnography*, Tami Spry asserts: "The composition and performance process continually forms and reforms the body, the body of the text, the text of the body. In other words, the literary and the performative collaborate in autoethnographic epistemology" (Spry 29). Because I am exploring issues related to my own body, Spry's words speak to the importance of using autoethnography in creating a piece of writing based on my performance and writing experiences. Further, I allow the collaboration about which Spry speaks, between the literary and the performative, by using performative writing in my dissertation. As I used

my body to create a full-length solo performance in the spring, the text of my body informs the body of text in my dissertation.

In *Autoethnography: Understanding Qualitative Research*, Adams et al. break down the process of writing by exploring how the writer can “write to *reflect and analyze* our experiences and conversations, shaping field notes and other recordings into stories about/around a theme (or themes), characters, voice, dialogue, and plot” (77). I have already done the work of turning my initial fieldwork, both with my personal experiences and with researching dieting culture, into a narrative, though not a traditional narrative with a beginning, rising action, climax, and denouement. I used my experiences with dieting from my past, and my attendance at Weight Watchers meetings during a folklore class in ethnography, to build my full-length solo performance “Bird Song.” I am using autoethnography to discuss the process of writing about and performing my experiences because I was already telling a story about my experiences and my place in the culture.

Adams et al. state, “Rather than silence or disguise the personal reasons that lead us to choose our research projects, autoethnographers make use of personal experience and subjectivity in designing their research” (26). As I have researched diet culture and investigated my own experiences in preparation for writing my solo performance and then writing my dissertation, I have used my personal experience as the foundation for understanding diet culture and body image issues. My dissertation focuses on my own process as a writer and performer, from inception to rehearsal to performance to post-show discussions and responses. Foregrounding my own experiences allows me to present an individual case, my own, and in this way to encourage readers to relate to my work.

“Autoethnographers offer complex, insider accounts of *sense-making* and show how/why particular experiences are challenging, important, and/or transformative. In turn, autoethnographers provide a perspective that others can use to make sense of similar experiences” (Adams et al. 27). My work on “Bird Song” and previous shorter scripts encapsulates this process of sense-making and illuminating it for an audience. As I wrote my scripts about Tooka and the other birds and people in her life, I actively used my own experiences to make sense of the world and to make sense of the diet world I had been born into and participated in for well over a decade of my adult life. As a writer and performer, I also made it a goal to present my own experiences in such a way that audience members would use their experience at my performances to inform their processes of working through their own experiences and thoughts about their bodies. Using these scripts and my research as a foundation, I illuminate my own process of sense-making for the reader of this dissertation, my current audience.

Adams et al. assert that being an insider helps “generate insights that other methods might miss or actively discourage” (31). As an insider in both diet culture and the playwriting/performing process, I have insights that other methods would not encourage me to share. For example, as someone who went through numerous diet programs and spent 14 years bouncing between diets and refeedings (the process of eating more to allow my body to return to stasis), I have insights into the physical effects of dieting on my own body, and I also have insights into the mental effects of dieting. I can identify with the common mental processes in the diet mentality that Evelyn Tribole and Elyse Resch label and describe in *Intuitive Eating*; some of their descriptions and the parallels between those and my own experiences guided me in naming characters who

existed in my own head. In “Bird Song” I describe the love affairs I used to have with food, including the obsessive thinking about the food that I was not allowed to have or wondering whether I should have some at a party; as an insider, I have the knowledge that I no longer obsessively think about food and agonize over how much and what I should have when I am at a party or a restaurant. My insider perspective allows me to move past studies paid for by major weight loss corporations in my research, and it allows me to also hear current dieters and their experiences through the lens of my own experience with diets. The most positive reviews of diets often mirror the thoughts I had when I was in the middle of dieting programs and believed that I had accomplished health and self-actualization by losing weight through dieting.

Adams et al. also discuss another benefit of having an insider perspective in autoethnographic research. “Autoethnography also provides insight into social experiences that we *cannot* observe directly, because the experiences occur in their own time, uninterrupted by a researcher’s presence” (32). The authors then explain that events like self-disclosure of identity are too spontaneous and private to be recreated by an experiment, and they are also too private to occur in front of outside researchers. My perspective has allowed me to recall group meetings with other dieters from when I regularly attended meetings as a fellow dieter and to experience the creative process of putting together productions with other theatre practitioners, in addition to my own private experience of sitting down and writing my full-length solo performance. As an insider, I can also access and write about those moments that organically occurred between my director, Xiomara Cornejo, and me during the rehearsal and rewriting process for “Bird Song.”

Adams et al. assert that “autoethnographers *intentionally* use personal experience to create *nuanced, complex, and comprehensive* accounts of cultural norms, experiences, and practices” (33). I have already used my own experiences to critique the diet culture I have partaken of in my solo performance scripts. In this dissertation, I critique diet culture and critique the ways in which the fat body is often neglected in both Performance Studies and Theatre.

Finally, Adams et al. describe a specific, reciprocal relationship between the autoethnographer and his/her audience:

Autoethnographers invite participants and readers/audiences to engage in the unfolding story of identities, experiences, and worlds, to creatively work through – together – what these experiences show, tell, and can mean; they treat research as a socially – and relationally – *conscious* act, and attempt to cultivate reciprocal relationships with their participants, readers, and audiences. By reciprocity, we do not mean the *exchange* of stories, experiences, or resources – a “giving back for something received” that is commonly criticized in fieldwork relationships. Instead, autoethnography seeks reciprocal *responses* from multiple audiences through *relationships* and *participation*. (34-35)

In my work with my solo performance, I have been seeking these reciprocal relationships, with the people who have worked with me in creating the performance and with audience members. As a performer, I require some form of reciprocal relationship with my audience; I actively sought to create this type of relationship with the audiences who attended “Bird Song.” Several audience members had formed a relationship with the character of Tooka during previous performances, and this relationship manifested in

their participation in the full-length performance. New audience members could form a connection with my characters through my performance.

Here I refer to Carolyn Ellis's full definition of autoethnography in *The Ethnographic I*:

"*Autoethnography* refers to writing about the personal and its relationship to culture. It is an autobiographical genre of writing and research that displays multiple layers of consciousness," I read from my notes. "Back and forth autoethnographers gaze: First they look through an ethnographic wide angle lens, focusing outward on social and cultural aspects of their personal experience; then, they look inward, exposing a vulnerable self that is moved by and may move through, refract, and resist cultural interpretations. As they zoom backward and forward, inward and outward, distinctions between the personal and cultural become blurred, sometimes beyond distinct recognition." (Ellis 37-38)

In my work on "Bird Song," I constantly moved back and forth between the culture I live and partake in and my own experiences and thoughts. My cultural and social experiences influence my analysis of my own experience and are intricately bound with my experience; at the same time, my "vulnerable self" (37), made manifest in the character of Tooka, can "move through, refract, and resist cultural interpretations" (37). Using this fictional character based on me, I could find the raw vulnerability of my inner self, and I continue to use Tooka as a medium through which to express the epiphanies I have experienced about the cultural and social landscape in which I live. Through viewing my experiences through a creative lens, I provide a critique of the "social and cultural aspects of [my] personal experience" (37).

Performative Writing as Method

Carolyn Ellis names several types and techniques of writing that autoethnographers employ in their work:

Usually written in first-person voice, autoethnographic texts appear in a variety of forms – short stories, poetry, fiction, novels, photographic essays, scripts, personal essays, journals, fragmented and layered writing, and social science prose. They showcase concrete action, dialogue, emotion, embodiment, spirituality, and self-consciousness. These features appear as relational and institutional stories affected by history and social structure, which themselves are dialectically revealed through actions, feelings, thoughts, and language. (38)

I use multiple modes of writing, including script, journal, and personal narrative, throughout this dissertation. Through these performative modes of writing, I “dialectically reveal” (38) the structures that have affected me in my relationship with my body, as well as the structures that have affected me as a playwright and performer. My work in theatre and my relationship with my body have affected each other, and both have been affected by the social and cultural climate in which I live. By writing performatively, I identify and critique the systems that affect me and from whose power I seek to liberate myself.

Performative writing allows me to incorporate ideas that are best expressed through the language of poetry, storytelling, or playwrighting. In *A Methodology of the Heart: Evoking Academic and Daily Life*, Ronald Pelias asserts that research is always a story. “Whenever we engage in research, we are offering a first-person narrative. Even our most traditional work is someone’s story” (Pelias 7). By writing both

autoethnographically and performatively, I embrace the storytelling aspect of my work as a scholar and integrate it with the storytelling I mentioned earlier that is a main goal of my autoethnographic work in playwriting and performance.

Fat Studies

This discipline of Fat Studies offers rich material in which the fat body is theorized. I draw on the work in Fat Studies that most directly concerns my work with solo performance and body image. Some of the broad areas of Fat Studies research that inform my work are: food and the female body, reasons people are so consistently drawn to dieting, the mental and emotional mechanisms at work in dieting, the fat body in performance, and the Fat Liberation Movement, also referred to as the Fat Acceptance Movement and the Size Acceptance Movement, which is a movement toward acceptance and the subsequent liberation of the fat body. “This liberation, according to the movement, will come through the social and political acceptance of fatness and obesity” (Mack 3).

My solo performance work concerns issues often discussed in Fat Studies, including the fat female body, transgressions of societal norms, and the health debate surrounding the fat body. This field is interdisciplinary, and entering a dialogue within this field allows me to maintain an interdisciplinary approach to my writing. In this section, I discuss the Fat Studies literature that I have used to inform my writing about the fat female body. In this section, I also include texts that, though not categorized as belonging to Fat Studies, inform my discussion of the female body on stage.

In *Unbearable Weight: Feminism, Western Culture, and the Body*, Susan Bordo, while not specifically focusing on fat women, does focus on the bodies of women and the

reading of those bodies by the surrounding culture. Bordo explores issues such as the racially biased treatment of women in advertising, and the societal expectation that all women look like thin white women to be considered beautiful. Though she does not focus her book on fatness, this book does provide a lens through which to view discrimination against fat women and the ways in which their bodies transgress societal expectations for beauty and submissiveness. These transgressions are particularly striking when they are carried out on stage in front of audiences.

Sandra Lee Bartky's essay "Foucault, Femininity, and the Modernization of Patriarchal Power," from the published collection of essays titled *The Politics of Women's Bodies: Sexuality, Appearance, and Behavior*, provides a foundation for understanding the ways in which women are coerced into adhering to societal expectations for attractiveness. As her basis for understanding this pressure on women, Bartky uses Michel Foucault's concept of docile bodies, exploring how women are expected to create docile bodies that respond to their discipline through such practices as exercising, dieting, and wearing cosmetics. Although Bartky does not specifically focus on fatness in women, her essay does provide a basis for understanding the ways in which fat female bodies transgress social mores. In the following chapters, I explore ways that I have transgressed social norms and tried to liberate myself from living in a docile body.

In her essay "Social Drama in the Spectacle of Femininity: The Performance of Weight Loss in the Weight Watchers' Program," Lesa Lockford compares the performance of weight loss with Victor Turner's concept of social drama. She argues that weight loss occurs because of a crisis that must be redressed, thus taking the woman who is losing weight through the initial stages of social drama. However, as Lockford explains

later in her essay, this social drama does not reach the stage of reintegration. The formerly fat body is constantly under surveillance, to ensure that weight is not regained; alternatively, many bodies become fat again after initial weight loss. This article foregrounds the issues inherent in dieting, from a Fat Studies perspective. Besides having useful information and analysis of diet culture, this provides a model for integrating Fat Studies and Performance Studies concepts. I explore the process of attempting to reintegrate myself through writing and performance after going through a different process: giving up dieting.

In “Foucault Goes to Weight Watchers,” Cressida T. Heyes uses Foucault to investigate the effects of Weight Watchers specifically, and diet programs generally, on women who try to lose weight. Heyes’s analysis addresses the pathologizing of fat, looking at why women try to lose weight. She also provides an illuminating perspective to the experience of dieting and why women continue to do it if it does not work in the long term. Heyes argues that diet programs promote self-care and enable women to feel empowered as they take control of their food intake and participate in behaviors that are ostensibly self-care behaviors. This article provides an interesting lens through which to view dieting and insight into the pleasant feelings women may experience while dieting. This article informed my writing of “Bird Song”; after reading it, I considered the reasons I spent so many years dieting and ignoring the fact that I always gained the weight back quickly. Consequently, I incorporated into “Bird Song” the ambiguity of my position in relation to dieting. I might have given up dieting, but there were things I had enjoyed about it. I wove that enjoyment and the things I missed about dieting into “Bird Song.”

In “Review: Trail of Blood: Celebration and Capitulation in Eve Ensler's ‘The Good Body’ and Elizabeth Ellis's ‘One Size Fits Some,’” Milbre Burch focuses on the solo performances of two women: a fat woman and a non-fat woman who experiences some dissatisfaction with her body. Burch explores the differences between these performers and their use of their bodies in performance. Ensler, while exploring the effects of aging on her body and her attempts to love herself, also uses her body to sell copies of her work, using a commercialized beauty ideal to her advantage. Ellis, however, openly uses her fatness to transgress social expectations in her performances. This article provides a possible model for critique of live performances of fatness. I approach my work differently, however, because I view the fat body through a different lens from the one used in Burch’s article. There is a pathological view of fatness implicit in Burch’s article, encapsulated in this interview question she posed to Elizabeth Ellis: “In our interview, I asked Ellis how she balances the mental health of being satisfied with her size and the physical health issues embodied in obesity?” (Burch 156). I do not assume that my fatness carries with it the health risks that my culture warns against. Instead, I view fatness as a state of physical being, and lifestyle choices as leading to health or illness, not fatness or thinness as leading to health or lack thereof. I use the concepts of fat liberation and Health at Every Size, “an alternative public health model for people of all sizes” (Burgard 42), to frame my discussion of my fat body and my solo performance work, and to situate my work within Fat Studies.

Sharrell Luckett’s article, "*Young Gifted and Fat: Performing Transweight Identities*," provides an overview of her project of performing the self as a thin person, after having lived as a fat person for most of her life. This article focuses on the issues of

integrating the fat self and the thin self into a whole person, reconciling both identities. This article provides a good model for discussing the fat self and thin self. Part of my discussion is the positioning of myself in the work, as a woman who spent a good portion of my adult life in periods of thinness and averageness before stopping my incessant dieting and settling into a fat body. However, I go in the opposite direction of Lockett's work. While she describes the process of transitioning into a smaller body, I describe the process of transitioning into acceptance of my fat body. I lived the transition into a smaller body, several times, and the transition back into my previous size, before I decided to stop dieting. I write from the point of view of someone who has periodically experienced thin privilege and ultimately chosen to stop seeking thinness.

In her book, *Revolting Bodies? The Struggle to Redefine Fat Identity*, Kathleen LeBesco presents the issues and obstacles that fat people face in this culture, along with suggestions for ways to change the culture into a more body positive environment. Her approach is firmly rooted in body positivity, challenging notions of fatness as problematic or unhealthy. This book introduces organized movements promoting fat acceptance, such as NAAFA (National Association to Advance Fat Acceptance) and the Fat Underground. LeBesco suggests, with her title and her writing, that fatness can start a revolution, making fat people agents of societal change. She discusses the performance of the fat female body in everyday life and the possibilities of creating revolution through the fat body. LeBesco's book is important to my research, because she speaks about the representation of the fat female body, and she also speaks about the history of ways in which our culture has looked at and thought about the female body. Because fatness is such a visible feature, and I am highly visible as a fat performer, this research helps me to

situate my solo performance work within a larger dialogue. LeBesco's work enables me to speak to the way female bodies perform on stage and how these performances are read based on audience members' perceptions of those bodies. I also use this work as inspiration for my own way of revolting, with my body in performance and with my body of writing.

Bodies Out of Bounds: Fatness and Transgression, a collection of Fat Studies essays edited by Kathleen LeBesco and Jana Evans Braziel, offers multiple perspectives on the fat body from the field of Fat Studies. Various essays from this volume inform my work with my dissertation, offering perspectives on fatness and specifically fatness on stage. The authors explore multiple perspectives on fatness, looking at fat bodies through mediums such as visual art, literature, television, film, and live performance. The book presents a picture of how society has viewed and continues to view the fat body, and how these perspectives influence and are influenced by various art forms. Specific essays within this volume enable me to situate my work within Fat Studies and articulate my own perspective as a fat woman and consumer of culture and art.

The first essay from this work that plays an important role in situating my work within the larger context of Fat Studies is "Fighting Abjection: Representing Fat Women," by Le'a Kent. Like Kent, "[m]y interest in these questions is not, of course, strictly academic" (Kent 131). While Kent does not focus on theatrical performance in this essay, she does describe an experience like my own, of eventually coming to accept her body and stopping dieting after several years of trying to lose weight. Though I do not have a diagnosed eating disorder (dieting is not officially considered an eating disorder), I did spend many years dieting, and like Kent, found myself

ultimately ending up in a body most fat activists would place on the small end of “fat” (fat enough to suffer street harassment, but thin enough not to suffer medical harassment—fat enough to have to shop in special stores, but thin enough that those stores can still be found in shopping malls), I’ve gone across borders my teenage self could not imagine. (131)

In this essay, after situating herself as a fat woman, Kent discusses the representation of fat women in media and ways to push back against that representation. Though I had a similar experience of working to maintain a thin body before accepting a fat body, I am choosing to focus on my fat body on stage in a theatrical show and the process of writing and rehearsing that show, instead of focusing on the media Kent chooses, which consists mainly of magazine photos and art.

The next few essays I discuss are found in the final section of this collection, subtitled “Deconstructing the Carnavalesque, Grotesque, and Other Configurations of Corpulence.” These essays delve into the performance of fatness, discussing the association audiences often make between fatness and the carnivalesque and grotesque. The chapters specifically addressing the connections between fatness and the carnivalesque resonate with me more now than when I first read this collection, after having performed “Bird Song” and collected survey responses to my performances. One response, from the only participant who chose to remain anonymous, can be better understood through the connections between fatness and carnival. In the midst of a response that reads for several pages, the participant declares: “Ditto the carnivalesque presentation (as at the start)--because it seemed to introduce an element of self-mockery that never left, and that undermined other elements of the exploration of the self-as-bird”

(anonymous, March 12, 2016). This statement follows another statement declaring a different aspect of the show “off-putting,” meaning that this participant found the “carnavalesque presentation” off-putting as well. I was confused when I read this response, and the declaration that the beginning of my show was carnivalesque was one of the moments of confusion for me, because I did not intend my script or my performance to be carnivalesque, and none of the other participants seemed to find my performance carnivalesque. I speculated that perhaps this audience member had not experienced the weight loss meetings and encountered the meeting leaders who inspired the beginning of “Bird Song” and misinterpreted what I had presented as not being as truthful as it was. However, in retrospect, I can see the association between this audience member’s perception and the theoretical work in *Bodies Out of Bounds*. Using the lens of Fat Studies to view participant surveys and conversations with audience members illuminates the sometimes-confusing array of thoughts they have shared with me.

Sharon Mazer explores the performance of the female fat body at an actual carnival in “‘She’s So Fat...’: Facing the Fat Lady at Coney Island’s Sideshow by the Seashore.” She explores and analyzes a carnival performance by Katy Dierlam, performing with the stage name “Helen Melon.” Mazer describes and critiques a performance she attended, analyzing both the performance itself and the audience’s response in the moment to Dierlam’s performance as a fat woman. Mazer describes Dierlam’s gaze back at the spectator:

By mimicking and mocking the stock phrases of ridicule and pity generally left to behind-the-hand snickerings, Melon/Dierlam appears to demand that we reconsider what it means to be both human and female in a world where

appearance frequently supersedes and, indeed, effaces presence. Moreover, by telling us she has “heard it all before” and articulating the shrieks, taunts, and condescension her appearance regularly provokes, she not only preempts our responses, she also reverses the lens of her performance. Our reactions to her become transparent as clichés, our positions as spectators characterized as cultural stereotypes. Her character is no longer in question; ours might be. The anticipated exchange—spectators free to stare (even jeer) at a passive Fat Lady—is abrogated. (Mazer 260)

In “Bird Song,” I too turned the gaze back on the audience, choosing to deliver lines directly to them that people in my life had said to me. This forced us to engage with one another; I had to embrace the discomfort of these interactions, even as my body and heart revolted against becoming the oppressor. I took a different approach from the Melon performance, choosing to honor the gravity of the jeers and “advice” I had received. This relationship with the audience is something I explore in my analysis of my performance.

Another essay in this collection that addresses the carnivalesque is Angela Stukator’s “‘It’s Not Over Until the Fat Lady Sings:’ Comedy, the Carnavalesque, and Body Politics.” Stukator discusses the societal and cultural forces that make fat women the butt of jokes and consistently cast fat women in this role. She argues that fat women are seen as disobedient and unruly because of their size, greedily consuming, making them targets for jokes. Stukator focuses on film representations of fat women, analyzing these representations and how they interact with culture. Fat women are relegated to specific roles; Stukator describes these roles in comedic films as typically being “mother/mammy, spinster, cultural other, or female buddy” (Stukator 200). All film

comedy pertains to the fat woman's body in some manner, per the definition Stukator has created for comedy. Further delving into the connections between carnival and fatness, Stukator explains that the fat body holds ambiguity in its meaning, because of its size:

Bakhtin uses the material body to represent the dispersion and multiplicity of a model social system: the grotesque body is multiple, bulging, open, the body becoming, the body in process. While his grotesque body is not related to an individuated ego, it has an uncanny affinity with women, particularly fat, pregnant, and old women. . . .

In contemporary mainstream comedy, the spectacle of the fat woman epitomizes Bakhtin's grotesque body and its functions as a symbol of ambivalence. She is constructed as disgusting and delightful, attractive and repulsive, normal and deviant. (202)

Though Stukator is discussing representation of fat women in film, her analysis elucidates the representation and reception of fat women on stage in theatrical productions, as well. As I discussed previously, the theoretical groundwork of this essay facilitates my own understanding of the response I received that declared the beginning of "Bird Song" to be carnivalesque. I can also make connections between this essay and the anonymous participant's uneasiness with what they perceived to be contradictory ideas and states of being within "Bird Song." My performance reflected the ambiguities of being a fat woman who thinks fondly of the experience of dieting yet does not want to diet; my alter ego Tooka was at once powerful and vulnerable. Layering these ambiguous ideas with the ambiguities that I physically embody as a fat woman, an audience member,

who is perhaps not aware of the cultural influences working within them, could find it difficult to reconcile the multiple facets of *Tooka* and of “Bird Song.”

The next essay from this collection that is of interest is “Fatties on Stage: Feminist Performances” by Petra Kuppers. Kuppers argues that the fat female body is always read as being out of control, lacking agency instead of claiming it. This reading of the fat body is always present, and the fat performer must fight against it to be heard, because their very physical presence is a performance. “Their size is already performance, prior to any staging of it” (Kuppers 278). In developing “Bird Song,” I considered the performance of my body on stage. What would be the implications of my size? As I worked on my script and reworked it during the rehearsal process, I was aware of and nervous about the possibility of my body reading in preconceived ways for audience members, in ways that had not concerned me when I was an average, sometimes thin, sized performer during my dieting years.

In her book, *Female Bodies on the American Stage: Enter Fat Actress*, Jennifer-Scott Mobley outlines the ways that fat actresses have been represented on stage. Her definition of fat seems to encompass any body size that is larger than what is considered a normal size for the female body in theatre. As Mobley describes in her introduction, her working definition of what constitutes a fat body includes multiple body types and ways of being fat:

I am also keenly aware that fat is deeply subjective; an individual’s definition of what visually constitutes a fat person varies significantly relative to their race, culture, socioeconomic status, and personal aesthetic. Thus I position fat as fluid and inclusive of any woman’s body that is considered excessive or somehow

outside the standard of American society's perceptions of normal or neutral, whether it is considered "overweight" or "oversize." This "more-than-ness" might include a woman who is of above-average height, broad shouldered, thick waisted, or large breasted, to someone you might describe as "big boned," "chunky," "zaftig," or simply fat. In this respect, fat encompasses a range of nonnormative body types. Moreover, I purposefully avoid the words *obese* and *overweight* because of their implied medical connotations and (frequently inaccurate) health-value assessments. (Mobley 3)

By Mobley's standards, a fat actress could be a size ten. My body, which is the centerpiece of the solo performance about which I write, would be considered a fat body by non-actress standards – a size 20, at 5'2". While her examination of theatrical standards for the female body is fascinating and helpful, I go one step further and investigate a performance involving a fat, unapologetic female body that would be considered fat by standards outside the theatre.

Like Mobley, I will be using the word "fat" as a descriptor for my body and referring to fat bodies, in lieu of using other medicalized terms, such as obese or overweight. However, because I am focused on my own solo performance, my definition of fat pertains to my own body, which would likely be considered fat by most people's definitions in my culture, whereas bodies that are tall or broad shouldered, but otherwise slender, might not meet most people's criteria for being considered fat. Besides having a body that is not considered a normal size for being on stage, at least as a character my own age, I also have a body that has been subjected to street harassment, and I am bombarded daily with assurances from the media and from BMI charts – which doctors in

my culture continue to use – that I am not healthy. I face obstacles in other areas of my life beyond my performance on stage. Furthermore, my work differs from Mobley’s because I am focused on my own solo performance and she discusses several plays and playwrights in her book, most of which are plays written for the theatre, released from the playwright’s artistic control and performed by multiple actors. Our methods also differ. By using autoethnography, I offer a new, sharply focused perspective to Fat Studies about the fat woman on stage.

A Bird with a Plan: A Blueprint

In terms of general structure, I adopt an approach like that of E. Patrick Johnson in *Sweet Tea: Black Gay Men of the South* and several of the pieces in *Voices Made Flesh*. In both these works, sections are devoted to either scripts or interviews, allowing the performance work of the author and the words of participants to stand apart from the rest of the written text. I incorporate passages that are script, poetry, or sections of my solo performance scripts and writing into the rest of my writing. I also use as a model Carolyn Ellis’s structure in *Revision*, in which she weaves together characters, dialogues, and events, and bookends passages with analysis. For my own writing, I use performative writing to comprise the bulk of my dissertation, with passages of analysis to guide the reader from one chapter to the next.

The main thread that connects all the ideas I explore is the account of the progression of the Tooka bird. Besides being the main character in “Bird Song,” she provides a creative and personal foundation for using autoethnography as research method and a tool for expressing that research. The bird also symbolizes my own progression through giving up dieting, improving my body image, and finding a voice to

speaking about my experiences. I begin with an account of the circumstances that inspired me to begin to develop a character who could speak for me, then follow that narrative through to her development alongside my research in dieting and Fat Studies, to her continued development for performance, to the point at which she speaks, and conclude the through line of that narrative with an account of ways in which the bird can inspire others to find their own voices in relationship to their bodies and health.

In Chapter 2, “The Bird Waits,” I continue the narrative thread of the bird as a character waiting for me to discover her and use her to find and use my voice. This chapter establishes the urgency of speaking about body image and dieting in response to the cultural pressure to be thin and/or perpetually diet. Using both ethnography and autoethnography, I focus on my experiences with dieting, body image, and intuitive eating. I discuss my own experiences with dieting and body image, making connections to cultural beliefs about fatness and women’s bodies. By grounding the discussion in my own narrative, I draw connections between the experiences the diet industry encourages and the impact these experiences can have on girls and women such as myself. As part of my narrative, I use ethnographic research, in the form of quotes I have collected from women leading and involved in dieting programs, conversations with others about dieting and body image, materials I have collected from diet programs, articles, books, and media advertisements about the body and dieting. In this chapter, I join the larger discussion of Fat Studies, weaving information and ideas from that field through my narrative. This chapter provides the autoethnographic research that acts as a foundation for my solo performance. I also clarify why this performance is important and establish a

foundation for the reader to understand the experiences and diets I reference in my script and research.

Chapter 3, “The Bird Speaks,” discusses process of writing and performing pieces featuring the Tooka bird. This chapter has as its focus the process of writing and performing a full-length script. The narrative of the bird continues as I explore the ways in which she spoke to and through me during the process of writing and rewriting the script. In addition to my autoethnographic discussion of writing and performing, I discuss: audience reactions to my full-length performance, based on ethnographic research collected during the run of this performance; my director’s reactions to the work and my subsequent revisions; the reactions of friends and family that informed revisions of the show; and ways that my work parallels and differs from other plays and solo performances.

Chapter 4, “The Bird Sings,” introduces and includes the full-length script of “Bird Song,” with an analysis of the script and the continued narrative of the bird and her place in my work. Including this script is essential to this dissertation, as it gives the reader the opportunity to experience what I have written and performed in its original script form, it provides the main tool for allowing the reader to experience the bird’s voice, and it provides a performative product based on my ethnographic research in body image and dieting. In this chapter, it is necessary for me to expand upon parts of the script; this expansion consists of an analysis of what I wrote and why, as well as the inclusion of sections I deleted to meet the time constraints of live performance.

The Conclusion, “The Bird Calls,” offers a call to action. At this point in the narrative of the bird, I explore the ways in which Tooka continues to call me to action

and calls others to action, promoting a new vision of health and self-love. By filling a gap in Performance Studies through offering a discussion of the fat female body in performance, I provide a much-needed addition to Performance Studies. With my solo performance, I offer a way to rethink the fat body and health. Seeing a happy, fat performer, who moves fluidly around the stage and through multiple identities, provides audience members the opportunity to see my body, and by extension their own bodies, from a fresh perspective. “Bird Song” and this dissertation are my acts of transgression, my staging of my own political protest against the systems that keep us dieting and hating ourselves, and invitations for others to revolt.

A Note: A Bird Speaking in Today’s Climate

It is a dangerous time to be a bird. In a practical sense, being a bird in the current climate means dealing with the effects of global warming and the unpredictability of changing weather patterns. Waiting too long to migrate could mean certain death. Migrating too soon could mean missing out on food or taking other birds’ food and shelter (Press Association). With government officials refusing to acknowledge global warming, it is unlikely that these dangers to birds will decrease in the near future.

Being a Tooka bird in the current political climate is quite dangerous. As government officials seek to reverse advances made in healthcare reform, I imagine a world in which I, with my fat body, would be denied essential care because of my placement on the BMI chart. Would my fatness be considered a preexisting condition when insurance companies are once again allowed to base coverage on so-called preexisting conditions? Though I do not seek treatment for my body size, I am aware that insurance companies and healthcare providers often blame health problems on the size of

the patient. Being a fat patient is a scary prospect, indeed. By being a Tooka bird, I take a risk everyday.

The Bird Takes Shape

There is a bird lurking beneath my skin. She is using her talons, talons of silk, to push at me from the inside and insist I let her breathe. I expand, my heart swelling and my skin opening to the air. The bird inside me begins to take shape, to round her body, to grow luxurious feathers. She is moving her head from side to side, seeing my insides, curious about my joy and my pain. My heart again swells as her laughter fills me, bubbling inside my throat. She begins to dance, tapping at my veins and tickling my organs with her tiny silk talons, brushing her feathers softly, soothingly against my hurt places, healing me from my insides. I laugh and dance with her as she dances inside me, moving my limbs and tapping my feet with renewed joy.

She whispers to me, and I listen. Wait, she whispers. Wait. I wait. It is not yet time, she whispers. We wait. We watch. We learn. Slowly we grow stronger together. The bird waits.

The Show Begins

(Tooka sits and swings her legs. She looks out at the audience.)

TOOKA: That was a nice prologue. Now we know why we're all here. Would you like to know more? Stay in your seats. The main part of the show is about to begin. I hope you like it.

(Lights brighten on the stage. There are desks full of paper behind Tooka. She stands and walks to one of the desks.)

Chapter 2: The Bird Waits

The Bird's Research

(Tooka sits behind one of the desks, going through papers.)

TOOKA: This is a lot of bird papers. Did you ever see a bird's cage get lined? Well, this is a lot more paper. But these papers were needed before I could speak to everyone here.

This is research and planning. Would you like to learn more about what I found out?

Good! On with the show!

The Bird Waits and Watches

I researched dieting and body image for a month before sitting down to begin writing a script I simply titled "Body Image." The script that would become "Bird Back" bore that title as a document in my computer in the days prior to submitting it for a class project and later performing it.

Why do I need a character named the Tooka bird to speak for me about dieting, body image, and health? Why is it important to speak about these issues? I argued with myself several times against the importance of writing and performing "Bird Song" and the pieces leading up to it. Yet, the Fat Studies and science literature research I completed told me that speaking about diets and bodies was important. If I could convince someone to begin a journey away from dieting and toward health, they might avoid early death by organ failure. This early death is a possibility for dieters, and it poses a higher risk for those who receive weight loss surgery.

The Female Body: Holding it In or Else!

The diet culture that encouraged me to diet for several years as an adolescent and adult also demands that my body be silent and invisible, that I hold it all in – my body,

my voice, and my identity. Yet, my autoethnographic research demanded that I put my body on stage and speak about diet culture and body image. The cultural norms I discuss at length in this chapter demanded that I act in response, and as a theatre artist I knew I must act by staging a revolt in performance. In putting my body on stage and staging my revolt in performance in “Bird Song,” I was taking a risk by making a spectacle of myself.

Making a spectacle out of oneself seemed a specifically feminine danger. The danger was of an exposure. Men, I learned somewhat later in life, “exposed themselves,” but that operation was quite deliberate and circumscribed. For a woman, making a spectacle out of herself had more to do with a kind of inadvertency and loss of boundaries: the possessors of large, aging, and dimpled thighs displayed at the public beach, of overly rouged cheeks, of a voice shrill in laughter, or of a sliding bra strap – a loose, dingy bra strap especially – were at once caught out by fate and blameworthy. It was my impression that these women had done something wrong, had stepped, as it were, into the limelight out of turn – too young or too old, too early or too late – and yet anyone, any *woman*, could make a spectacle out of herself if she was not careful. (Russo 213)

In my own life, I feared making a spectacle of myself. To have a fat body, especially if I loved that fat body, would be to make a spectacle of myself. As a fat woman and as a performer, I would need to overcome this fear of making a spectacle of myself to write and perform “Bird Song.” Part of overcoming this fear involved uncovering and critiquing essential parts of diet culture, first as I researched and then in writing and performance. To make a difference, I would need to purposely make a spectacle of

myself. In this chapter, I interrogate the diet culture that required I make a spectacle of myself to promote and make change.

My body could be considered grotesque, per the definition outlined in Mary Russo's "Female Grotesques: Carnival and Theory":

The grotesque body is the open, protruding, extended, secreting body, the body of becoming, process, and change. The grotesque body is opposed to the classical body, which is monumental, static, closed, and sleek, corresponding to the aspirations of bourgeois individualism; the grotesque body is connected to the rest of the world. (219)

My own body extends beyond the constraints that diet culture would require of it, taking up space and defying the standards embodied by models and actresses in film and on television. Simply performing in my body would be considered making a spectacle of myself, putting a body on stage with parts that extend and protrude. In writing my performance, I also made my body a site for becoming, process, and change. I moved through multiple identities and ways of being in "Bird Song," consciously making a spectacle for my audience of my changing, fluid body. Making a spectacle of myself in this way was a direct challenge to the diet culture that demanded I try to constrain my body to a smaller size and try to hide my current body until I could change it.

I raised and interrogated issues of the regulation of my body by performing, by making a spectacle of myself, similarly to the bodies Rebecca Schneider discusses:

any overt manipulation of the gendered/colored/classed body against dominant codes delimiting those bodies raises the issue of the social regulation of the appropriate and the inappropriate. Arguably, any body bearing female markings is

automatically shadowed by the history of that body's signification, its delimitation as a signifier of sexuality – either explicitly (literally) in porn, or implicitly (symbolically) in art and popular representation. (Schneider 17)

As a woman, my body already bears a history of being objectified and sexualized, regardless of my size. As a fat woman, performing and moving my body in various ways, I could push back against the social regulations Schneider mentions. In my everyday life, my body is marked as female and therefore objectified, whether it be by the man walking down the street who tells me I'm smokin' hot or the young men driving by who yell derogatory slurs about my size. Part of what I investigate in this chapter are the cultural codes and ideas that encourage strangers to objectify my body and try to deny me ownership of my body through their acts of speech. Some of these ideas are related to health and some are related to the aesthetic regulation of bodies.

This regulation leads to the problems inherent in diet culture, some of which are outlined in this chapter, and to diagnosable eating disorders. Schneider discusses the tendency for women and girls to turn to eating disorders (or dieting) in their quest to reflect the desires of patriarchal culture:

The effort to emulate disembodiment can be seen across the board in women's reactions to phallogocentrism: both in the literal self-starvation of teen girls leading to anorexia and bulimia and in contemporary feminist theories exploring invisibility as political practice. In feminist performance art, however, disembodiment is played out, made explicit, across the literal bodies of performers on stage who "take" the bodies of modernist dreamgirls onto

themselves *as if* they themselves were disembodied, only to wield those dreamscapes with a voluble, “in your face,” embodied vengeance. (100)

While I did not take the body of a “dreamgirl” in my performance, I did present a fully embodied performance, defying the criteria for women’s bodies and defying the expectations that a fat woman must be stationary and eager to change her body. In my performance, I made myself highly visible, engaging in physical activities that I often see presented in weight loss ads as activities in which women can engage *after* they lose weight. I also fully felt my body and remained embodied as I researched the cultural norms I discuss in this chapter, refusing to separate my mind from my body and fully feeling my bodily and emotional reactions to my research. My autoethnography, from research to performance to writing this dissertation, has been a fully embodied experience; I have stopped striving for the disembodiment Schneider names and discusses.

Fat is Unhealthy! Or is it?

On a sunny day in July of 2015, I am reading Fat Studies literature. I am saddened by the evidence of body image issues and fat phobia that run through my culture. I know that these issues affect many people, because they affect enough people that I read several essays and portions of books addressing the problems that my culture has with fat bodies and the problems that fat people in my culture have with simply living their lives. Living in a culture that values thin bodies and disparages any nonconforming body type proves difficult and, at times, deadly.

I sit in my chair, sunlight flooding the living room. My back hurts from hunching over my books, though I do not yet notice because I am too involved in my reading to

notice my body. This disembodiment is something I have perfected through dieting: I ignore my body's cues, such as hunger or pain, to accomplish a task, such as starving my body or reading for long periods without taking breaks. I learned to punish my body and ignore its needs through dieting, and I frequently fall back into that habit when I have a lot of work to do.

In my reading, I come to an essay that speaks about the death of Mama Cass. I know the myth. I do not remember my age when my mom first mentioned the rumor that Mama Cass choked to death on a ham sandwich, but I have known the story for a long time. Mama Cass was fat. I know this. I vividly recall The Mamas and The Papas song that says, "And no one's gettin' fat except Mama Cass," and later, "And everybody's gettin' fat except Mama Cass" (The Mamas & The Papas). As I write this, I take a break to find a video of a live performance of this song on PBS; I see Mama Cass, fat and beautiful, dressed in a yellow dress that falls loosely on her frame ("Creeque Alley"). I listened to this song frequently on the Oldies station that my mother loved when I was a child, and I knew the story of the ham sandwich from an early age.

As I read the essay in *Fat Shame: Stigma and the Fat Body in American Culture*, I am shocked and saddened. Amy Erdman Farrell writes:

Rumors began to spread internationally that she had died from choking on a ham sandwich, or that she died from choking on her vomit after stuffing herself with food. Ironically, Elliot had just lost eighty pounds after fasting four days a week during the previous eight months. The fatal heart attack that Elliot experienced was likely precipitated by this extreme weight loss measure. (144)

I suspect, and Farrell confirms, that her death was the result of putting too much strain on her body by starving herself of nutrients. Yet, this is not the story I was told, and it is not the story I usually hear. A year later, I am on the phone with my mother, talking about the dangers of starvation dieting and venting about the doctor who has suggested that weight loss is the most important factor in my health. I bring Mama Cass into the conversation as an example of someone whose story has been coopted and changed by a culture that fears the fat body. When I mention Mama Cass, my mom's immediate response is, "Didn't she choke on a ham sandwich?" I talk about the essay and Mama Cass's weight loss immediately preceding her death. It is a sad topic, yet I am happy to be sharing the information with my mom.

In June of 2016, Ron Lester dies. I had seen Ron Lester in multiple movies when I was a teenager. I was a junior in high school when *Varsity Blues* was released, and while I could not relate to the teenage characters in the movie, I took great pleasure in sitting through a movie focused on characters my own age. Ron Lester played Billy Bob, one of the football players in the movie, who is the subject of multiple fat jokes, including a scene in which he drinks until he vomits. When I am exploring my news feed on my Facebook account, I see a link to an article about him dying, and I click it. Maybe the article title indicates that he had weight loss surgery, and I am curious about whether the strain of weight loss surgery on his body will be mentioned. Maybe I am simply curious because I remember seeing *Varsity Blues* and enjoying it as a teenager. Whatever the reason, I click the link and am taken to a short article about Ron Lester's death. The article mentions his role in *Varsity Blues*, his weight loss surgery, his health problems, and the fact that he was engaged to be married when he died. This article is nearly

identical to the other articles I will search later when I am trying to relocate the article so I can talk about it with my partner James. Each article begins with an account of who Ron Lester was, using his role in *Varsity Blues* as a quickly identifiable role the reader will recognize. Each article then talks about his weight loss and declares that he had multiple health problems and struggled to lose weight for most of his life. Most of the articles also use a quote in which Ron Lester says that weight loss surgery killed his career. The articles all stop abruptly after mentioning his liver and kidney failure, with a closing line mentioning the name of his fiancé. Though the surgery is touted as having saved his life, a few articles mention briefly that he almost died during or immediately following his weight loss surgery. I am not surprised about his earlier brush with death, given the information I have read about the side effects of weight loss surgery in *Health at Every Size*; the side effects range from unpleasant to disgusting to debilitating to deadly. When I think about weight loss surgery, I agree with Linda Bacon's assertion that it is nothing more than dangerous cosmetic surgery. Before delving into Fat Studies and stepping back to look at my own experience with dieting and body image, I believed what I had been told: weight loss surgery was healthy, because short of diagnosed anorexia or bulimia, weight loss is always healthy. Yet, when I thought about it logically, I could not reconcile the idea of being healthy with the reality of cutting open a body and hindering its natural digestive processes. I was not surprised to read that Lester had nearly died immediately following his surgery, nor was I surprised that he had died a mere two years after going through weight loss surgery. Bacon lists nearly two pages of side effects an individual can expect from undergoing weight loss surgery, many of which are effects the surgery and subsequent weight loss are purported to prevent, such as the early onset hypertension

that weight loss surgery almost certainly guarantees will occur. Yet, despite Lester's health problems becoming deadly two years after weight loss surgery, one article I skimmed declared he died because "the physical damage caused by years of obesity couldn't be completely undone" (Deerwester). I am frustrated and saddened when I read this, afraid that there are fat people reading this who, unlike me, will accept the idea that it was not weight loss surgery that proved fatal but waiting too late to get that surgery.

Months later, I am at an appointment with a doctor who declares that I need to adopt the Paleo Diet, because he is convinced that my vegan lifestyle combined with my weight will quickly kill me. As I uncomfortably endure the meeting, he shows me pictures of himself at various weights and happily declares that he used to weigh 375 pounds and lost a lot of weight doing the Paleo Diet. I smile awkwardly and wait for him to move to a different subject. I am not visiting him because of weight concerns.

Truthfully, I am finally not concerned about my weight. Ironically, as soon as I discovered I was no longer afraid of being fat and was happy with my body and my health, doctors started expressing their concern about my weight. It was like they could sense my contentment and feared it. I am uncertain what to say to this doctor, because he has just shared his own "success" story with me and seems to genuinely believe that he is healthier and that I would also be healthier (thinner) if I only adopted this style of eating.

During our one-sided conversation, the doctor announces that on paper, I should lose about 100 pounds, but looking at me, if I lost 50 pounds I would be in great shape. I have not put myself on a scale in years, and the last time I looked at my weight, it was because another doctor excitedly showed me the numbers from the scale and informed me that I had already lost 4 pounds in 2 weeks from adopting the vegan, whole-foods

way of eating she suggested. During that appointment, the fact that I had lost that much weight in 2 weeks terrified me. I remembered numerous diets, during which a weight loss of 2 pounds in 1 week was cause for celebration. After the weight loss inevitably came the misery and loss of energy; ignoring my body's needs would begin to wear my body into exhaustion. Eventually, I would eat normally again, naturally drawn to higher fat foods to compensate for my body's starvation (Bacon Chapter 3), and then I would quickly regain all the weight I had lost and possibly gain more. After that appointment, I was scared to look at my weight again. As I sit now with this doctor, I am unaware that in a couple weeks, curiosity will overcome my fear and I will look at my weight after discovering that my BMI number has shifted lower, only to discover that losing 100 pounds would, in fact, put me at a weight that was quite unhealthy for me.

I shift uncomfortably, remembering the diet I was on for several months in my early 20s, driving my body down to a size four. The doctor is espousing a diet that sounds quite similar, with consuming high amounts of animal protein and severely cutting back on carbohydrates. I remember my misery; there had been many days on that diet when my exhaustion felt like it was weighing me down into the earth. Despite weighing so little in those days, I had felt incredibly heavy, ready to sink down into the ground like a stone. I also remember reading *Intuitive Eating* and finally understanding why I felt so miserable when I was eating that way. According to Tribole and Resch, my body was beginning to eat its own protein because I was not eating enough carbohydrates, and eating more protein could not make up for the energy I was failing to feed my body (63-64). As I have more actively ensured that I am eating an adequate amount of

carbohydrates, my energy has indeed risen and my daily activities and physical exercise have become sustainable.

I remember another doctor at a New Age expo in San Marcos, Texas. James and I attended and visited various booths at that expo. I was quite interested in the massage equipment that used electrodes to move the muscles, but the equipment was a bit too expensive for us. At that expo, we sat through a talk from a local doctor who also espoused the Paleo Diet. During his talk, I silently poked holes in his logic and wondered how many people believed him because he was a white man and sounded authoritative. Though he did not label it the same way, he did espouse the Paleo Diet. He argued that foods like potatoes and grains, two foods which regularly made me feel nourished and healthy, were not meant to be food because they were unattractive. Food, he argued, would look attractive because it would want to be eaten, like fruit and nuts. He then began talking about eating mainly animal meat, and I thought to myself, *Animals never look they want to be eaten. They always run away.* The doctor then talked about a tribe he visited, who daily ran after and caught an animal, then ate it. He talked about how healthy these people were, all because, as he argued, they ate meat, and I thought to myself, *But who runs and catches their meal every day? It's all in the grocery store.* Remembering my own difficulty with eating high amounts of animal protein and very few sources of carbohydrates, I talked to James afterward about why I thought this doctor was ridiculous. After our talk, James tried that way of eating for a while, and I continued being a vegetarian.

The doctor in front of me tells me that veganism has no scientific support, but this Paleo Diet has a lot of scientific research supporting it. Despite my being a PhD

candidate who is quite capable of looking through research, he does not offer sources I can peruse on my own, leaving me to go home later and take a quick look at the research on both veganism and the Paleo Diet. As I suspected, the doctor greatly exaggerated any health benefits of the Paleo Diet and was speaking in pure hyperbole when he announced that I would die a quick death if I continued to eat vegan.

I remember the appointment I made with a doctor more than a decade ago when I was worried about my body, while I was on that same diet with the high amounts of animal protein. I was concerned, because my menstrual cycle had been missing for five months. I knew I was not pregnant and could not be pregnant. I worried about my future fertility. Yet, I was not concerned about other symptoms, like my constant fatigue. When the doctor came into the room, we talked briefly, and I explained that I had recently lost weight because of dieting, and I was also exercising much more frequently than I had in the past. Without further questioning me about my lifestyle or showing any concern about whether I was eating enough or exercising too much, the doctor said I was probably right and prescribed birth control pills to regulate my hormones. I then left, with no discussion of my eating or exercising habits. I was, after all, within the normal weight range for my height on the BMI chart that doctors and weight loss programs have used in conversations with me. I had to be healthy, according to that chart. In BMI language, I could still be healthy after losing another ten pounds, something I fully intended to do even as I struggled with fatigue and irregular hormones.

What would happen if we as a culture began moving toward looking at measures of health that had nothing to do with weight? A recent visit to one of these doctors had that doctor lecturing me on my insulin levels, even though they are completely normal.

The belief that I needed to worry about them stemmed from a belief that the fat body is always moving toward health problems if the health problems are not already present. One of the things that I challenged with the use of my body on stage was this assumption of lack of health. I ran around the stage, sometimes dancing, sometimes mimicking weight lifting, and demonstrated that my body can move and I can sustain a highly active performance on stage. In one moment on stage, I bent forward and heaved with breath, feigning sickness, as I recovered from a “workout.” Part of what I was doing was showing the audience what they would expect would happen to a fat body in motion, though I made it clear that I was acting in that moment to highlight their own expectations and my knowledge of those expectations.

My experience with doctors and my experience with my own body have presented two contradictory ideas of health. Doctors have told me I am unhealthy because of my size, yet I continue to function as a healthy human, choices about how to deal with stress and how to care for myself trumping anything my body size would tell doctors by looking at a BMI chart or listening to assertions that fat is unhealthy. It was important to me to bring this contradiction into a performance space and show the capabilities of my current body to move dynamically and fluidly.

Power Drinks: A Meeting of Powerful Women (And a Few Men)

It is a Monday night. I have been struggling to begin Chapter 2 of my dissertation. I already finished a draft of Chapter 4, and I’m continuing to a different chapter, waiting to begin the work of editing until later. Right now, I am focusing on getting my thoughts on paper, or on the Word document. I think in a corner of my mind that I am such an

awesome writer that maybe I will look back at Chapter 4 later and discover that nothing needs rewriting.

James and I go to dinner before we are to meet friends for a drink. One of my friends has a birthday today, and drinks are imperative. So, we eat our dinner, enjoying our newly vegan lifestyle that my doctor suggested a couple months ago. I continue to be surprised by the variety of foods that plants provide, though I had long fantasized about only eating plants. When we arrived at the restaurant minutes ago, someone passing by said something about it being a “vegetarian place or something.” It is a vegetarian restaurant, and we have rediscovered it recently with renewed passion for its fresh, whole foods.

James and I talk about our days over dinner. I am feeling particularly smug and vindicated, because my body has proven to me that the OB/GYN who suggested weight loss as a viable solution for regulating my cycle was quite wrong. To my knowledge, I have not lost 10% of my body weight, yet my cycle has returned to normal, probably because I took my general practitioner’s advice to cut all animal products and processed foods from my diet. A veteran of dieting to lose weight, I know quite well that there are incredibly unhealthy things I can do to show a change on the scale, and I know that several months later I will regain that weight. Today, I am celebrating my own good judgement in immediately dropping the OB/GYN and sticking to my recent turn to veganism. I share this with James, and he and I both laugh when I casually refer to the OB/GYN by saying, “I knew that doctor was full of shit.”

We finish our dinner, and I drive us to the bar, circling twice for a parking spot after accidentally missing the bar the first time we drive down the street. Finally, we park

and walk into the bar. I have been working on parking farther away from places so that my legs get more of a workout, but tonight I park in front of the door because I can. Parking in front of the door when we are downtown is an exciting and rare occurrence, so I must seize this opportunity.

We join our group, and I send James to buy us a non-alcoholic drink. Everyone else is sipping their alcoholic slushies, and we covertly stick to our frozen virgin fruit punch. Conversation passes pleasantly for a half hour, and another person arrives. Conversation again passes pleasantly. James and I both spend most of the time listening to everyone, indulging in our own brand of introversion.

We are a group of five women and two men. I am in the company of powerful women, and I hope that I am a powerful woman by association. I am surrounded by women who are smart and driven, each pursuing her own goals.

The conversation turns to dieting. I am the only woman at the table who is not planning a new diet program, or planning to exercise for losing weight, or currently involved in either. My recent change to a vegan lifestyle was per a doctor's suggestion, and per my own concern for the environment. I know that when I gave up meat, I gave up the most popular diets from my dieting years, those high-protein (meat), low-carb diets that proliferated during my teens and twenties. I am the odd woman out, refusing to do anything with the word "weight" attached to it, while at least three of the strong women around me are planning to attend Weight Watchers, or as one sheepishly tells me, the WW.

"Okay, guys, I need your thoughts. Jenny Craig and Weight Watchers. What are the differences?"

“Well, I’m starting the WW in September. Sorry, Melissa.”

“Okay.”

“Weight Watchers costs less.”

“Yeah.”

“I’ve been doing Weight Watchers recently. They’re better now, because they’re considering macronutrients in their points, so there’s a lot more focus on health. It forces you to choose healthy foods.”

“See, when I went years ago, they were just starting the Points system, and I didn’t like it.”

“Oh, I hate Points Plus.”

“Yeah, this is a lot better. It makes you eat healthier. Things like fruits and vegetables are all free.”

“I remember that.”

“Things that have saturated fat, or sugar and alcohol, like this,” pointing to her cup, “cost more points. So, you make healthier choices.”

“What are your thoughts about the meetings?”

“Meetings?”

“Oh, no. Meetings are... I had a lot of success doing the online program, without the meetings. I don’t like doing all that.”

“I’m doing it online. I’ve been hiding the scale, and I take it out once a month to weigh myself so I don’t start getting crazy about it.”

“The thing I like about Weight Watchers is that they take your eating into the real world, and you have to make choices there. You eat real food, not like...”

“I’m doing Weight Watchers until I learn what works for me, and then I’m going to stop paying. I just want to learn healthier habits. I found this journal at Target, where you track your food and your exercise and your feelings.”

“Lately, I’ve just been eating what I want, but exercising six days a week.”

I listen as this group of powerful women discusses their new diet programs and the ways that they hope these programs will make them adopt healthy habits. Maybe it will work that way for them, I muse. For me, I quickly discovered that any program geared toward weight loss encouraged me to adopt decidedly unhealthy habits, perhaps the most innocuous of which was simply focusing on numbers of calories, or points, instead of focusing on my body’s cues that I needed more to eat or was finished. It has taken me three long years of not dieting, of exploring my body image, to be ready to jump into eating healthy whole foods as my doctor suggested; her suggestion coming after three years and not before has convinced me that I would not have been ready before now to focus on healthy foods and that, once again, divine intervention has helped me on my journey as a human.

Maybe, I think to myself, one of these women will discover the secret to finding healthy habits in a diet. I already know that, though it is rare, there are exceptions to the rule of dieters regaining weight, and maybe one of these women will be an exception. I am sad, thinking that it is unlikely, given how rare those exceptions are, that one of them is sitting with me at this table. I am torn. After reading *Health at Every Size*, I am convinced that the body is biologically opposed to dieting. There are too many safeguards against starvation, and even if the starvation, or calorie deficit, is minimal, a dieter will begin gaining weight while still in a calorie deficit (Bacon 47-48). I see the road ahead,

the initial excitement, followed by disappointment, be it sooner or later. I remember this well. I lost weight several times, each time gaining it back several months, or even a year or two, later.

I wonder whether their talk of health is an unconscious attempt to distance themselves from the truth: that all the women at this table have been pressured from birth to conform to the thin ideal and no amount of education or work on ourselves is going to erase the effects of that pressure. Three years into my body image journey, I still have those thoughts that maybe I will lose weight and be thinner, though after three years I have learned to accept that those thoughts are about looking thinner and not about my health. Even now, using my blood pressure as a gauge for my health, I secretly hope I am losing weight. My partner is the only person with whom I have shared that hope, though I hide behind my desire to fit into a size 16 dress in my closet when I speak to him, because I think that it is wrong of me to want to lose weight. In fact, I know that wanting to be thinner for the sake of being thinner is unhealthy, but I cannot rid myself of that desire; I can only live with it and cope with it.

Maybe it will be different for my friends. Maybe they are only concerned about their health. Maybe.

From the Ashes: A Bird Waits to be Born

(Melissa slowly gets out of her car. She has a weigh-in, and she has just finished another 2-hour workout at the gym. She walks slowly, the weight of exhaustion making her feel like she is sinking into the ground. This feeling will become her monitor in years to come, letting her know that she has neglected to eat or has not been eating enough nutrient-heavy foods.

She enters the building, sighing wearily. She will talk to her weight loss counselor, but she knows from experience that it is unlikely her counselor will have any useful suggestions. They seem to all work in a vacuum, espousing treatments that look good on paper but do not work well with actual bodies. She remembers the last such conversation with her counselor well. Flashback:

Melissa sits in a chair across from her counselor, who holds her chart. She has been struggling with painful hunger pangs, but she is reluctant to do anything to slow her quick weight loss.)

COUNSELOR: How have you been doing? Have you been eating all your food?

MELISSA: Yeah. I guess I get hungry a lot, but that's probably normal, right?

COUNSELOR: You don't want to let yourself get hungry, because then you'll eat too much or cheat. Try eating some extra celery during the day. It has a lot of fiber, so it'll keep you feeling full longer.

MELISSA: *(skeptical)* Okay.

(Cut to a different flashback. Melissa goes into the center and greets the staff, then expresses her concerns about this weigh-in.)

MELISSA: I just got my period, and I usually weigh more when I do, like about three pounds, so I don't think the scale's going to be accurate today.

(A manager, obviously pregnant yet still quite thin, smiles conspiratorially at Melissa and motions her to join her.)

MANAGER: Come with me.

(Melissa follows the manager to a backroom, where some supplies are stored. She feels giddy, wondering what secrets wait in the backroom. The manager pulls out a large jug

of apple cider vinegar and a small paper cup. She pours vinegar into the cup and hands it to Melissa.)

MANAGER: Drink this.

(Melissa takes the cup and brings it toward her mouth, wrinkling her nose at the strong smell of the vinegar and wondering how she will make herself drink straight vinegar.)

MANAGER: Just do it fast, like a shot.

(Melissa downs the cider quickly, wincing at the burn in her throat as it goes down. When she is done, she coughs and draws in harsh breaths, trying to make herself breathe through the nasty burn and aftertaste of the vinegar. A burning begins in her stomach, the vinegar interacting with her already overactive stomach acid. Though this is painful, she is pleased to have been let into the manager's exclusive club in the backroom, pleased to have completed this ritual of liquid fire.)

MANAGER: *(smiling)* Anytime you're bloated, you can just do a shot of apple cider vinegar, and that'll help your water retention. Let's go weigh.

(Cut to a different flashback. Melissa sits in the same seat as the first flashback, with the same counselor. She is now smaller.)

COUNSELOR: You've been drinking a lot of water?

MELISSA: Yeah, sometimes I get really thirsty and I need more.

COUNSELOR: The thing is, if you do that, you retain more water, and it messes up your weight on the scale. Try to drink the same amount every day. If you feel like you need ten glasses or twelve glasses, drink that every day, but don't go back and forth, one day ten glasses, one day eight glasses, one day twelve glasses. Stop at the same number each day.

You can also try drinking Crystal Light if you're still thirsty, and that won't mess up your water intake.

MELISSA: *(obviously dubious)* Okay.

(Cut to a different flashback. Melissa sits in the same seat, with a different, older counselor. She is now even smaller.)

MELISSA: I've been eating a little piece of chocolate for one of my starches the past few days.

COUNSELOR: *(laughing uneasily)* That's not good. You shouldn't do that.

(This program has had her eating two large servings of animal protein each day, two teaspoons of oil, three servings of vegetables, two servings of fruits, and two servings of reduced-calorie starches, such as diet bread, for the past eight months. Melissa can tell from her utter exhaustion that this diet is not enough to sustain her and provide her energy to make it from one day to the next. She is tired all the time, and only her willpower gets her through her long daily workouts. She stopped getting her period three months ago, but because she is a size four instead of a size zero, she does not believe that this diet could be the cause.

She enters and sits in a chair to wait. At the counter, she can hear her regular counselor speaking with another client. She wants to roll her eyes at the conversation she overhears, but that conversation is not for her.)

CLIENT: So, what about lifting weights? I'm thinking about doing that for part of my exercise.

COUNSELOR: The thing with lifting weights is, you tend to actually gain weight, so we don't recommend doing that. We recommend sticking to cardio and following the eating plan.

(Melissa wants to laugh. She has been lifting weights for several years, and she knows that, while the scale might show a gain, that's only because muscle weighs more than fat. In fact, her weight loss has probably actually accelerated along with her weight lifting these past few months, but the scale shows that it has slowed down. She wants to see if she can lose another ten pounds, get to that elusive 105 lbs. she has dreamed of, but it will take time. Finally, the client leaves, and she stands to talk to the counselor.)

MELISSA: Hi.

COUNSELOR: Hi, Melissa.

MELISSA: I have a concern.

COUNSELOR: Okay, shoot.

MELISSA: I feel like I'm not getting enough to eat. I feel tired all the time.

COUNSELOR: Are you eating all your protein?

MELISSA: Yes.

COUNSELOR: Drinking all your water?

MELISSA: Yes.

COUNSELOR: You might want to try some extra celery.

MELISSA: I did, but it didn't work. I still feel hungry.

COUNSELOR: *(losing patience)* I don't know what to tell you. You know if you're hungry and need something extra during the day. You can try eating an extra piece of cheese. That should work, because of the protein.

MELISSA: Okay, I'll try that.

(The scene transitions to the next day. Melissa sits in front of the TV, using a TV tray and a pad of paper to do some calculations. She finishes the calculations and stares at the number. It reads "900". Her heart begins beating wildly in her chest. She runs a shaky hand over her cheek. She has only been eating 900 calories per day for the last nine months. She assumed she was getting 1200 calories per day, the recommendation she usually hears from diet programs. Tears threaten to spill from her eyes.

The scene cuts to Melissa sitting with her mom.)

MELISSA: (*scared*) Mom? I calculated the calories I've been eating with Quick Weight Loss.

MOM: Oh, yeah?

MELISSA: Mom, I've only been eating about 900 calories per day.

MOM: Yeah.

MELISSA: That's really low.

MOM: I think when I did the Diet Center it was about 1,000 calories per day. This eating plan is a lot like that was.

MELISSA: I don't think I should do this anymore.

MOM: Well, I've certainly fallen off the wagon myself.

MELISSA: Maybe I should try that Dr. Phil diet.

MOM: You want to do that? I was thinking about doing it, too.

MELISSA: It's probably a lot healthier.

MOM: He lost a lot of weight.

MELISSA: You have the book, right?

MOM: But of course.

MELISSA: Okay, maybe we can start it on Monday?

MOM: But what will we eat tonight?

MELISSA: (*laughing*) Want some Mexican?

MOM: Now you're talking!

The bird began whispering to me when I realized how unhealthy my behavior was on this diet. I had been told by multiple programs within the diet industry that a caloric intake between 1200 and 1300 calories per day was the healthiest way to lose weight, providing the body enough energy to survive while allowing it to also lose weight. The popular way of talking about this was to discuss the body's need for food and then talk about it getting enough food, which was presumed to be the magic number of 1200, so that it would be able to stop "holding on" to the weight for fear of starvation. I believed that eating less than 1200 calories was starvation, which was why I was horrified when I calculated the number of calories I was consuming daily on the Quick Weight Loss program. It was during that time in my life that I began drinking multiple cans of diet soda in one day; it would not be until much later that I learned that this habit gave me a false sense of fullness and helped me to continue starving my body of the nutrients it craved.

After the fearful realization that I was killing my metabolism, I decided to only try the "healthy" diet programs, such as Dr. Phil's plan. I assumed that Dr. Phil's plan was safe and healthy, because he would certainly be ethical above all else and more interested in his readers' health than in making money off fat phobic crash dieting. I tried the plan several times, beginning the first day being "good," all the way through breakfast

and lunch, before succumbing to hunger in the evening and treating myself to a “last supper” in preparation for really attacking the diet plan and doing it right the next day. I cycled through that first day multiple times, occasionally making it through to the next two or three days on the plan. Three years after first trying the plan, I would return to it as a vegetarian, looking for a diet plan that I could use without eating meat. I recall the vegetarian meal plan consisting of one week’s worth of daily menus, while the “regular” plan (with meat) provided four weeks of daily menus. Giving up animal products has worked in concert with giving up dieting, because the popular diet plans I am familiar with rely on eating large portions of meat while eating little to no starchy foods such as bread and pasta.

Because I became a vegetarian in 2008, after several years of using high (animal) protein diet plans to quickly lose weight, the one point of contention I have with various popular books about moving away from dieting is the assertion that many people use vegetarianism or veganism as methods to lose weight or as excuses to not eat enough nutrients. We were warned in “Eat for Life” that vegetarianism and veganism are often used as lifestyles that enable insufficient intake of calories, which directly contradicts my own experience of having simultaneously worked my way away from animal products and away from starvation, or dieting, simultaneously. Tribole and Resch similarly warn the reader about the dangers of becoming a vegetarian to lose weight (45-46). Despite my experiences that directly contradict the idea that vegetarianism or veganism can so easily be used as crash diets, I understand that using these ways of eating in this way is possible within diet culture. Something that seems to have become an offshoot of diet culture is a culture of eating healthy, whatever that means in the moment and in the media. I have

noticed that there are many new ideas coming out about nutrition. I have possibly bought into an unpopular idea of the moment, in giving up animal products, though my blood pressure and hormones seem to have benefited greatly from keeping my body free of animal products, and Linda Bacon cautiously suggests that eating more plant foods is healthy, though she is quick to also say that moderation is key and completely forsaking a loved food is not the answer. As someone who does not love animal products, primarily because of my ethics and the way those foods feel in my body, I can easily cut them from my eating. I also came to this nutrition from a unique position, being more motivated by my compassion for animals than by my desire to be healthy, fit, or thin.

Midway through the Dr. Phil plan, I began counting calories daily and discovered that this plan did not provide a sufficient number of calories, according to the numbers that numerous programs within the diet industry had told me were healthy. I belatedly read through some of the book, after having only looked at the meal plans in the back, and discovered that Dr. Phil openly advocates this plan that has the dieter eating between 1,000 and 1100 calories per day. After reading this, I began counting calories and alternating between: using the meal plan and adding an extra 100-200 calories worth of food to my day; eating what I wanted, in amounts that equaled 1200 calories per day; and starting the day “on plan” before becoming too hungry and bingeing at night on my dinner.

After failing to lose those last ten pounds on the Dr. Phil plan, I briefly rejoined Jenny Craig, a program I had enrolled in with my mother four years previously, becoming nearly as thin as I had with the Quick Weight Loss program, though through slightly different use of food. The first time on Jenny Craig, I had regained ten pounds

my first week on maintenance, when I was visiting my uncle for my spring break and eating unpackaged foods. I was hopeful that if I rejoined, I would successfully lose those last ten pounds and weigh in at 105 pounds, instead of the 115 pounds at which I had been hovering for several months. I quickly lost interest and motivation after rejoining, primarily because I was attempting to pay for it this time, whereas my mom had paid my way the last time, putting herself further into debt. I discovered that the food alone cost more than \$10 per week for one person, which did not include my membership fee, nor did it include the fruits and vegetables I was required to buy at the grocery store to supplement the frozen meals and prepackaged snacks. I also found that primarily eating frozen meals was no longer possible with my social life; when I had first participated in the program, I had not made any close friendships in Austin, and I had not yet found a theatre group with whom I would regularly rehearse, perform, and share meals and the occasional glass of wine. Being required to eat all my meals at home simply no longer worked for me. After a few weeks, I made the decision to quit the program a second time.

It would not be until several months later, while working a stressful office job, that I would try the Cabbage Soup Diet for the first time. I had regained about 20 pounds during the time at my office job, my body craving anything with high fat and high sugar content. Given the frequency with which store-bought cakes were brought in for various birthdays and other occasions, it was easy for me to indulge in those high fat, high sugar foods. The company I worked for also frequently held company meals, during which I would indulge in desserts of various kinds, potato chips, and high fat meats. I do not clearly remember what I ate at home during this time, though I do remember packing diet

lunches for work on the days we did not have company lunches and eating a “healthy” lunch before supplementing it with store-bought cake.

I was attempting to find a way to lose the weight I had regained in time for my brother’s wedding, which was to take place in April. I had started work in October and quickly regained weight during the months leading up to my first fitting. I was disappointed in myself when I required a size 8 bridesmaid’s dress, and I was determined to force myself down into a size 6 for the wedding. I wore the size 8 for the wedding, but I did frequently restart my plans for losing weight during the weeks between my initial fitting and the final fitting before the wedding. It was during that time that my coworker announced that she was doing the Cabbage Soup Diet. The structure of it intrigued me; she was allowed to eat as much of this soup as she wanted every day for a week, and on each day, she was allowed specific foods in addition to the soup. I tried the diet, and at the age of 24, spending most of my day at a desk, my body could endure the caloric deficiency and high acidic content of the diet for those 7 days. The sequence I used came from the “Cabbage Soup Diet” website:

Day One:

Fruit: Eat all of the fruit you want (*except bananas*). Eat only your soup and the fruit for the first day. For drinks- unsweetened teas, cranberry juice and water.

Day Two:

Vegetables: Eat until you are stuffed with all fresh, raw or cooked vegetables of your choice. Try to eat leafy green vegetables and stay away from dry beans, peas and corn. Eat all the vegetables you want along with your soup. At dinner, reward yourself with a big baked potato with butter. Do not eat fruit today.

Day Three:

Mix Days One and Two: Eat all the soup, fruits and vegetables you want. *No*

Baked Potato.

Day Four:

Bananas and Skim Milk: Eat as many as eight bananas and drink as many glasses of skim milk as you would like on this day, along with your soup. This day is supposed to lessen your desire for sweets.

Day Five:

Beef And Tomatoes: Ten to twenty ounces of beef and up to six fresh tomatoes.

Drink at least 6 to 8 glasses of water this day to wash the uric acid from your body. Eat your soup at least once this day. You may eat broiled or baked chicken instead of beef (but absolutely no skin-on chicken). If you prefer, you can substitute broiled fish for beef on one of the beef days (but not both).

Day Six:

Beef and Vegetables: Eat to your heart's content of beef and vegetables this day.

You can even have 2 or 3 steaks if you like, with leafy green vegetables. *No Baked Potato.* Eat your soup at least once.

Day Seven:

Brown rice, unsweetened fruit juices and vegetables: Again *stuff, stuff, stuff* yourself. Be sure to eat your soup at least once this day. (<http://www.cabbage-soup-diet.com/eating-plan/>)

I did not experience the 10-pound weight loss advertised on the website, though I was regularly drinking 8 glasses of water per day before starting the plan, so I did not

easily lose water weight from upping my intake of fluids as I had the first time I went on a diet, at the newly named Nutrition Center. When I went home and announced I was going to try the diet, my mom said, “Oh yes, I’ve tried that,” and then we did the plan together for the next 7 days. She fixed the soup that first time, making it much easier for me to jump in and try the diet. Several years later, during my first two years of marriage, I decided to try the diet again after regaining most of the weight I had lost doing the Weight Watchers diet. That time, and each time thereafter that I attempted it, I did not make it through the first day because I suffered a headache, nausea, and general weakness and fatigue within the first day. The first time I retried it, I roused myself from the bed after 10 pm, unable to sleep for hunger, and ate a Pop Tart so I would be able to sleep. The time I tried after that, I thought that perhaps my lack of physical activity would make me able to eat less; I reasoned that the reason I had suffered nausea and headaches the time before was that I was simply burning too many calories lifting weight and jogging on the treadmill, and because I had been exercising less and less as a graduate student, the diet would work for me. It did not. I battled nausea, fatigue, and a headache before succumbing to hunger and eating regularly the first night. The last time I tried it, a few months before I gave up dieting, I downloaded the e-book from the website and tried the tips for hunger, such as eating a piece of cheese or a handful of nuts if I wanted to “cheat,” but still found myself feeling miserable and sick by the evening of the first day.

Folklore of Diet Culture

Preparing for my full-length performance of the Tooka bird was part of a journey that began three years prior and included autoethnographic and ethnographic research into the diet culture in which I had actively participated for most of my life. I continue to

find myself drawn to the culture and its specific folklore that guided my actions for much of my adult life.

My encounters with salespeople, or weight loss counselors, at Quick Weight Loss, seem extreme when I think about them all together, yet the ideas espoused there reflected ideas I had heard in several other programs. There were times, as well, when the strategy of a program would be comparison between it and something more extreme or older, to make that program seem reasonable. I remember sitting in a Weight Watchers meeting and being told that the leader had been with the program in the 70s, when members still made their own ketchup. We were all expected to breathe a sigh of relief that, despite the restrictions on eating, we could at least buy ketchup instead of making it ourselves. In *Women and Dieting Culture: Inside a Commercial Weight Loss Group*, Kandi Stinson discusses her experience as a participant observer in a commercial weight loss program. My experience reflects the experience Stinson discusses:

Occasionally ... a member or leader would come across old organizational materials ... and share with the group various taboos, restrictions, or requirements. At one time, potatoes could only be eaten early in the day, and liver had to be eaten once a week. Although members found the stories funny, leaders used them to emphasize how much the program had changed and especially how much more freedom members now had to eat what they wanted. Taboos are associated with “the old days”, and are presumably no longer necessary as we have become more enlightened. (146-47)

The idea, even as they transmitted bits of folklore of dieting culture, was that we had moved beyond older pieces of dieting folklore. Some of the folklore remained intact, like

the idea that we could all lose weight if we found the right amount of food to eat each day. The specific folklore that dictated the amount had changed, from calories to points in the case of Weight Watchers, and from 1200 calories per day to 1300 calories per day in the case of SlimFast.

In “Bird Song” and in this dissertation I identify and clarify bits of folklore that are central to diet culture. These pieces of folklore enforce the culture and ideas about body size and health. This folklore is transmitted in concert with the cultural gaze, which according to Susan Bordo is at least in part shaped by consumerism: “the meaning of ‘the gaze’ varies by culture, gender, race, sexuality, etc., and the notion that patriarchal society structures images or narratives according to the laws of psychoanalysis ignores (among other things) that consumer culture bends to no processes other than those of the market” (Bordo, “It’s Not the Same for Women”). Indeed, fat shaming simplifies how commercial airlines can justify the shrinking of seat sizes on airplanes, which enables them to make more money by having more patrons and is bolstered by the belief that fat customers should and can make themselves smaller in order to fit in those seats. At the same time, fat people, and in particular, fat women, turn the gaze on themselves, policing themselves in a similar way to Foucault’s Panopticon, as Sandra Lee Bartky describes in “Foucault, Femininity, and the Modernization of Patriarchal Power,” in which she discusses Foucault’s theory of the docile body and women’s self-policing of their bodies in addition to the culture’s policing of their bodies. These transmitted ideas and behaviors reinforce dieting behavior and perpetuate systems that reward the diet industry while destroying the body. In my work on body image and “Bird Song,” it was important to have a clear picture of what I was challenging in my work before moving forward.

“Good” or “Bad”

The first major piece of folklore that I identified in diet culture was the use of language to assign moral values to eating and exercise. As part of my work in the first class I took on ethnography and folklore, I completed a project based on research I gathered during my time attending Weight Watchers. Below, I have included selections from the script that highlight the use of language in diet culture.

While the language does not necessarily rely on the use of the words “good” and “bad,” the way that diet program leaders and members talk about behaviors and bodies indicates that each are constantly being classified in discrete categories, which I label here as “good” and “bad” to quickly summarize the essence of what I heard. During my time as a member and later an observer at Weight Watchers, one of the phrases I heard quite often was that someone (myself or another member) had had “a bad week.” If there was a loss on the scale, this was classified as “a good week.”

At the same time, with another trick of language, meeting leaders announced that the program was reasonable because we did not do the things that used to be done in the program, as Stinson describes in her account of women bringing in old materials from a weight loss program to make the current version seem much freer and more reasonable (Stinson 146-47). Words like “livable” and “workable” were commonly used to describe the behaviors promoted in the program, as well as “lifestyle” and “lifelong.”

Excerpts from “Body Talk”

* Verbatim quotes are in bold.

Enter NOTCH. She walks slowly to center stage, looking suspiciously at the audience.

NOTCH: Well. Well, well, well. Hello there. My name is Notch. I'm a Notch bird. My good friend Tooka asked me to stop by. Mmmhmmm. I know what she's trying to do. Mmm, mmm, mmm. She's probably told you all about her bird back. Well, let me tell you about mine. I don't do that silly bird calling either. You don't call your food, you measure it. Notches. Notches. I got on the WW wagon back in 1983. I lost the weight. I fell off the wagon too, of course. But I got back on and lost the weight, and I'm a lifetime rider on that wagon. I still fall off the wagon occasionally. I have this other bird friend, and sometimes we go out to eat... Well, you know what we always get, and I'm not going to lie about it. Nachos. Next week we're meeting at the office for lunch, and we're having a Smart Ones and a Lean Cuisine. It's pretty easy to get on that WW wagon nowadays. You kickstart that wagon, a two-week kickstart, and you learn to choose the right foods. There's absolutely no measuring or weighing those first two weeks. Lots of riders lose a lot of weight during that time. One mother-daughter team lost 9.8 lbs! The slightest loss I've seen is 2 lbs. I kickstarted my wagon just the other week, and I lost 3 lbs. without even trying. The best part is, you're required to eat treats every day. You might eat a slice of butter, or some wagon-branded candy for your treats. We require it, because then you can stay on the wagon. And did you know, there are five full weeks in January. If you're paying to ride the wagon monthly, that's a whole extra week that month. You should check out some different wagon drivers. It depends on your personality. We have quiet, reserved drivers, like this professor who stands and talks, and some of them are bubbly, outgoing, super-excited people. You might need some encouragement before you get on the wagon. I like to look in the mirror without any clothes on over my feathers or my bird back. You can't lie to yourself then. You might

dress up in a bird dress and think, Hey, I look pretty good. But if you're naked as a bird, you cannot lie to yourself. You see yourself like you really are.

TOOKA stands and twirls for NOTCH.

TOOKA: What you do think of my pretty bird clothes?

NOTCH: Well Tooka! I can see you like your bird clothes! Wouldn't you like to get some even smaller ones? I could help you with that.

TOOKA: Oh, well I don't know about that. I might stick with this bird back for now.

NOTCH: But Tooka, don't you want to look good?

TOOKA: I guess so...

NOTCH: Tooka, **you're not just gonna total your vehicle because you dinged the door**. Don't let 52 bad weeks stop you. You can get back to eating the right food and exercising.

TOOKA: Do I eat the wrong food?

NOTCH: Tooka, Tooka, Tooka. Would you like to meet a friend of mine?

TOOKA: Well sure. I always like meeting new friends.

NOTCH: Well, okay then! Just have yourself a seat, and I'll call her.

TOOKA sits and watches NOTCH. TOOKA tries to make herself a little smaller in her seat.

NOTCH: Scaaaaaaaaaaaaaales! Scaaaaaaaaaaaaaales! Scaaaaaaaaaaaaaales!

Enter DONA. She is breathless with excitement. She wears exercise clothes – possibly yoga pants and a tank top. Her clothes should be as lightweight as possible. She carries a Coke Zero or diet Coke in one hand and a large cup of coffee in the other. While she is onstage, she alternately sips from each one. These drinks give her energy and make her

brighter for a split second each time she drinks from one. She is full of nervous, jittery energy. Her hands shake slightly, most likely from the caffeine. If needed, she might take out sugar free gum and chew it while she is on stage, depending on her level of hunger.

DONA: Here I am! Is it time for the weight loss lottery?! I had a really good week. At least I think I did. It's okay if I had a bad week. I'll face it on the scale. When you have a bad week, it's good to use the scale as punishment.

NOTCH: You deserve a round of applause and a Bravo!

NOTCH begins clapping and encourages the audience to join. TOOKA halfheartedly claps in her seat. She has wilted since DONA'S entrance.

NOTCH: Dona, why don't you tell Tooka how you've been eating the right foods?

DONA: Sure! You know, I always thought that if you exercise, then you can eat more.

NOTCH: I think we've all been conditioned to think that if you go out and run for a little while, then you can eat a donut.

DONA erupts into her bird calls. The change is sudden. She desperately looks around the stage and audience, her gaze darting from place to place.

DONA: Donuuuuuuuuuuuuuts! Donuuuuuuuuuuuuuts! Donuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuts!

DONA continues calling for donuts as NOTCH speaks her next line.

NOTCH: Oh dear. She's calling for donuts. Dona's a Dona bird because she likes donuts. I tried to explain that you have to give in to your cravings every once in a while or you'll go crazy. You just have to eat the right foods most of the time. But Dona can't eat donuts in moderation. She always gets too many because she's a Dona bird. A moment, please.

NOTCH pulls DONA to the back of the stage. DONA stops her bird calling. They share a brief, whispered conversation, shaking their tails as they talk. DONA and NOTCH return to center stage. DONA is now calmer, and she takes a very long gulp of Coke Zero.

DONA: Another myth is that **if I lose the weight, I can have a milkshake. You can't. Well, yes you can. If you don't wanna eat for the rest of the week.**

NOTCH: Dona, why don't you tell Tooka what you told me about eating the right foods?

DONA: Well, I used to think that if you exercise you lose weight. **Really, it's what you eat.** I've been doing great since I got back on the wagon. I had gotten off in the past because the wagon rode over a plateau, but I'm riding it for good now. The wagon really works, though. You get plenty to eat, as long as you pick the right foods. I hopped back on the wagon and kickstarted it for two weeks. **It wasn't bad. The first couple days were hard. Yesterday this girl brought in cinnamon rolls and I did not even touch any.**

NOTCH claps for DONA and invites the audience to join. TOOKA looks more interested. She claps tentatively. She wants to know what will happen next.

NOTCH: Tell everyone what you ate last week.

DONA: Oh, well. We stopped at this roadhouse on the wagon trail. I ate a plain baked sweet potato and salad with no dressing.

NOTCH: And how was it?

DONA: **It was really good!**

NOTCH: So, do you think you'll stay on the wagon?

DONA: Oh yes. It's great. I'm thinking about when I kickstarted the wagon, and that's when I really got hooked. **I never was hungry. I was satisfied. I didn't have any of the problems I've had in the past with dieting.**

NOTCH: Tooka, we promote health. Paying for your wagon ride motivates you to be healthy and happy.

TOOKA: I suppose I would like to be healthier. I try not focus on having a smaller bird back these days. I've been taking care of myself and trying to make myself comfortable and like my life, as I am now. Yesterday, I realized I that I've run out of reasons that I just have to lose weight. It's a little disconcerting, but it's nice.

Yoga, who has been unobtrusively posing in the background for the last few lines, comes forward.

YOGA: Well...that's one thing we have to understand. You can like yourself, and accept yourself, and still want to change. You can still want to lose weight. It's the paradox. You accept yourself and then you love yourself enough to want to change.

TOOKA: So, you think I should shrink my bird back?

YOGA: You can lose weight if you want.

TOOKA: Should I want to lose weight?

NOTCH: Of course you should! And you can enter the weight loss lottery right after you hop on that scale for an initial reading.

End of excerpt

Notch's glee with eating nachos and subsequent condemnation of the action reflects the tendency of women in the programs I visited to classify foods and behaviors as good or bad. Interestingly, it was the bad behaviors that seemed to be the most fun for

everyone, such as going out to eat and eating nachos. The woman who confessed doing this at a meeting I attended told us her secret in a gleefully conspiratorial tone, much to everyone's delight. It seemed that talking about the times we were "bad" gave us all common ground and something fun to discuss amid our attempts to be "good" and to avoid foods that would make us gain weight or that were high in points, while regularly exercising. There were stories of triumph, certainly, but it was the stories of cheating or doing other bad behaviors that seemed the most fun and told with the most relish, at least when these were stories based on past behaviors. Members who had recently engaged in deviant behavior, such as eating pound cake, were often disappointed in themselves and openly berated themselves for having engaged in the behavior.

With the classification of "good" and "bad," women in meetings often asked the same question of themselves as they told the group about the "bad" things they had done in the past week or two weeks. "Why did I do that?" At this point, the leader would often step in and reaffirm their humanity, and then make suggestions about ways to avoid engaging in that behavior again. One Weight Watchers meeting leader described the way that she would pack a box of chocolate Weight Watchers brownies for the times when she visited her mother's house. When her mother's brownies would begin calling to her, she would rip into the box of processed brownies. She assured us that even if she ate the entire box, that would be better than eating one of her mother's homemade brownies. Though she did not use the specific words "good" and "bad," she had clearly categorized the processed treats and homemade treats as being in two distinct categories. The homemade brownies seemed to be "bad" because they could lead to bingeing behavior. Many of the foods that were categorized as bad in meetings were likened to gateway

drugs; they were foods that could and would lead to bingeing. Binge eating “good” foods, such as processed Weight Watchers foods and other foods that would be labelled healthy, such as rice cakes, was generally deemed acceptable in group meetings. Gorging ourselves on foods that were “good” was rarely mentioned.

There was also an unspoken understanding in our meetings that foods that tasted good to us or that we genuinely enjoyed eating were “bad” foods. The very act of enjoying eating was implicitly classified as a “bad” behavior. Frequently women in Weight Watchers meetings would announce that they liked eating too much. The act of eating was treated as something illicit, only acceptable if the act of eating was completed with minimal satisfaction and with one eye constantly on the goal of weight loss.

Overeating is Acceptable, with a Partner

I sit with my mom on a Wednesday night, looking over a menu. We are at a local fast food restaurant in Temple, Texas. I have been working on eating what I want and when I want for the past few years, and it still proves difficult to do that when I spend time with my family. I fall back into old habits. I wait to eat until someone else is also hungry, contenting myself with munching on the pecans my mom keeps in a drawer when it is not yet an officially acceptable hour for a meal. At home in Columbia, I sometimes eat dinner as early as 4:30, followed by a snack later in the evening. Eating early seems to work well for my body. In Temple, I must wait until almost 6 pm before I mention hunger. Eating earlier than 6 pm is unacceptable, and eating at 7 pm is ideal. Eating dinner at 8 pm is nearly unacceptable, considering my mom’s early bedtime. So, I must mention that I want to eat between 5:30 and 5:45, after which we discuss the options at length and generally defer to the men in my family for the decision, because

neither my mother nor I wants to expend energy arguing with their preferences. My older brother, the middle child, does not like this system, because he feels that it always puts him in the position of making decisions about where to eat, though he is quick to settle the discussion with a quickly offered, firm suggestion that leaves no room for waffling. My oldest brother always has a clear idea of where he wants to eat but will not immediately share his idea, prompting my mother to ask him several times what he wants to eat.

I am well-rehearsed in this game. I know that, should I offer up a definitive opinion about where I would like to eat, I will receive one of four reactions from my mother: she will immediately ask my oldest brother if my suggestion is to his liking; she will make a sound of disapproval and wait for a different suggestion; a combination of the first two will occur; or on rare occasions, when it is the two of us, she and I will be imagining the same food and will quickly arrive at an agreement about where we should eat. I have adopted and modified a simple strategy for talking about where to eat: I rapidly name several restaurants, hoping to elicit a quick response, which rarely happens. Because we always defer to my oldest brother, who is reluctant to decide yet quite displeased if our decision is not to his liking, these conversations tend to last a minimum of ten minutes, with detours into other topics and periods of silence during which I pet my Yorkshire terrier and try to ignore my hunger pangs. In recent years, I have been careful to only name those restaurants that appeal to me.

This evening has been easier, because my mom and I are eating alone, and we like a lot of the same foods, except for my mom's continued love of hamburgers and my switch to veggie burgers. As we look at the menu, I weigh my options. My body does not

feel like eating a lot of fried food, yet I know that my mom is probably in the mood for fries, because we are eating at a restaurant that specializes in fast food. If I say I do not want fries, she will not get them, because it only seems to be acceptable for her to have them in my presence if I also eat them.

I finally decide that I will get a veggie burger and offer to share some fries and onion rings with her. I can agree to the food and simply not eat it once it is at the table. So, we order, and we share a meal and laughter, me ignoring the fries and onion rings and my mom too wrapped up in our conversation to notice. The important thing is that I gave my verbal approval and support of getting the fries. Whether I eat any of them is not as important as the act of agreeing that we should get some.

This is the way of doing things in the diet culture. Overeating, or eating “bad” things, is acceptable with a partner. My mom and I were partners who engaged many times in Last Suppers, “the final step before ‘dietary cleansing’ – almost a farewell-food party” (Tribole and Resch 3), before beginning new diet programs together. We laughed and commiserated over the tasty foods we would soon give up forever, or least for a few months on a new diet program. As I have moved away from diets, I have found that it is difficult to move away from that habit, though I am making progress. There have been many nights when I have wanted James to eat what I am eating, so that it is acceptable for me to eat it.

On the other hand, one thing I have learned in diet culture is that it is much more difficult for a man to overeat, because there is a belief that men need much more to eat than women. As a teenager and young adult, I often gave food away to my brothers, eating a small portion and then trusting them to take care of the rest. From an early age I

was taught that, biologically, men must eat much more than women. I learned to deny myself food in the interest of keeping the men around me well fed, to serve them first, to give them what I was too full to eat, and to watch them to ensure I was not eating more than they were. I engaged in the Panopticon, watching myself to ensure that I was behaving as I should with food (Bartky).

In “Bird Song,” a character named after the Well-Meaning Archer in “The Bird is Back” speaks to Tooka on the phone about her plans for the evening. This character is based on my mom and our relationship around dieting. As the phone call continues, the character reveals that she has just engaged in a Last Supper and is preparing to start a new diet plan the next morning. The gleeful laughter and delight in my performance of the character highlighted the role that overeating plays in diet culture, a very essential role. It is a lot of fun, and a lot of that fun comes from knowing that it is naughty and that there is a partner or even group of people who will engage in that naughty behavior. It becomes part of the game of dieting. These Last Suppers often led to last minute weight gain for me so that I could quickly lose weight in the first week on a new program, due at least in part to water retention from the high sodium intake involved in the Last Supper.

Fat is a Symptom of Psychological Unrest

In the pathologizing of fat, mental health issues are often cited as giving way to overeating, bingeing, emotional eating, and subsequent weight gain. When I was constantly going from one diet to another, I often asked myself why I overate. One year, I visited my uncle in Oklahoma for my spring break immediately after having lost at least 30 pounds attending Jenny Craig. I was just going into my second week of maintenance when I visited him. Instead of eating prepackaged frozen meals, I ate at restaurants and

ate home cooked meals that entire week, paying attention to my body and only eating to uncomfortable fullness once during that week. Yet, when I went to my weigh in after going back to Austin, I had gained 10 pounds over the course of a week. What had happened? Had I been bingeing without realizing it? Was there something wrong with me? I knew for certain that I could not trust myself to eat what felt like a right amount and the right food. I would have to go back to eating the prepackaged frozen meals and following a strict daily menu to prevent more weight gain.

One of the questions that this incident raised was whether I had an overeating problem. I decided that I did, because I often ate too much when I was anxious or stressed, or when I allowed myself to indulge in forbidden treats. Later, in my 30s, I would decide that it was likely that I was simply overeating in response to starving my body through dieting and that my body was gaining weight after I gave up dieting not because of frequent overeating but because it was trying to reach equilibrium after several years of weight cycling. It would not be until early in 2015, as I sat down to read *Health at Every Size*, that these suspicions would be confirmed for me by reading the research Linda Bacon compiled about dieters and the body.

I gave up dieting in 2013, in early June, soon after reading about the ill effects of dieting on the human body. It was a relief to give up dieting, though I battled the fear for years afterward that I would begin gaining weight and would never stop. I did gain weight after I gave up dieting, something that my “Eat for Life” instructor assured us was totally avoidable if only we ate mindfully. My body did not listen to that advice, and I found myself drawn to high fat and high sugar foods as I struggled to convince my body that I would not be starving it again.

When my mom visited us in September of that year, I had gained about 15 or 20 pounds from when she had last seen me in early July, something that upset me when I saw it on my doctor's chart. I was nervous for my mom to see me, knowing her tendency to discuss family members' bodies when she talked to me on the phone. Surely, I would be discussed. I hoped, though, that I would be able to communicate my thoughts and feelings when she saw "Bird Back," which she was there to see.

We went to lunch together to a restaurant I knew she would enjoy because they had a large selection of fried foods. Though I did not know the science of it then, having not yet read Bacon, I am certain that my mom, like me, is specifically drawn to high fat foods because of years of dieting. This restaurant had high fat foods like waffle fries, sweet potato fries, potato skins, and large onion rings.

As we sat waiting for our food, she leaned forward and said, "Are you happy?" in a concerned tone.

Uncertain what she was talking about, I said, "Yes." Was she worried about James and me? Was there some crack in our relationship that I was unaware of, that only an outsider could see? Did I seem unhappy about school? I had to admit, being in school was stressful, but I did not feel particularly unhappy. Maybe she was sensing some disharmony buried deep in my soul, that only a mother could sense.

She continued in the same tone, her words laced with both concern and censure. "You've gained a lot of weight. I saw you in July. Is something going on? Are you overeating?"

I was shocked and mad at myself for not preparing for this conversation. I had decided that my body was my business, yet how could I expect everyone in my life to

automatically come to the same conclusion without talking to them first? I did not have the words to have this conversation about respecting my boundaries and not talking about my body, so I floundered in that moment, upset that I would even need to address this issue so quickly with someone I trusted.

“No,” I said quietly.

“I know about overeating. God knows I’ve done it plenty myself. Is there something going on?”

Again, I said, “No.” Then I added, hating my own need to explain myself, “We’ve been eating different things, and I’m just trying to adjust and figure out how much to eat.”

She shook her head and looked at me pointedly. “It’s not that. James hasn’t gained weight.”

Again, I was too shocked to say what I wanted to say: that this was not a topic we should be discussing, now or ever. How did I tell my mom, the woman who had nursed me and taken care of me as a child, that voicing her concern was inappropriate? I quietly responded that everything was fine, and then the food came and my stomach felt too constricted to eat much. I took the rest home and made myself eat later so that I would not feel starved when I performed that night. Our conversation would later become the Well-Meaning Archer’s monologue in “The Bird is Back.”

The idea that people become fat from overeating, and they overeat because of mental health issues, usually depression, is not new. Psychology manuals continue to use the terms “overweight” and “obese” and give tips about helping clients lose weight by

stopping overeating. In *Dialectical Behavior Therapy for Binge Eating and Bulimia*, Safer et al. declare:

As noted, overweight clients entering treatment tend to be quite concerned about weight loss. The therapist validates the client's concerns as quite understandable. The therapist might add that he or she, too, worries about the client's weight, as the excess pounds reflect an overuse of food to numb or avoid emotions. ... [I]t is hoped that this treatment's focus on stopping binge eating will ultimately place the client in a much better position not only to eventually diet but also to be able to maintain his or her hard-won weight loss results. (40-41)

This therapy is based on mindfulness, which seems to promote paying attention to the body and its needs, yet weight is still used as an outward indicator of mental health issues.

In *Fat is a Feminist Issue: A Self-help Guide for Compulsive Eaters* by Susie Orbach and *Breaking Free from Emotional Eating* by Geneen Roth, the authors draw explicit connections between body size and mental and emotional health concerns. Orbach presents a plan for addressing mental and emotional health concerns and assures her readers that, once these issues are addressed, the weight will fall away, leaving the participants much thinner. Roth, whose work seems to rely quite a bit on the principles outlined in Orbach's book, similarly promises that addressing emotional needs will enable readers to become happier and, of course, thinner. In neither of these books is there an indication that a fat body could be the reader's natural, healthy body size.

The assumption that the fat body is the result of pathology contributes to the idea that fat is bad, whether the pathology be physical or mental.

Calling fat people “obese” medicalizes human diversity. Medicalizing diversity inspires a misplaced search for a “cure” for naturally occurring difference. Far from generating sympathy for fat people, medicalization of weight fuels anti-fat prejudice and discrimination in all areas of society. People think: If fat people need to be cured, there must be something wrong with them. Cures should work; if they do not, it is the fat person’s fault and a license not to employ, date, educate, rent to, sell clothes to, give a medical exam to, see on television, respect, or welcome such fat people in society. ... The pretense of concern for fat people’s health wards anti-fat attitudes against exposure as simple hatred. Belief in a “cure” also masks that hatred. ... Medicalization actually helps categorize fat people as social untouchables. (Rothblum and Solovay, xiii-xiv)

On the other side of this, cultural ideas tell us that the very thin body is also sick, probably resulting from a disorder. In addition to talking me about my own body and overeating, my mom frequently would ask me if I thought a particularly thin woman had an eating disorder. My answer was usually no, apart from my ex-sister-in-law, who would eat large meals and disappear to the bathroom for long periods of time immediately after the meal, somehow maintaining a figure that was much thinner than the one she had when she first married my brother.

Instead of body positivity only addressing the fat body, though it certainly does embrace the fat body, it addresses all bodies, including those that are quite thin. In “Bird Song,” I exposed folklore that contributes to a culture of punishing and trying to control the body. These pieces of folklore affect each body size. Because I have a fat body and the piece was autoethnographic instead of ethnographic, I focused on my own

experiences in a fat body interacting with the culture. Yet, there is the implication that someone can be too thin, which is assumed to be the sign of an eating disorder. In “The Bird is Back,” the Well-meaning Archer talks about the necessity of not getting too small, because that would be a sign of an eating disorder: “I can even watch your weight for you. I’ll let you know any time I noticed you’ve gained weight. I don’t mind being on the job just for you. I can also let you know if you get too small. That’s a sign of eating disorders, you know.” Perhaps a good beginning for body acceptance is with the fat body, because there are no rewards for being fat. A thin body, though occasionally pathologized, is rewarded in many ways for being thin, from having a large selection of clothing from which to choose to being able to comfortably sit wherever the person pleases. By starting with my own fat body, I could also recognize ways in which the culture unfairly pathologizes thin bodies if they are deemed too thin. While it is possible that some thin bodies are sick, just as it is possible that some fat bodies do become fat from overeating and emotional and psychological problems, it is unlikely that all bodies that fall above or below a certain weight are sick bodies.

Losing Weight is Possible with the Right Behaviors

After having written two Tooka bird scripts and worked on my body image for several months, I attended “Eat for Life” in person. I had already taken the class twice online, once in the summer and once in the fall. My body had settled at a much larger weight than I was accustomed to, yet my shape and size were now quite like my mom’s and both my brothers’, so I suspected that this might be the natural result of heredity instead of, as the Food Police or Mean Old Lady kept telling me, the result of poor eating habits or a sign that I should continue dieting for the rest of my life.

When I arrived at the classroom, I sat in hopeful anticipation of what this in-person experience would bring. I had already embarked on an exciting journey of self-acceptance and healing my body, and that had been inspired by the online version of the course. Surely taking the class in person would be an even more enlightening experience. I shifted on the seat, settling down in the new pants my mom had given me for Christmas. I was ready to engage in the class and share my insights with my classmates. I had many insights about myself, having just completed, the semester before, a series of counseling sessions in which I worked on my body image.

My therapist, a student in training, was quite happy with my performance, informing me that I was doing most of the work on my own and that was exactly what I should be doing. It had been an exciting experience, in which I discovered that we had been matched well; she had written a thesis about the very issue of size variability that I was beginning to discover and critique, and she, like me, was a vegetarian who had to not only struggle with accepting her own body but also with often not having food available when she wanted to eat at communal gatherings because of the prevalence of meat-laced dishes. We commiserated and laughed about my experience at a church dinner, when I was finally learning to be okay with eating whenever my body wanted and eating the amount my body wanted, only to find that all the dishes at that supper, including the quiche, were laced with meat of some sort, leaving me to eat a cookie and a slice of pie to try to satiate my hunger. After one shopping experience, I shared with her that I had decided against a fancy dress and later regretted it, admitting that my reluctance was rooted in my difficulty buying clothes for myself after gaining weight, having been trained to buy new clothes when I lost weight. Soon after that session, I saw her in that

same department store, and we waved at each other from across the aisle as I carried a beautiful, sparkling dress in a clear garment bag. I would later wish I had walked up to her and said hi, though at the time I did not want to interfere with her shopping experience.

Now, armed with insights about myself and multiple experiences honoring my body and finding joy in it, I was ready to delve back into “Eat for Life” and begin helping others to take a similar journey. I assumed that, though there must be people in the class who had originally joined it with the intention of losing weight like I had, the instructor would want for them what had been happening to me. How could she not? I was happy and healthy. I was slowly becoming accustomed to not thinking about the food the whole time I was at a gathering, periodically realizing with shock that I was not thinking about the food because I knew I could eat it if I was hungry. I reasoned that, even if my body was not healthy as the culture assured me it was not, I was finally achieving an improved state of mental health because I was not constantly either starving or overfeeding my body. My mind was free to focus on other things. In my afternoon classes, I no longer had chronic headaches because I did not eat diet food for lunch and try to make it through the afternoon with a banana or a coffee beverage. I had convinced myself the year before that these headaches were related to allergies, even though they went away with a sugary coffee drink and did not plague me the day my classmate brought in vegetarian chili and I ate a substantial lunch. Now, as I tried my hardest to eat real food and eat enough to satisfy my hunger, these headaches all but disappeared, only to plague me when I slept too little or was suffering PMS symptoms.

I excitedly waited for the class to begin. I had packed a lunch, and I would eat it afterward in the comfortable seating area by the elevators before walking to one of the classes for which I was a teaching assistant that semester. I would practice mindful eating during that break, and I also looked forward to the days when I would not have time to pack a lunch, because that meant I would eat the potato soup and grilled cheese I so enjoyed from the café downstairs. I thought about eating before the class, but my breakfast was too late for that, so by the end of the semester I would regularly get hungry midway through class and then struggle to focus. Yet, I did not want to eat before I was hungry, because that would take the joy out of eating, and I knew that taking the joy out of it would lead to dieting behaviors that I still occasionally struggled to let go.

People slowly came into the classroom, and I wondered if they would judge me and assume I was there to lose weight. I was ready to help them break free of the assumption that I needed to lose weight. I had found my voice when I wrote and performed “Bird Back” and “The Bird is Back” the previous semester. I would use the self-awareness I had gained from those scripts to express myself and help others begin to accept their own bodies. Some of my classmates smiled and introduced themselves, and I relaxed with their friendly attitudes.

The class began, and the instructor launched into her introductory speech. As she spoke, I slowly tensed and then wilted.

“Welcome, everyone. I’m glad you’re here. I’ve been teaching this class for about four years now. The way it got started is that my supervisor came to me one day and said, ‘We need to do something about this obesity problem. I want you to do something.’ I’ve been a health psychologist for a long time, and I knew a lot about mindfulness. So, I

started putting together a program that would encourage people to listen to their bodies and eat the right amounts. I'm sure a lot you are here to lose weight, and you can do that, but first we're going to learn to listen to our bodies.”

I barely heard the rest of what she said during that introductory speech. My mind had stopped and latched onto her mention of the “obesity problem.” I had to assume my body was part of that problem, at least from what BMI charts told me, yet I felt much healthier than I had at a lower weight the year before. I wondered if I would be identified as unhealthy if I had walked in with the body size I had the previous year, unhappy with myself but not quite classified as obese.

After her introductory speech, we began going around the large tables that had been set up in a semi-circle, each person introducing him/herself and telling us why they were there. I knew there would be a lot of people hoping to lose weight, and there were. I silently planned for my own introduction as we went around the table. My introduction would be different, but surely my instructor would be pleased with it.

A few people ahead of me, a woman introduced herself and said she had already taken the “Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction” class with this same instructor. The instructor jumped in and announced that this classmate had lost 10 pounds without trying, simply because she became more aware of her body and its needs. The room erupted into spontaneous applause as my classmate smiled at all of us. I was the only person in the room who did not clap. I waited for the applause to die, as I recalled the meetings at Weight Watchers that had been filled with applause. I had received rounds of applause when I lost five pounds, or 5% of my body weight, or 10% of my body percent. I never quite reached my goal weight during that program, hovering at about four pounds over it.

I remembered the congratulatory phrases about my weight loss and thin body when I was 23 and eating less than 1,000 calories per day, and the abrupt switch my dad made to calling me “princess” and holding the door open for me. Would I receive applause now for my improved mental health and the fading away of headaches and heartburn? Could I be rewarded for such simple improvements in my health? I looked around the room and feared for the people around me, wondering if they would declare themselves failures if they did not immediately lose 10 pounds after beginning their mindfulness practice. I wondered if they would go back to dieting, craving those rounds of applause and emphatic expressions of congratulations from friends and family. As Linda Bacon asserts in *Health at Every Size*, it seemed that, despite the focus on not dieting and trusting the body, this class was still focused on weight loss and could prove harmful: “Also popular are intuitive eating programs (also called non-diet programs) that suggest trusting your body is the best way to lose the weight you want to lose” (267). For a woman like me, who was seeing increased health benefits yet had gained weight instead of losing weight, the program had not “worked” as it was intended to, and more harmfully, it led me to believe for several months that I was not working correctly with my eating habits. Individual counseling with a body positive therapist helped me to see that my health and well-being were indeed more important than what I weighed, but how many people in the room with me during this first class would seek individual therapy and be lucky enough to find someone who was body positive?

The gap closed between the woman being celebrated and me. I took a deep breath and tried to calm my nerves before introducing myself. I had to make this introduction

good, because I had to impact the other people in the room and inspire them to focus on their mental and physical health instead of chasing after weight loss.

“Hi, my name is Melissa Jackson Burns. I’m a second-year PhD student in Theatre. I took the ‘Eat for Life’ class last summer and fall online, and I’m here to take it again in person. I think one of the things that I’ve discovered since I started taking the class is that I’m fine at the size I am. It was difficult to accept, but I don’t need to lose weight because I’m healthy. I’ve been making a lot of progress and listening to my body, and being this size is fine.”

An awkward silence fell on the room as my classmates stared at me, and the instructor gave me a funny look as she searched for words. After a few seconds that felt much longer, my instructor responded, struggling to use the right words to respond.

“That’s the paradox,” she said thoughtfully. “You can want to change, want to lose weight, and yet you have to love yourself first, just as you are. So, you can make those healthy changes, but loving your body is a must.”

There was no applause for my revelation that I had learned to accept my body. All my classmates watched my instructor and nodded as she shared her wisdom, likely relieved that their beliefs that weight loss and thinness are healthy would not be challenged during this course. As I felt my cheeks flush, I realized belatedly that this class would fall short of embracing health regardless of size. Though we were being encouraged to reject dieting, the expectation would still be to achieve a “healthy” weight and size, and the definition of health would remain unchallenged. My attempt to challenge it was immediately, if gently, rejected.

Later in the program, the instructor would assure us that we can lose weight if we want, and that we could avoid weight gain during the program by simply paying attention to our hunger and satiety signals. Having gained weight after giving up dieting, I felt like a failure during this program. It would not be until reading about the biology of weight loss and weight gain in *Health at Every Size* that I would come to trust my own instinctual knowledge that my weight gain was a bodily reaction to over a decade of dieting; given the similarity of my body size and shape to my mother's and brothers' bodies, I had also suspected that my body was finding its natural size, larger than the size I had forced it into when I dieted. I was not surprised to read that “[i]t’s a biological fact that identical eating and activity habits can result in thinness in one person and chubbiness in another” (Bacon 141).

The idea that we can all lose weight if we want to do so is entrenched in our culture. It is so common and accepted that I have difficulty identifying specific moments when I have been told that I can lose weight if I want to, beyond those moments in “Eat for Life.” The idea is implicit in the plethora of weight loss products and programs that surround us, as well as in the comments and articles I frequently see that declare that fat people are lazy. Articles that seem to sympathize with fat people also indicate that we can lose weight, if only we figure out the magical formula. If fat people are not to blame for the perceived problem of fat, then culprits like sugar and even antibiotic hand soaps are blamed in online articles and documentary films. These articles and films suggest that, even if fat people did not become fat through any fault of their own, they can still lose weight if changes are made to their lifestyle or treatments are tried. Kathleen LeBesco discusses research on the “fat gene” in her essay “Quest for a Cause” in *The Fat Studies*

Reader. There is little to no room in this rhetoric for the idea that the fat body is a normal and healthy part of the spectrum of human size.

Interlude: A Journal Entry about Mindful Eating and Experiments

A year after taking the “Eat for Life” class online, I purchased a book entitled *Eating the Moment: 141 Mindful Practices to Overcome Overeating One Meal at a Time* (Somov) and began working my way through it, completing exercises in mindfulness. One of the first exercises was to wait until I was hungry before eating and record my physical, mental, and emotional response to the experience. That day, I did not eat before a two-hour class because I was not yet hungry. What follows is the journal entry describing my experience and thoughts.

June 2, 2014:

I abstain from eating until I’m hungry every day. This is how I’ve trained myself. However, hunger manifests in different ways for me. Sometimes I have an intuitive sense that I must eat; this happens on days when I’ve done a lot of exercise. It’s this humming, vibrating sensation that my body needs more. Occasionally my stomach growls, when I’m PMSing or on my period. My stomach doesn’t generally do a whole lot soon enough for me to eat before I’m ravenous. When I’m aware of my stomach, it’s in a lot of pain from hunger. It feels tight and empty, and I double over to try to relieve the pain. I’m so familiar with being too hungry. That’s how it was off and on for 14 years of my life. I know the pain of headaches, dizziness, weakness, and listlessness.

Today I pushed the envelope, so to speak. I didn’t eat lunch before attending a two-hour class. I began feeling a heaviness in my body part way through the class. My arms were heavy. I felt as though I could sink through the floor. I started wanting to just

sleep, because my energy was sapped. I lost my ability to concentrate, for certain. I didn't hear half of what the instructor said, even though I had stayed hoping to hear some interesting information and make my trek to the campus worth my time. I couldn't concentrate and wanted to fidget, even while I felt like I could sleep for a week. I felt irritated. I hated the noise that my classmate's desk made when he fidgeted, and I looked over a couple times, unable to block it out during my too-hungry state. I was irritated at the whole thing: having to sit there, not being able to leave, being too hungry, knowing that I was doing it just so I could complete a mindfulness exercise, knowing that it's stupid to intentionally get too hungry after all the times I've accidentally done it and been miserable. My stomach hurts, I'm weak and shaky, and I want to sleep.

It's not too hard to reminisce about the last time this happened, because it was yesterday. Eating before I'm hungry is not my main problem. Letting myself get too hungry most certainly is. I was so hungry, and I knew after leaving the conference room and the food, I should have eaten more to alleviate my hunger. I thought, with all my Weight Watchers training, that I surely had eaten more than enough for my pre-dinner snack. I should have listened to my body, which was telling me to eat more. I was so relieved when I got that piece of Communion bread. I wanted more of it.

Yet that feeling of being too hungry, that misery that I know food will alleviate, is comforting. It's familiar. I know this feeling so well, because I've had it so many times. It's one of those things about dieting that was constant. I might not lose weight, but I could count on getting too hungry. I could revisit that familiar feeling anytime I wanted. It meant I was doing something, working hard on something. It's also comforting because I know I can fix it. I can eat a meal and solve that problem. It's not complicated. I get too

hungry, and I solve it with food. It's comforting because, deep down, I think it's a sign that I'm not overeating. I think it's a sign that I'm getting just the right amount. How can I know that I haven't eat too much if I'm not miserably hungry and irritated?

The comfort is probably why I keep coming back to it, at least subconsciously. It's my blanket, to cling to when I'm stressed or don't know what the future holds. Here I am, preparing for a self-directed summer, trying to figure out how to get work done over the next few months and trying to figure out what work I should get done. I'm not sure whether I should be preparing for my dissertation, starting a reading list for my comps, writing a new script, editing an old one, or editing an article for submission. This hunger thing is a piece of cake, so to speak, compared to that. I create a simple physical problem, and I provide a simple physical solution. Overeating is not my problem. More than emotional eating, my problem has become emotional hunger. I delay eating, because deep down I know that that too-hungry feeling is just what I need to feel comforted. It's not new ground. I don't need to figure things out. I just feel it and treat it. Feel it and treat it. Or feel it and wait to treat it.

The Bird: A Character and Scripts that Reflect Diet Culture

The scripts I wrote featuring the Tooka bird highlight and reflect the pieces of diet culture I have discussed in this chapter. In the sections that follow, I discuss my goals for writing and performing these scripts. I also begin discussing the effects of these scripts, though the bulk of that discussion occurs in Chapters 3 and 4. One of my primary goals in writing these scripts, particularly "Bird Song," was to expose and name pieces of diet culture, to give audience members and me a chance to think about diet culture and make an informed choice to accept or reject it. To identify diet culture, I decided that the best

vehicle would be my own story, so that I could access the universal by focusing on the personal. I also wanted to observe myself and gauge the effectiveness of theatre in helping one person to make life changes; my plan was to use my own experience to expand and theorize about the efficacy of solo performance about body image in encouraging audience members to make changes to their own lives and the world around them.

Awareness: A Goal unto Itself?

In *Revision*, Carolyn Ellis speaks about the importance of sharing experiences to make meaning both collectively and as an individual. “Telling one’s story gives meaning to both the present and past of human experience” (107). Part of what my script and solo performance provide is the opportunity for readers and audience members to compare their own experiences to mine. By putting my experiences into the public realm, I negate the tendency of diet culture to isolate even when we are told to find partners and groups. In group meetings and meetings with diet “counselors” in my own experience, honest conversations about the actual effects of dieting on our bodies, based on lived experience, were expertly prevented and turned into conversations about why our experiences prove that these diet programs do work. As a dieter, I never revealed the behaviors I regularly practiced that did not align with the programs, behaviors which would abruptly become proof that I should follow the program more closely if I saw a gain or stayed the same from one week to the next. The extra Dairy Queen blizzard I had one week would result in a loss, and I would not reveal that I ate it to the person weighing me; the following week, I would repeat the behavior and be informed that I had not followed the program closely enough when I failed to lose or gained. At Weight Watchers, the members often

repeated the notion that if we engaged in deviant behaviors, that meant that one week those behaviors would “catch up” with us on the scale. Yet, if we did lose during a “bad” week, we were quickly informed that we “must have done something right.” These tricks of logic were used to negate our experiences within our bodies and convince us that the programs worked and were based on scientific truths. By sharing my lived experience, I make visible the contradictions between conventional wisdom shared in diet programs and the actual experience of following this wisdom or not following it. I expose those gaps between what we are told our bodies will do and what they actually do, and as I perform onstage alone, there is no meeting leader there to find ways to verbally turn my experiences into proof that the program works.

The very act of identifying the folklore that informs diet culture allows the audience to begin to think critically about this folklore and about diet culture. To claim power over a culture and begin to change it, we must first identify what it is that must be changed. Identifying culture was also a first step in beginning to craft a play and performance that would critique that culture in front of an audience.

The Cultural Gaze: Turning it Back on the Audience

Part of the work of Fat Studies has been exposing the cultural gaze that keeps us all adhering to diet culture and striving for thin bodies. As S. Bear Bergman declares, a fat person could be defined as “a Fat person: someone who is visibly deviant in the cultural gaze” (Bergman 142). Yet, Fat Studies also moves past the cultural gaze and looks toward action and ways to empower the body that does not fit within the standards of the cultural gaze. In her article “Stark Raving Fat: Celebrity, Cellulite, and the Sliding Scale of Sanity,” Brenda R. Weber suggests that the fat female body can prove a site of

agency, enabling the female to control and manipulate the gaze as her body defies societal expectations for femininity.

As Katy Dierlam did in her carnival performance in “‘She’s So Fat...’: Facing the Fat Lady at Coney Island’s Sideshows by the Seashore” (Mazer), I also turned the gaze back on my audience, though in a different way, in “Bird Song.” My strategy was to use a section of the script, in which Tooka hears the many phrases that people tell her about her body, and turn that section so that she is saying those phrases to members of the audience. These phrases are included in the script because they reflect the ways in which the culture has made it acceptable to speak openly to and about women about their bodies and body sizes. In writing the script I also included phrases that do not necessarily concern body size and focus on objectification of the female body, reflecting the ways that the gaze has policed me even as a thin woman in the past. The characters, who are based on real people, range from hearty eaters to people who pick their food, and include both men and women, making everyone culpable in the ways in which the female body is verbally policed. This is a moment in the script in which I address both the objectification of the fat female body and the objectification of the thin female body, both equally harmful even as the comments begin to sound more complimentary as they move from comments about a fat body to comments about a thin body. By saying these things as the performer, I also placed part of the responsibility on my own shoulders. I physically represented the internalization of the oppression of diet culture, showing that I as a fat woman was also capable of saying these things to people.

The Feedback Loop: Using Performance to Enact Real Life Change

After studying the metatheatrical theory of the feedback loop, I was eager to try to use my own performances as Tooka to enact change, hopefully in the culture and in my own life. I intended to study the ways that my performances of the Tooka bird would create a feedback loop: “there is a feedback loop through which changes in reality stimulate changes in the [drama/culture] complex, while changes in the complex alter the ways in which we comprehend reality” (Hornby 27). This feedback loop is a theoretical basis for my hope of enacting change.

Certainly, as a performer, I have been able to create a feedback loop for myself. In multiple ways, I have used my scripts and performances to work through questions of body image and move away from dieting, and in turn my scripts have developed as I have progressed on my personal journey, giving me more to share with audience members.

One of the ways I used my playwriting was to try to reconcile my feelings about my relationship with my mom, who joined me in most of my many diets, and the part of our relationship that is intertwined with dieting and body image. For several years, I craved and eagerly soaked up her excitement about my weight loss and periodically thin body. I continue to crave her acceptance, glorying in that glowing feeling that fills me up when she sometimes still compliments me on my “great gams” or declares me beautiful or affirms that I “look good.” The culture has certainly trained me to crave that acceptance of my body, and we have both struggled for several years to attain thinner bodies. As a child, part of my indoctrination into diet culture was watching her diet and lose weight and then eating the same foods she ate. I have many happy memories of

munching on cantaloupe and honeydew melon for breakfast, or enjoying cold shrimp with Diet Center dressing for lunch.

The first time I based a character on her in a Tooka script, she was the Well-Meaning Archer, a character who takes the stage and shoots arrows into Tooka and her friends, accidentally hurting them as she attempts to help them, so entrenched in diet culture that she truly believes that losing weight will make Tooka and her friends happy and healthy. I developed the character into an amalgamation of helpful people, representing the people who do try to help with compliments and expressions of concern and even expressions of motivation as they work from the belief that weight reflects happiness or lack thereof. My mom watched this performance, and afterward we awkwardly laughed about it together when she revealed that she recognized a line based on what she had told me over lunch the year before. While we did not delve into our feelings, the script gave me a place to start expressing myself. Almost a year later, I sent her a letter letting her know that I did not feel comfortable discussing my weight. Several months after that, she did ask me what I weighed, and to my surprise, I immediately responded that I did not want to tell her and then refused, drawing a boundary line, after which we quickly moved on to another topic of conversation without the explosion of hurt feelings and anger that I had previously feared. Though it took more than a year, I eventually began enacting the scene I had written between Tooka and the Well-Meaning Archer, though in a slightly different way from what had occurred in my script. I found that being firm and immediate with my response, without any long talks about my mom's feelings on the subject, allowed us to quickly move past that part of the conversation. I had deliberately written it with one of my goals being to rehearse the solution to my

problem, much as I might use Theatre of the Oppressed techniques to rehearse solutions to big problems.

Several months after that conversation, as I worked on “Bird Song,” I discovered that I no longer needed the Well-Meaning Archer to be the character she once was, making hurtful/helpful comments and attempting to get Tooka back onto a diet plan. The characters who spoke directly to the audience captured these comments, and they represented a range of voices, not just my mother’s. Having used a script to help me rehearse a solution, then eventually being able to act on a variation of that solution, I was then able to let my developed perspective of my mom inform my writing in “Bird Song.” In “Bird Song,” I wrote her from the position of having worked through and accepted our relationship and the way it had many times intertwined with diet culture. In the rehearsal and rewriting process, that character slowly became my mom, with her gleeful irreverence about eating cookies and Chinese food, a character the audience could love as I do, who gently offers Tooka the option of eating comfort food to deal with her encounter with the Monster while simultaneously laughing about preceding her own start on a new diet program with a large meal and sweet treats. Her character is one that greatly complicates the issues in “Bird Song,” highlighting the often-fun experience of bonding over mutual experiences with eating, dieting, and exercising. Writing the character reflected my own recent attempts at finding alternative things to do together; despite our closeness, giving up dieting has left a gap in our experiences together.

One of the main ways in which I hoped to contribute to a feedback loop in which the audience would then begin to change the culture was by offering a set of problems without any clear solution. I purposely included my own ambiguous feelings about

dieting and body image in “Bird Song,” including those things that I sometimes miss about dieting, be they commiseration with friends and family or things tied to the actual physical experience of embarking on a new diet, such as having rules to follow that give me something to focus on, almost a game in which I participate. As I reviewed the feedback I received from participants in the post-show survey for “Bird Song,” I discovered that there were a few audience members who were on a body image journey, though they still believed that their own bodies could be healthier if they lost weight. Unlike me, they were focusing on weight loss but had changed their perspective so that they were wanting health instead of achieving an ideal of beauty. I wondered whether I should have included something in “Bird Song” that explicitly reveals that dieting is harmful to the body, though the participants who were still intent on weight loss seemed to agree that dieting itself was harmful and were searching for other ways to become thinner, as they revealed in their surveys. While this is a different starting point from the one that encouraged me to give up dieting, I am still hopeful that this starting point will lead the participants on a winding road toward health and perhaps accepting their current body size.

I borrow from the tenets of Augusto Boal’s Theatre of the Oppressed techniques in my effort to leave problems unfinished or to make it clear that these problems are not so easily solved. I do not offer to my audience a prescriptive formula for becoming healthier and improving body image. Instead, my performances offer problems for audiences based on my own experiences, and I deliberately try to not provide solutions for the audience. Despite my characters’ triumph over the Mean Old Lady in “The Bird is

Back,” the characters agree that she will be back. For each small success or problem solved, there will be a new problem.

Similarly, there are multiple issues in “Bird Song” that I present to the audience without presenting a solution. At the end, I speak about my own solution and give them a suggestion for finding their own song, or voice, in dealing with body image. Yet, I do not give them answers for how this should happen. I hoped to motivate audience members to search for their own solutions by including the problems that continue to plague me, such as my uncertainty about not dieting and dealing with multiple people who do not agree with my allowing my body to be its current size. My giving up dieting has not solved the problems of the culture, though some of my own problems have certainly been solved. I leave my audience to wrestle with some of the issues I raise and to hopefully try to find answers, though not all audience members are willing to search for answers.

A Need for the Bird

In the scripts I created featuring the Tooka bird, she challenges the very ideas and bits of folklore I have identified in this chapter that contribute to diet culture. Through physical performance, the bird challenges the idea that fat is unhealthy and that fat people cannot move their bodies. Using juxtaposition and metaphors, I purposely shaped my full-length performance so that Tooka and other characters could reveal the logical fallacies and inconsistencies in the folklore I found in diet culture. In one particularly ridiculous moment, I as a performer quoted a meeting leader who had announced that she joined Weight Watchers and lost seven pounds. The line, on my own body, highlighted the tendency for meeting leaders and diet programs to focus on small amounts of weight

loss or gain to convince customers that following these programs is effective, while not following them is ineffective.

The Weight Loss Lottery is a moment in which I use metaphor to highlight the variability of weight loss and the probability that a participant in a weight loss program does not actually have complete knowledge of why she gained or lost that week, having done the same things last week. Like the members of my audience, I often did not know why I lost or gained one week and had a different result the next. The numbers on the scale always turned into a lottery system at some point during my participation in a program, usually after my body had really started protecting itself from my attempts to whittle it down. Yet, the meeting leader in “Bird Song” also repeats the same admonishments I received each week; placing these phrases together highlights the assumption that a loss or gain on the scale is a direct indication of the participant’s behavior, often contradicting the participant’s own experiences that week with the diet. The meeting leader summarizes the system of phrases with her parting words to the audience, again revealing the lack of connection between the repeated phrases and the reality of the participant’s daily experiences following the diet program.

It is through the placement of these ideas and words from people in the culture around me that I highlight and challenge the assumptions we are taught to accept in diet culture. I challenge claims that seem to be scientific by showing Tooka’s physical reality, such as the reality of still being hungry after brushing her teeth even though many diet programs claim that the taste of mint prevents hunger and tricks the body into being done with eating for the moment. As a performer onstage, I trusted that many people in the audience would have heard this conventional wisdom and may have even tried it, only to

find that it did not work. Through my performance, I affirmed that these bits of advice often do not work and are not based in reality.

As I critiqued the culture in my script, I also highlighted connections between beliefs and behaviors. Characters in “Bird Song” exhibit behaviors based on beliefs in diet culture. One of the most physical moments of the show is a scene in which the newly imagined Notch runs around the stage completing vigorous physical activities while shouting motivational sayings about exercise. These beliefs culminate in her running so fast and hard on the treadmill that afterward when she transforms back into Tooka she must battle physical sickness as she recovers, all the while verbally affirming that the exercise was great and fun. The extreme sayings, such as “If your heart doesn’t feel like it’s going to rip out of your chest, you are not working hard enough!”, lead directly to behavior that is extreme to the point of making Tooka quite ill.

Using a character who is at times comic allowed me to critique cultural norms and to suggest possible ways to move forward out of these norms. I needed a humorous character to allow me to express an unpopular opinion – that dieting is unhealthy and that body size does not directly indicate health – that unreceptive audience members would hopefully be willing to hear for the humor, or at least not reject the entire performance out of hand. With humor, I used the feminist coding strategy of trivialization, as outlined in Radner and Lanser: “Perhaps the most frequent mode of trivialization is humor, and women use it in many contexts to buffer the seriousness of what they are saying” (Radner and Lanser 421). This use of humor was intended to invite audience members into the world of Tooka and to inspire them to remember and think about issues raised in the performance. This tactic did not work with every audience member, with some audience

members becoming quite offended by the idea that dieting is not a healthy plan for caring for the body. However, one particular audience member who seemed offended by the entire show did take the time to think about it and write several pages' worth of notes to me about the show, in the guise of intellectual criticism of the performance itself; however, the incorrect assumptions about the play, which were not shared by other audience members, indicated a degree of being offended by the idea of not dieting, such as the assertion that Tooka was a "needy, frustrated, and resentful bird-self" (quoted from survey response) for sharing her experiences and taking the stage for a full hour.

By taking the stage, I also challenged the idea that my body should not be allowed to take up the space of center stage (Bordo 187-191, Bartky 74), as a woman and as a fat person. I was at times sensual, as with my portrayal of Bliss, speaking of the sensuality of my relationship with my partner. Fat women might take the stage as older women or lesbians. Jennifer-Scott Mobley discusses her own experiences with casting as a woman who is not thin:

[P]erceptions of my body size, not my skill, were a central consideration in my casting. When I was cast in certain roles, I often received critical feedback regarding the way my size somehow colored the narrative of the play. Not surprisingly, I was often cast in roles much older than my actual age. This was somehow considered more realistic than casting me as the heteronormative age-appropriate romantic female lead. On the other hand, I was a shoe-in for any age-appropriate role that called for a lesbian. (Mobley 2)

Speaking of my joy in sexuality with a male partner was a deviation from this norm. The act of putting my own body onstage for a full hour, solo, was a deviant act.

In the next chapter, part of what I will discuss will be this deviation from the norm and the ways in which I combined the deviation of body size with deviations from playwriting conventions. As a playwright, I deviated from conventions of playwriting that are meant to help playwrights craft effective plays, while also deviating from some solo performance norms by approaching my work as a playwright and employing strategies such as use of metaphor, multiple characters, and animal work, filtering my real-life experiences and research into the world of Tooka.

The Need for Utopian Alternatives

The issues raised in this chapter led me to seek a solution to the problem of the concurrent invisibility and hypervisibility of the fat body in performance. I was “called to see what and who is stunningly, repeatedly evident and what and who is devastatingly, obviously invisible in the art and popular culture we regularly consume for edification and entertainment” (Dolan, *The Feminist Spectator in Action* 2). The fat body, especially the fat female body, is repeatedly absent from representations of women in the media and, often, on stage. By performing, I could call attention to that absence with my own present body.

By seeing what is often absent from performance – a fluidly moving fat body, with shifting identities – an audience can have the opportunity to celebrate difference and move toward body acceptance. Dolan asserts, “Through practicing identity in performance, and by creating variable structures of feeling, a different kind of cultural fluency might be learned, one that begins to offer a fleeting glimpse of humankind united around common difference” (*Utopia in Performance* 88). Performance is a unique art form that affords performer and audience alike the opportunity to rehearse a revolution of

acceptance. Through performance, I could begin to envision a different way of being, a way of accepting all bodies, both for me and for my audience.

In the next chapter, I discuss my process writing “Bird Song” and the considerations that influenced my writing and revising. I sought to make myself visible in writing “Bird Song,” and I also sought to allow the audience to envision a world in which we could accept and celebrate differences, including differences in body size.

The Bird Prepares to Speak

(It is late at night. Melissa sits at her desk, completing some of the reading for her “Eat for Life” class. Her instructor suggested on the discussion board that everyone focus on the mindfulness practices, such as meditation, and only do the reading if they have time. Melissa has other ideas. She loves doing the reading, because she wants to know more. Reading about the ill effects of dieting was eye opening, and she quickly withdrew her membership from Weight Watchers after reading about the diet mentality and the ineffectiveness of dieting.)

JAMES: Whatcha doin’, old baby?

MELISSA: Reading.

JAMES: Yeah?

MELISSA: I’m scared.

JAMES: What’s wrong?

MELISSA: I’ve been reading about the effects of dieting. It’s killing my organs. I could die.

JAMES: Okay.

MELISSA: Am I going to die?

JAMES: I don't think so.

MELISSA: I should give up dieting.

JAMES: If that's what you want to do, I'll support you.

MELISSA: But how will I lose weight?

JAMES: If that's what you want to do, I'll help you figure it out.

MELISSA: I was thinking.

JAMES: Yeah?

MELISSA: Maybe I should write a script about my experiences with dieting. Maybe it would help me to talk about it.

JAMES: I'm sure it would.

MELISSA: My mom would hate it.

JAMES: Why?

MELISSA: She wants me to be thin. She'll be disappointed in me.

JAMES: She loves you.

MELISSA: I know.

JAMES: Maybe we can do some roleplaying to figure out how you'll talk to her.

MELISSA: Okay, but not tonight.

JAMES: Okay.

MELISSA: Do you think I should stay with Weight Watchers?

JAMES: I don't know.

MELISSA: I mean, they say they're not a diet.

JAMES: Yeah...

MELISSA: But you weigh in every week.

JAMES: Uh huh.

MELISSA: I guess it would save money if I stopped my membership.

JAMES: Yes, it would.

MELISSA: Okay. I'll think about it tomorrow.

JAMES: Let's go to bed.

(Together they leave for the bedroom. The book sits on the desk.)

The Bird Speaks

(After a moment, Tooka enters. She smiles at the audience.)

TOOKA: Let's go to the next chapter. I get to talk now.

Chapter 3: The Bird Speaks

The Bird Takes Center Stage

(Tooka approaches center stage.)

TOOKA: Are you ready to hear about what I think? I'm ready to talk. Let's talk. And maybe later we can sing.

(Tooka makes herself comfortable on a small stool and prepares to speak.)

Giving Voice to the Bird

I sit on the small couch that dominates the living room. It seats only two people, so I call it a loveseat, which is appropriate because James and I share it and we love each other. He is not home now. It is the summer, and I am sitting on the couch with my laptop on my lap, staring at a small collection of scripts I have written over the course of two years.

Cyndi Lauper, our tiny Yorkshire Terrier, jumps onto the couch with me and curls into a tight ball. I put my hand on her luxurious fur, and she sighs heavily. I pet her, pausing to scratch. She is still for a moment, and then she shifts onto her side, maneuvering her body so that my hand is on her belly. I scratch her. The room is quiet.

"I need to get back to work," I say softly. She looks up at me with big brown eyes, pleading to have her belly scratched. "I know, but I have to."

I remove my hand, and she holds my eyes for a few long moments before wearily dropping her head back down. She again sighs, heavier this time, and stretches her limbs before settling more heavily into the couch.

I turn back to my work. Cyndi Lauper spends her days in pursuit of bodily comfort, using every opportunity to curl up on a soft blanket, get scratches, stretch, or eat

a treat. Sometimes she disappears for long periods of time, and I later find her curled beneath the blankets on the bed, sleepy and warm. She and James have their routine: she growls at him, and he scratches her; she paws at his hand, and he scratches her; she gives him a long, meaningful look, and he scratches her.

I, on the other hand, do not spend my days in pursuit of bodily comfort. As I have been fretting about writing my full-length script and looking through the same scripts over and over, my back has slowly been tightening. When I occasionally stand up to use the restroom or take Cyndi out, my lower back clenches in protest. I spend so much time reading and writing that my body locks up when I stand, and I struggle to maintain my balance as I fight through the stiffness. Sometimes I wonder if being a graduate student is bad for my health.

I stare at my computer screen for several minutes, clicking back and forth between scripts. Food has long since lost its appeal during times like this, when I am caught in a slump; if anything, now I eat too little during these times, letting my lack of interest lead me to ignore my body's hunger for long periods of time. It is a habit left over from my dieting days, and I am uncertain whether it is better or worse than the days when I would munch on sweet snacks and eat large meals to deal with these periodic spells of trying to be productive and not being quite ready. As a dieter, I teetered between those two extremes, eating too much or eating too little, and though I am better at avoiding eating too little and have fallen out of the habit of snacking mindlessly, there are days when I fall into a stupor that deprives me of my appetite. This is one of those days. I am unaware of it today, but it will be December before I sit down and write "Bird Song." Today, I tell myself I will write it before the summer is over.

Inspiration strikes. I will do an improv exercise! I think about what I could do, and I decide to have James interview me on our tape recorder. I can be Tooka, and I can create material for my full-length script. A long road of writing and revising lies ahead of me, with issues in creating and maintaining motivation. It will be another several months before I sit down and write “Bird Song,” but the process will be worthy of my time and effort.

Bird Writing through a Theoretical Lens

When I began writing scripts featuring Tooka, there were multiple elements for me to consider. I wanted to challenge the ways in which the fat female body is viewed in my culture; I wanted to challenge the elements of diet culture I identified, as discussed in Chapter 2. In my writing and revision process, two complications presented themselves to me: by writing and subsequently performing a solo performance, I became the author of my own body and transgressed social mores by claiming that power; and I pushed against the tendency for both me and my director to focus on relating to and reaching out to men, lest my performance become solely about women’s issues.

In *The Explicit Body in Performance*, Schneider includes in her discussion the idea that women are trained to identify with men, to see from their perspective. As a woman who has spent her life watching movies and theatrical shows that do, indeed, usually focus on men, I can attest to this simple fact. As I wrote and revised “Bird Song,” one of the comments my director made about the piece was that it seemed like it was only about women and might be difficult for men to relate to (in fact, many of the voices in the piece include and are partially inspired by men). I questioned why she would think that my piece would not be relatable for men, and I did consider trying to make at least one of

my characters overtly masculine. As I worked through multiple revisions of my script, I decided that the audience would have to accept my womanly body, which might make all my characters appear feminine. I also decided that, as part of my transgression of social propriety, I would unapologetically present a string of characters who seem to be women.

In considering the addition of an overtly masculine character, I discovered that I identified certain qualities of myself, such as the aggressive energy with which I lifted weights in my 20s, with masculinity. Thus, my thinking about masculine characters led me to redevelop one of the characters in “Bird Song” into a workout junkie, someone who likely would be a member of a CrossFit gym, or even a trainer in one. I found a new layer to the identities I would be performing on stage through the process of thinking about how I might relate to men in my performance. Yet, my performance of Notch was channeled through my own womanly body, presenting yet another woman character to my audience. Through my performance, I continually pushed back against gendered modes of enacting identity, by embodying multiple identities, some of them with characteristics that might be considered stereotypically feminine or masculine.

By exploring my identity as a woman and taking control of my own body in writing and performance, I was performing a potentially shocking act for my audience and perhaps for some of my readers.

Today, it is mostly women, artists of color, and gay and lesbian artists who, rather than utilizing shock for shock’s sake, are interrogating the social properties of that shock – interrogating the markings of “disgust” and “terror” by asking precisely who is disgusted and terrorized and across whose body has that disgust been inscribed? (Schneider 151)

I asked this question of my audience with my performance, interrogating the disgust and shock I had encountered in real life in reaction to my body, and possibly shocking my audience with my own body positivity and reversal of the usual narrative – instead of trying to get a smaller body, I had decided to accept a larger body than the bodies I inhabited during my years of dieting. I was also using my body in a variety of ways during my performance, physically embodying characters, dancing, and working out. As I wrote and revised “Bird Song,” I had to consider how shocked my audience would be by my body and my acceptance of that body and how much their shock could or would interfere with their engagement in my performance. I chose to use my body in potentially shocking ways, though I did not try intentionally to do things for shock value; for example, nudity in my show would have been something that would have been for shock value for me as an artist, so I did not consider including it.

Perhaps the most shocking aspect of my writing and performing “Bird Song” was the control I wielded over my own work. Rebecca Schneider asserts that “the issue of who has the right to author the explicit body in representation – or more to the point, who determines the *explication* of that body, what and how it *means* – has repeatedly been a matter of political and juridical concern” (Schneider 3). Writing in 2010, Jill Dolan asserts that “women in theatre still are not controlling the means of their own production or the discourse that characterizes their work” (“Making a Spectacle, Making a Difference” 564). “In other words, not only are women underrepresented on stage, but the female characters that do exist are more closely linked to the projections and fantasies of their male creators than to the complex, diverse, and ambiguous lives of real women in history. So two kinds of damage are perpetuated: underrepresentation and distortion”

(Donkin and Clement 1). By writing my own solo performance, performing it, and now writing an autoethnography of that performance, I have taken at least partial control of my own performance/production and my representation. My main collaborator for my performance, my director, is also a woman, meaning that primary control of my representation on stage stayed in the hands of women. My director and I crafted a performance in which we consciously did not cater to our male audience. I have also taken some control of the discourse around my own work by writing about it, including analysis and critique of my playwriting and performance.

The Writing Process

Of the process of playwriting, Mead K. Hunter says, “we see how truly idiosyncratic the growth of a creative undertaking can be. . . . Naturally, it progresses differently for each artist” (Hunter viii). Documenting my own writing process is part of my political act of claiming and loving my own body. I also hope to illuminate the ways in which my writing process reflected the ambiguity and complicated process of learning to accept my own fat body.

What follows is an account of my process writing “Bird Song” and other solo performance scripts. My methods intersect with and diverge from methods outlined in the playwriting resources I review here. The process I used forced me to work through some of the difficulty I had accepting my body and the reasons I had for dieting.

Parts of the Process

Many of the parts of my writing process for creating solo performances happened simultaneously. I often returned to research and gathered more information as I edited and wrote new material. I also continued developing and rewriting “Bird Song”

throughout most of the rehearsal process. What follow are milestones in the journey of writing and performing “Bird Song,” beginning with the prewriting process before I began writing “Bird Back” and ending with my performance and the audience reactions to “Bird Song.” While I will continue to do work with Tooka, this dissertation must have an end on which to focus, and that end is “Bird Song.”

As I outline my process, it is my hope to illuminate how this process has helped me to think through diet culture and body image and to provide tools for others to challenge diet culture and begin to make peace with their own bodies.

Prewriting: Research on the Body

I sit down at the computer and take a deep breath, preparing myself. I need to do more research about body image, but what I have already found has intensified my feelings about my own body and my body image journey.

I am already frightened for my own body, having read about the life-threatening effects of dieting. I have cried in fear and regret, wondering what I have done to my body and how many fewer years I might live as a result. Reading about others’ issues with body image and eating disorders has intensified the feelings of regret and fear, but I also have hope. If I have given up dieting at 31, will my body be able to reverse some of the ill effects of dieting?

I begin reading a book called *Bodies Out of Bounds: Fatness and Transgression*. It is a collection of essays about the fat body, many of which celebrate fatness and the beauty of the fat body. I am enchanted with this book, my first reading of scholarship in Fat Studies. As I read the essays and think about my own body, my view of my body begins to change shape. My body is beautiful, I think. It should be celebrated. I should

celebrate it. I am not sure how I will do this, but writing a script seems like an important first step toward celebrating my own body and encouraging others, whether fat or thin, to celebrate theirs as well.

My research includes articles about Weight Watchers, complicated analyses that discuss the reasons Weight Watchers continues to be popular with most of the clients regaining the weight they initially lost, including me. “Foucault, Femininity, and the Modernization of Patriarchal Power” provides some insight into why women continue this diet program, citing the feelings of empowerment for taking control of diet and exercise. I file this information for later, not yet ready to think about the ways that dieting still appeals to me. Both articles are missing something, I think. They do not acknowledge that the authors who have participated in these weight loss programs will likely regain the weight, as do most clients.

I look online for statistics and information about body image and dieting. The statistics I find are disheartening. One website reminds me that my own struggles with body image are far from uncommon: “Approximately 91% of women are unhappy with their bodies and resort to dieting to achieve their ideal body shape. Unfortunately, only 5% of women naturally possess the body type often portrayed by Americans in the media” (“11 Facts about Body Image”). I struggle to figure out how to include them in my solo performance piece. They must have a place, I tell myself. Why else would I need to know them? Eventually, I will opt to leave statistics out of my performance, instead focusing on my own experience as an insider in diet culture. For now, I struggle.

The days until my script is due grow short. It is time to sit down and write. I set up my old laptop computer, with the scriptwriting program I purchased during a

playwriting class in my Masters program, and I set up a small desk and numerous comforts to help me. Though I do not feel ready to write, I must.

Finding the Bird's Truth

“Truth in memoir is achieved not through a recital of actual events; it is achieved when the reader comes to believe that the writer is working hard to engage with the experience at hand. What happened to the writer is not what matters; what matters is the large sense that the writer is able to make of what happened” (Gornick). As I prepared to write my initial bird script, I explored ways to tell the truth to my audience. Simply reciting the events in my life that were connected to my placement in diet culture and my body image would not be telling the truth as an artist and a fat woman.

I discovered that Tooka was the ideal character to tell the truth. She is a bird character, yet she embodies the deepest parts of my humanity. Weaving my own narrative with metaphor would enable me to make sense of diet culture and body image and to make sense of the issues inherent in both for my audience. As a playwright, by using metaphors and multiple characters I could reveal larger truths than a simple accounting of my autobiographical experience would reveal. To earn my audience's trust, I had to filter factual events through my own sensibilities as a playwright and performer, taking the reality of my experience and creating Tooka and her world.

Why a Bird: Using Animals in Playwriting and Performance

Developing Tooka for performance felt natural. I never questioned using a bird as my voice for talking about body image and dieting. I had been building a performance of her for years before she became Tooka; I joined together parts of characters I had performed for James in the privacy of our home.

There is a precedent for the performance of animals. Several schools of acting technique use animal work, including Lee Strasberg's Method and Jerzy Grotowski's work with actors in his Poor Theatre. There are several acting exercises that utilize animal work. While I have not often played animals onstage, my own training as a performer has included multiple exercises in which I used specific animals to access more creative character work. Performing as Tooka was a natural extension of parts of my training in acting classes. She provided a fascinating character to embody and explore for me as performer.

Tooka is a bird, and her birdlike movements are also a way of accessing some of the (very human) parts of my own personality. When she is not hunting for tookies, she embodies the same shyness that bubbles inside me when I talk about my body, and the same bashful friendliness that sometimes overtakes me when talking to someone I genuinely like but do not know very well, which for Tooka would be most of the audience. Yet, Tooka is also a bird. She walks like a bird when she calls for her tookies, looking sharply in all directions, before she finally finds them.

Perhaps the most compelling reason for me to build the character of Tooka was the creativity she inspired in my writing and performance. I wanted to build a character that would engage the audience, and I drew on my strengths as an actor and playwright to create something that would engage the audience. Using an animal character in a world filled with metaphor allowed me to work from my own strengths, instead of trying to work in a way that would reflect other performers' and other playwrights' strengths. Tooka is fun to play, too, and when I delved into the topics of body image and diet culture, I needed a way to have fun and to look forward to performing each night. Tooka

gave me that element of great fun as I developed my first and subsequent scripts and then performed them. In turn, she engaged the audience in her world, using humor to pull them in.

Writing the First Script: A Bird Whispers

As I prepared to write the first script featuring Tooka, I did not know that she would become the main character and my voice for this series of scripts. After doing research, I sat down and attempted to write a script. I rejected the entire first attempt, unhappy with the results and feeling the pull of theatricality as I considered what would make a script like this exciting for me as the performer and for the audience watching me. This first attempt included a monologue that reflected the thoughts I was having but did not capture the essence of how these thoughts interconnected and how different parts of me interconnected to form me and my thoughts and feelings about my body and about dieting.

Script Excerpt

I had a terrible experience last night. Do you ever have that moment, when you look up at the mirror, and you think, yuck? Well, that happened to me. I looked up, and I thought, yuck. Now, maybe it's because I was tired. Maybe it's because I wasn't feeling great. Or maybe I'm just starting to hear those things that I tell myself but don't realize I'm telling myself, because it's not politically correct to have a bad body image:

What is politically correct? To tell myself I think I'm beautiful? But it's not politically correct to be overweight and still think I'm beautiful. Maybe the only option is to be thin. Be thin or die. Or in some cases, be thin and die. That's the only right answer.

I enjoy judging my judgments. Deep inside, I tell myself I'm too big. Outside, I tell myself that's not the correct thing to think, and I cover it. Well, I just want to fit into my cute clothes. Well, I just want to be healthy. Well, this and that.

End of excerpt

Tooka began to speak to me. Her voice was a whisper, her body a soft beating of wings. She was pieced together magically from characters I had been performing for James and Cyndi Lauper. I wrote her lines, guided by an inner logic about how often she should become other characters in the story she had to tell and how often she should break into song or dance or poetry. I trusted my subconscious to ensure that what I wrote would fit and make sense.

As a playwright, I tend to focus on images and the rhythm of the words. The narrative is not as important as these elements. So it was with Tooka. She had things to say, of course, but the overall poetry of the piece was more important than telling a straightforward story to the audience. I wanted to develop something that would allow audience members to interpret the characters and world in ways that would speak to them about their own lives and bodies.

While the process leading up to writing took several weeks, including research, thinking about the piece, and writing the initial script above, the writing of "Bird Back" lasted three days. During that time, I sat at my laptop computer, struggling to form words on the page for Tooka and to fit together the different parts I created, such as her monologues to the audience and the songs she sang with the aid of her bass guitar. In my writing of Tooka, I incorporated some of the preferences I had as a performer: my love of dance, my sense of humor, and my newly learned skill of playing the bass guitar.

As a playwright and performer, I focused on writing things that I would really engage with as a performer and that I hoped would engage my audience, often, I hoped, by making them laugh. Following my own inner sense of logic, I pieced together a script that incorporated poetry and songs, while focusing on the Tooka bird as my alter ego who could say what needed to be said and accidentally shed insight on problems with diet culture through her innocent observations of the world around her.

My First Performance of Tooka: “Bird Back” at Life and Lit

I first performed Tooka in front of an audience in September 2013, one of multiple performances by multiple performers in the Life and Literature Series at the MU Department of Theatre. During the series that year, each night I first performed part of a short story by Shirley Jackson titled “My Life with R.H. Macy,” a comedic piece detailing a woman’s experience working for a department store which captured the often-ridiculous nature of being employed. After performing that piece, I immediately left the theatre each night, changed into my Tooka costume, and reentered for my performance of “Bird Back.” That year, I was convinced that my performance of the Shirley Jackson piece would be the better of my two performances, and I assumed that my writing in “Bird Back” and performance would go on each night and receive little comment and a subdued reaction from audience members.

To my surprise and delight, many of the people I talked with connected with Tooka and could use my performance to think more about body image. The audiences for whom I performed were raucous on some nights, cheering and applauding for Tooka, and for me as the performer. I had conversations about my own experiences and the

universality of those experiences, hearing from various friends and colleagues that they had been through a lot of the same things.

After the positive reception, I began to think more thoroughly about what I could do if I performed more times as Tooka, both for the audience and for me. It was then that the idea of writing an autoethnographic work detailing my experiences writing and performing as Tooka began to take hold. If I could inspire an audience to reflect on their own experiences with a performance, could I also do that with writing about my experiences, both those on which I based the script and those that arose from writing and performing Tooka? I decided I could.

There were also things I had to think about changing and more fully processing in my work. My relationship with my mom and my lack of ability to communicate some of my thoughts to her comprised a major point of change for future writing. One big misunderstanding between us was that she assumed that the Mean Old Lady, a character based on the Food Police (Tribole and Resch Chapter 8), was based on her. I was uncertain how to deal with this issue, opting to simply explain the concept of the Food Police, on which I had based the Mean Old Lady. Writing and further developing the script would prove to more readily solve this problem than my explanation. I also intended to use further writing in part to find my voice, for speaking to my mom and also for speaking to others who might want to say things to me about my body. As part of my plan, I would find my voice, and using that voice would in turn allow me to further develop Tooka and her world in writing and performance.

An Austin Performance of “Bird Back”

After performing “Bird Back” as part of the Life and Literature Series, I decided to submit the full ten-minute script for performance to FronteraFest, a new works festival in Austin, Texas. I would perform “Bird Back” at FronteraFest in January 2014, four months after my initial performance of the piece.

The reaction to this second piece was much more subdued than the reaction to the first piece. The audience seemed to enjoy Tooka, but there was something missing in our connection. I would need to further develop my performances. I suspected that part of what caused the disconnect was that I had tried to put too many different elements into my performance without fleshing them out. For Life and Lit, I had been required to cut my performance from a full ten minutes down to between five and seven minutes. That process required that I scrutinize the script and only include the most important elements, while challenging myself to rework and reorder the script to maintain coherency. I found that, after cutting multiple parts of the script, adding them back in proved difficult. I struggled to make the performance as long as possible, to come closer to filling the 20 minutes allotted to my performance. There were moments that I greatly enjoyed performing that I would later cut a second time when developing my full-length script, such as a moment in which I declared an ode to popcorn and danced to a song from the 1970s entitled “Popcorn.”

My second performance, this time of the full ten-minute script, further complicated my family’s reception of the work. My mother and both my brothers attended the performance, as well as my mother-in-law, and we taped the performance to later play for my sister-in-law. I received mixed reviews from family members. My

brothers told my mother that my entire performance had been about her, leaving me with the task of critically thinking about what I had written and how it might hurt those I loved, something I did not fully explore until developing my full-length piece. My sister-in-law's reaction was focused on the experience of overeating, which was not the intended focus of the piece, which also presented a difficult question to work through – How could I turn the focus of the piece and audience members' contemplation more thoroughly to body image and the negative effects of dieting, and away from ideas of overeating and eating the “wrong” foods? My mother-in-law sympathized with the character, though she sympathized in much the same way my sister-in-law had, focusing on and accepting beliefs that the main problem we as women have is overeating and that tasty food is problematic.

A Class Assignment: The Bird is Back

Shortly after performing “Bird Back,” I began formulating my plan for the script I was required to write for my seminar class in playwriting. My professor assigned us the project of each writing ten-minute plays, for which we would produce staged readings at the end of the semester. The other requirement was that these plays should somehow incorporate poetry.

I decided to experiment with Tooka. I wanted to know whether her world could include other performers and multiple bird characters. Because the task at hand involved making poetry, I played with the three birds speaking in unison and included passages of poetry and a short song at the beginning of the piece. The goal was to make a poetic play that would empower the character of Tooka to move forward and begin conquering some of the antagonists in her world.

The writing of the script occurred in a short period of time, over the course of a few hours. I allowed the writing to be a mixture of metaphor, poetry, song, and storytelling. The resulting script included passages such as the following:

TOOKA: The bird comes

She comes to say

TUPPY: We are beautiful

Beautiful birds

Every bird is pretty

Every bird is nice

TOT: Birds like to sing

And birds like to dance

TOOKA: The bird comes

She comes to tell you

TOT: You can be a bird

Nobody said

That you couldn't

TUPPY: Be a bird

TOT: Birds are strong

TUPPY: And birds have wings

TOOKA: Every bird

TUPPY: Has beautiful wings

TOT: Do you need the bird?

TUPPY: Do you want the bird?

TOOKA: Join us

BIRDS: In the birdolution

Most of the script did not translate into “Bird Song,” because I could not play with back and forth and unison dialogue with only one performer on the stage, but the process of writing “The Bird is Back” did help me to explore the possibilities of using poetic language and delving deeper into my use of metaphor as I prepared to write “Bird Song.”

The writing of this script also informed my own process of making peace with my body, giving me things to tell myself when critical voices would begin to speak from within me. While I did not say these things to my family members as I had planned, doing this work with my inner critical voices proved important in accepting the family relationships I have and the ways we have talked about bodies and embarked on body image journeys together over the past few decades.

A Class Performance and a Life and Lit Performance: Bringing the Bird Back

I performed this second script in December 2013, in front of an audience of peers and one professor, as my Playwriting final that semester. The performance was a staged reading, with scripts in hand, and it was the first time I had performed the Tooka character with other actors playing the other characters in the script. I needed to adjust to other acting styles, and I discovered other ways that the characters I had written could be interpreted.

I had created two other birds, Tot and Tuppy, and the women playing these birds in the class performance brought more innocence and more sassiness to the characters, respectively. In our rehearsals for the class performance, as director of my own piece, I

encouraged them to try to find their own inner birds, assuring them that each of us has a bird inside us. This reflected the philosophy I had developed that Tooka was the part of me who had a strong voice and knew how to love my body and herself, much as I assumed that each person has an inner voice capable of those things, some people's inner birds closer to the surface than others.

Besides discovering how others might interpret bird characters, I also discovered that writing other birds could result in characters that closely resembled Tooka. Part of my struggle with individuating the birds was that I was attempting to make the script poetic, which necessitated unison lines and passages that tied each character's thoughts into a coherent whole. In my second performance of "The Bird is Back" for the Life and Lit Series in 2014, my director worked with the other two actresses in the piece on creating individual bird characters who would differ from Tooka. The necessity seemed to result from a combination of my writing of the script and both actresses having seen my own portrayal of Tooka in the past.

Working with other actors as the Well-meaning Archer was perhaps the most challenging part of the performance process for this piece. The actress who played the Well-meaning Archer in the class performance interpreted her as a superhero, with a grand voice and gestures. As a playwright, I want to see others' interpretations of my characters, so I observed this interpretation with interest and resisted any urges to change the acting to suit my own interpretation. In writing the character, I had imagined her as a motherly figure, who spoke quickly and kindly. The actress who played the Well-meaning Archer in the Life and Lit performance, with the guidance of our director, played the Archer as an exercise guru, full of energy and life. My director and both

actresses who played the Archer seemed to find different things in her character that they could relate to their own experiences and or things they had witnessed, though what those things were differed from person to person.

Finally, having the Mean Old Lady played by someone other than me helped me realize the benefits of solo performance in performing these scripts. The Mean Old Lady represents the Food Police (Tribole and Resch), an *internalized* form of policing that reflects things that a dieter hears from their culture but is ultimately one of the ways the dieter observes and judges his or her own behavior. By having a different performer play the Mean Old Lady, I physically placed this voice as a separate entity onstage. I realized that it was important that I play that character, because the character is a part of me and is not a separate person in my life.

Writing “Body Talk”: An Exercise in Ethnography and Autoethnography

In the spring of 2014, a little less than a year after writing “Bird Back,” I began writing a third script, entitled “Body Talk.” This script, a mixture of direct quotes, scholarly research, and summaries of what I had learned, was a product of ethnographic research into diet culture. I attended meetings at a local Weight Watchers chapter and attended classes for “Eat for Life” to collect this information.

A character named The Scholar interrupted the action in the script in order to analyze the script I had developed for reporting the ethnographic information I gathered. She could step into the script and control the action, providing important information from research and giving voice to my own analysis of what I had learned:

THE SCHOLAR: First, we should establish that we are talking about body image and dieting. Are we all agreed? Notch? Yoga? Oh dear, they are frozen, aren't they? I make

the executive decision that we are, indeed, talking about body image. At least in the scholarly sense, eh? Ah. Here we are. A scholarly definition of body image, as articulated by Jill D. Duba, Aaron Kindsvatter, and Constance J. Priddy. The article is “Deconstructing the Mirror’s Reflection: Narrative Therapy Groups for Women Dissatisfied With Their Body.” Ah, that sounds fascinating. I wrote down this quote, from page 104.

Body image, or body esteem, has been defined as a multidimensional selfevaluation and attitude toward the size, shape, and aesthetics of one’s body. A woman’s body image is constructed through the comparisons she makes between her body image and the body image of others or between her body image and the idealized body image embedded in sociocultural norms. Body image develops from one’s personal evaluations of self that are correlated to the “investment in appearance as a domain for self-evaluation.” In other words, the importance placed on appearance will have a direct impact on body image. . . . Personal experiences and personality traits have been linked to a woman’s perception about her body and her attractiveness. In addition, many women have internalized the previously mentioned ideal of slenderness based on unnatural expectations that has been embedded in American history, culture, and societal standards. (104)

Let’s restate this without all the fancy talk, shall we? (*academic chuckle*) The way many birds perceive their bodies is linked with the images they see in the media, as well as the requirement our society has placed on birds to be attractive. Oh, I should clarify. I mostly mean female birds. The article I quoted certainly focuses on female birds. Ah, here’s a

note. Refer to Yoga. Ah, yes. Yoga has some opinions about body image and attractiveness. Yoga. Unfreeze please.

End of excerpt

In much of the script, I intertwined direct quotes from people who had expressed their own thoughts about bodies and nutrition in the meetings I attended at both groups. Distinct characters emerged who embodied the ideas of each group: two bird characters who were leaders and two other bird characters who represented their students.

One of the characters, who was an amalgamation of Weight Watchers meeting leaders and members, entered the first draft “Bird Song” in her original form. Notch was the first character I wrote as I made sense of the ethnographic research I had conducted, and her voice eventually merged with that of the Leader who would become the first character the audience would meet in my performances of “Bird Song.” Notch spouted wisdom about weight loss and discipline, using a metaphor of a wagon to illustrate her points:

NOTCH: Well. Well, well, well. Hello there. My name is Notch. I’m a Notch bird. My good friend Tooka asked me to stop by. Mmmhmmm. I know what she’s trying to do. Mmm, mmm, mmm. She’s probably told you all about her bird back. Well, let me tell you about mine. I don’t do that silly bird calling either. You don’t call your food, you measure it. Naches. Naches. I got on the WW wagon back in 1983. I lost the weight. I fell off the wagon too, of course. But I got back on and lost the weight, and I’m a lifetime rider on that wagon. I still fall off the wagon occasionally. I have this other bird friend, and sometimes we go out to eat... Well, you know what we always get, and I’m not going to lie about it. Nachos. Next week we’re meeting at the office for lunch, and we’re

having a Smart Ones and a Lean Cuisine. It's pretty easy to get on that WW wagon nowadays. You kickstart that wagon, a two-week kickstart, and you learn to choose the right foods. There's absolutely no measuring or weighing those first two weeks. Lots of riders lose a lot of weight during that time. One mother-daughter team lost 9.8 lbs! The slightest loss I've seen is 2 lbs. I kickstarted my wagon just the other week, and I lost 3 lbs. without even trying. The best part is, you're required to eat treats every day. You might eat a slice of butter, or some wagon-branded candy for your treats. We require it, because then you can stay on the wagon. And did you know, there are five full weeks in January. If you're paying to ride the wagon monthly, that's a whole extra week that month. You should check out some different wagon drivers. It depends on your personality. We have quiet, reserved drivers, like this professor who stands and talks, and some of them are bubbly, outgoing, super-excited people. You might need some encouragement before you get on the wagon. I like to look in the mirror without any clothes on over my feathers or my bird back. You can't lie to yourself then. You might dress up in a bird dress and think, Hey, I look pretty good. But if you're naked as a bird, you cannot lie to yourself. You see yourself like you really are.

End of excerpt

While the project of conducting research and writing a script helped me to analyze diet culture and use that analysis in my considerations of what to include in "Bird Song," Notch's short lines were the only lines that I included in "Bird Song." The characters' views in "Body Talk" influenced my writing, but including sections of back and forth dialogue would prove too difficult a task for me as a solo performer.

Writing the script proved a useful exercise in using fictional characters and fictional worlds to deliver real information and analysis. As a solo performer and playwright, I used this exercise in playwriting and research to inform later decisions about how to include truthful information in a script based on a fictional bird world. Strangers on the street became monsters in campfire stories, and meeting leaders became drug addicts whose drug of choice was Coke Zero as I processed and analyzed my own experiences and ethnographic research and turned them into fodder for performance.

Writing “Bird Song”: A Process of Writing and Revision

Writing “Bird Song” proved to be a process that was at times all about me and was at times all about my relationships with others, especially my relationship with my director. The first draft of the script consisted of a mishmash of chunks of previously written scripts. It was through the rehearsal process that I discovered the characters who needed to be added or changed, and the things that needed to be said to my audience. Each time I made a revision, I sent it to my director and we discussed the revision, all the while working on my characters with exercises she brought to rehearsal and with staging the piece as we prepared for my two performances.

Deviating from Traditional Structures: A Big Bird Body and a Non-linear Script

In *Thinking Through Script Analysis*, Suzanne Burgoyne and Patricia Downey outline the typical dramatic arc within a play. The play begins with a beginning stasis, “*the situation at the beginning of the script before the main action begins*” (Burgoyne and Downey, 36). Once this beginning stasis is established, an inciting incident occurs, a “significant trigger that sets the main action of the story in motion” (Burgoyne and Downey, 37). After this event sets the action in motion, a series of complications arise in

the plot, making small peaks on the rise toward the climax, as Burgoyne and Downey show in a diagram (32). Before the climax, a major crisis occurs, which is the “turning point when the protagonist must make a choice that determines the ending of the story” (Burgoyne and Downey, 42). Burgoyne and Downey then identify two climaxes, the major structural climax, the “*single moment* when the protagonist does something that resolves the main action” (44) and the major emotional climax, the “*single moment* that is the emotional highpoint of the story for the audience” (45). These two climaxes can occur in the same moment, resolving the main action while also providing the high point of the script for the audience. Burgoyne and Downey identify the end of the play as the ending stasis, the “new state of balance at the end of a script: the situation created by the major structural climax” (45). The ending is also often identified as the resolution or denouement, a period of falling action in which things settle after the climax (Benedetti 67).

“Bird Song” does not follow a typical dramatic arc like the one in Burgoyne and Downey. Instead, Tooka acts as a master of ceremonies, introducing new characters who bring their own points of view into her world. Together, these characters piece together a picture of Tooka’s life, her body, and diet culture.

With Tooka acting as a master of ceremonies, each character’s narrative weaves together, separate yet part of a whole. I do not call this work episodic, because while each character presents a separate piece, these are not



Figure 1: Moment from "Bird Song." Photo courtesy of Rebecca Allen.

episodes that form a plot in the way that episodes might work together in a Brechtian play. Each character simultaneously is an individual and is part of a whole, yet it is necessary to present them separately for the audience, because I am one performer who must switch between characters.

While my script deviated from traditional playwriting structures, my body deviated from body types that might be deemed “normal” onstage; my body would be “considered excessive or somehow outside the standard of American society’s perceptions of normal or neutral, whether it is considered ‘overweight’ or ‘oversize.’ . . . [T]he only neutral female body in representation, or perhaps more accurately, the only ‘realistic’ body in representation is the slender, dainty, hyperfeminine white woman” (Moberly, 3, 180). I presented my short, fat body, in clothing that did not disguise my size or shape. In my performance of “Bird Song,” I danced, hopped, walked around the stage, and mimed an intense weight lifting routine, challenging assumptions that my body would not be capable of sustaining a performance that incorporated a high degree of physicality.

In my performance, I further deviated from norms by openly rejecting diet culture and striving to embrace my body as it is. The expectation I have been trained to embody is to reject my body size and embrace diet culture. Diet culture teaches that this is what it means to love the self. Because it is accepted that fat is unhealthy, the expectation is that truly loving the self means doing anything possible to rid the body of fat. This endeavor must ultimately lead to happiness. My assertion that I am happy now that I have given up that endeavor is a major deviation from cultural norms.

Solo Performance and Tooka's World

As a solo performer and writer, I bring my own artistic sensibilities into my work. I often write using metaphor and animal characters when I write plays, which informed my work with writing my solo performance scripts that feature Tooka.

I blend fiction with autobiographical information in "Bird Song," creating an autoethnography that is rooted in metaphor. In playing a bird, I differ from the models of solo performance I was familiar with before beginning my performances with Tooka, choosing to embody a fictionalized bird instead of my own human persona. It is this choice to embody a bird that allows me to reveal my thoughts and feelings and to truly be vulnerable as Tooka.

My process more closely mirrored my work as a playwright than the process I read about in at least one how-to book about creating solo performance. I structured my work around fictional characters who would tell my story, and I built a world of the play around those characters. Michael Kearns structures *The Solo Performer's Journey* around the process of a solo performer working with a director to create a show. My work with my director involved refining what I had written, but I always had the final say about my script. Instead of bringing character monologues to my initial meetings with Xiomara, I first sent her a partially completed script, and by the time we met to begin rehearsing, I had a fully realized script. As the playwright, I edited the script between our rehearsals and made final decisions about what to include and in what order.

Yet, there were ways in which my process as a playwright reflected my position as a solo performer creating a script for my own performance. My incorporation of dance and playing the bass guitar gave me the opportunity to move, which I love to do as a

performer, and to show off my newly learned skills with playing the bass guitar. My writing process differed from the process of the solo performer at the center of Michael Kearns's *The Solo Performer's Journey: From the Page to the Stage* because, unlike the performer in the book, I as a playwright incorporated my performance skills directly into much of the writing, instead of writing monologues and then working with my director to make them theatrical. In my work on previous Tooka scripts, I wrote them from the perspective of playwright/performer, always looking toward what I would do on stage and how I would make my performance engaging for an audience. By the time I wrote "Bird Song," I had developed Tooka fully in performances. While this did not preclude my learning new things about her in rehearsal for "Bird Song," it did give me the unique perspective of writing a character whom I had already embodied onstage, in front of an audience.

Tooka and Her Audience: A Mixed Bag

As a playwright, I have received mixed reactions to my work, as I am sure most playwrights do. Most of the reactions I encounter are either delight in my use of metaphor and poetic language or confusion and sometimes anger and frustration with my use of metaphor and poetic language.

The majority of my audience members have expressed acceptance of my choice to focus on body image and diet culture in my work, though some audience members have declared that it is a good topic but I should take an entirely different approach. Yet, the work I have done with writing and performing Tooka is intrinsically bound with my processing of thoughts about bodies, health, diet, and exercise. Extracting Tooka from the equation, which has been suggested by at least one audience member, would

fundamentally change the work and the message. While performing as Melissa or as a different character would also be important work, it would not be the work I am currently doing. I am focusing on body image, yes, but I am also focusing on writing characters and creating a world, and exploring modes of playwriting that exist somewhere between traditional playwriting and solo performances that are grounded in the reality of human life. In my project, I maintain a dual focus on the social justice aspect of speaking about bodies and the ways in which I as a playwright can contribute to and create dialogue with the work of other playwrights who challenge and innovate.

As I discussed in the introduction, part of my research included a survey sent to participants. Participants each seemed to get something a little different from the performance, though most of the responses were positive in tone. There were a few responses that seemed to indicate the participants were leaning toward body positivity. My mother's response did not focus on how she felt about her body (whether she loved it or was working to love it more) but did indicate that she has separated health from body size in her thinking and has decided to focus on health instead of dieting. There were other responses that indicated a wish to focus on health, with a continued belief that weight is indicative of health. One participant, in an anomalous response, seemed to be very uncomfortable and even offended by the work, declaring Tooka "resentful" and childish. As a playwright and performer, part of my job moving forward will be to look at these responses and decide how to interact with these responses as I continue to shape my work.

After one performance of "The Bird is Back," two official respondents declared during a talkback that while they thought I had chosen a worthy topic, I needed to

structure my work to have an arc. As a playwright who rejects the notion that all dramatic works should be structured with a story arc, I also rejected this advice that was quickly thrown at me in what was likely intended to be a teaching moment. Before rejecting the advice, however, I did carefully weigh the importance of using alternative modes of playwriting as I was doing with the importance of presenting work that all audience members could connect with. I ultimately decided that by providing humorous moments, I would hopefully provide things with which to connect for those audience members who did not accept my methods of playwriting.

As a playwright and performer, I had to balance my response to various audience reactions with my responsibility to myself and the world and characters I had created. Consequently, as I explore below, I gave serious thought to the structure of “Bird Song” in terms of order of character vignettes and what to include, while I also stayed true to my own instinct and continued to use metaphor and characters in my exploration of body image.

Balancing Responding to Audience Reactions and Staying True to the World

As a playwright, my focus when writing “Bird Song” was split between a few different priorities: presenting a problem for the audience to think about and hopefully try to solve in the real world; keeping an eye and ear on what I had learned about audience reactions to prior Tooka pieces, so that I could tailor the piece to clarify those points that I wanted to be clear; and staying true to Tooka’s world and what she as a character demanded of me in the writing process.

As I wrote, it became clear that my approach to the first priority would be to make Tooka’s feelings about her body, dieting, and health as ambiguous as my own feelings

had become, perhaps even more ambiguous. She would voice those thoughts and feelings I had when I truly missed aspects of dieting, such as the structure that proved at times to be a distraction from my other responsibilities and the motivation to try new foods and recipes. I also decided that Tooka would not give the audience any answers about rejecting diet culture or working on body image, which would reflect both my need to make the audience think and her own innocence and positive attitude about her/my experiences. Just as I have made improvements with my own body image and physical health but am still working hard to find my own answers, so Tooka would exhibit growth from the beginning to the end of the piece without necessarily having solved all her problems with body image and becoming a healthier bird.

Responding to audience reactions is something I will explore more in depth in the next section. As a performer and playwright, I encountered reactions to my early Tooka performances that ranged from bewilderment to delight, with few reactions in the middle. I spoke with various audience members, and I also received written responses from students who have viewed the performances. In response to these reactions, I sought to maintain the use of metaphor and character work from my original pieces, while also constantly considering where I could inject moments that would reflect the reality of my own human existence.

Finally, I stayed true to what Tooka wanted from me as I wrote and revised the play, and what other characters wanted from me. Tooka's world is bright and colorful, and happiness abounds. Characters who are mean or unhappy turn into monsters in her world, such as the Mean Old Lady and Monster, one of whom does not speak and instead chomps her teeth at Tooka, while the other foams at the mouth as she hisses her words at

Tooka. While I had seriously thought about what might motivate someone on the street to come up to me and berate me for my size, reasoning that she was likely quite unhappy with her own body and responding to a combination of that and the fat phobia that dominates the culture, Tooka's reaction was different. As a bird, with childlike qualities, she would fully embrace her own fear of a hostile stranger. Tooka would also innocently tell the audience things that would make sense to her but do not logically line up, such as her belief that a Starbucks drink can cure allergies because her headaches must be from allergies and not hunger.

Revision: Incorporating Audience Reactions and Family Relationships

Multiple relationships guided me in the rewriting process when I was preparing "Bird Song" for performance. Four relationships I focus on here are my relationship with my partner, my relationship with my director, my relationship with my mother, and, collectively, my relationship with other colleagues in my department.

Besides being a first reader each time I write a new script or other essay, James provided a sounding board for ideas I was working through and assisted me in completing an improvisational exercise that would later become part of "Bird Song." I begin here with a discussion of his assistance in generating new ideas for "Bird Song" using an improvisational exercise.

In the summer of 2015, I struggled to begin to develop a full-length script. I went through stages of trying to write completely new material and trying to fit together all the material I had written for previous scripts. Neither approach worked, because I needed to incorporate old material and build new material onto my original writing. As I was struggling to figure out how to approach that task, I decided to use improvisation to

generate new ideas about what Tooka could say to an audience that would introduce her to new audience members and incorporate the growth I had experienced in my work with body image since first writing a Tooka script.

The exercise I decided to undertake was an improvised interview. I own a small recorder, and I asked James to conduct this interviewer. He suggested that perhaps in his persona as interviewer he could push me and ask questions that people who would not agree with the ideas I present in “Bird Song” would probably ask, and in a larger sense, he would represent the ideas in our culture that lead so many people to fear fat and to destroy their bodies with dieting. His persona in place, we sat down, and he conducted the interview. My responsibility was to answer each question as Tooka, with the hope that I would create material I would later use in a script. I did not use the material we created in writing a new script, but I did use interview snippets in the final product, peppering the script with them to highlight some of the most important points I was making. The idea of each bird singing their own song derived from one of my answers in the interview.

James’s role in the interview allowed me to access Tooka’s responses to possible objections to her thoughts and revelations, and these responses informed my writing of “Bird Song.” Because James and I had spent so much time discussing diet culture and people’s objections to body acceptance, he was able to tailor his interview questions and his interaction with me to draw answers from me that Tooka might have for the larger cultural conversation about bodies and weight.

My relationship with my director, Xiomara, directly impacted the ways in which I revised my script during the rehearsal process. We had known each other for a few

months when I asked her to direct “Bird Song.” I had noticed her work in our class on dramaturgy, which was visually stunning and showcased a creativity and thought process that I sensed would work well with my own. We would bring different yet compatible approaches to the creative process. I emailed her in December, asking if she would direct me, and sent her the short draft of “Bird Song” that I was struggling to finish. We met soon after I emailed her and made plans to work together on the project and for me to send her a complete draft when I had written enough for a full-length show.

Knowing that Xiomara was waiting for my draft helped me to finish it before the start of the spring semester, in mid-January. I had planned to finish the draft earlier, but writing during the winter break proved quite a difficult task. I did not sit down and write the script, though I did spend plenty of time during the break thinking about what I could write and about my experiences with body image and diet culture. During the break, my interactions with James’s family and my own family helped me think through family relationships that had influenced my treatment of and relationship with my own body. There were things that bothered me, such as my niece’s assumption that encouraging her to accept her post-pregnancy body meant that we thought that thin bodies were not beautiful. There were difficulties in communicating our efforts to accept our own bodies with family members, as we came up against the continued belief that body size indicates health.

When I came back from this break, I quickly finished my initial draft and sent it to Xiomara. She had not seen me perform *Tooka* before our collaboration on “Bird Song,” and she was able to look at my work with fresh eyes and identify parts that of the piece that did not connect or that could be confusing to audience members who had not

seen me perform Tooka before. She challenged me to think about which characters were essential to “Bird Song” and how these characters related to one another. Because of our conversations, I realized that I needed to merge two characters – Leader and Notch – and their dialogue, and change the time dedicated to Notch into a portion of the script dealing with exercise addiction and the current popular trend of encouraging people to exercise until they are ill or unable to continue.

In rehearsal, our relationship was collaborative, and Xiomara used my own impulses as a performer and writer to guide me as we worked on the show. She brought numerous exercises designed to help me explore characters, and these exercises directly impacted the development of the script. It was through these exercises that I made discoveries about characters who did not need to do what I had designed them to do. For example, having the Well-Meaning Archer in her original form, as a concerned motivator who accidentally says hurtful things as she attempts to help, proved unnecessary when I also had the series of people speaking about Tooka’s body and trying to compliment or help her. Xiomara challenged me in our conversations to think about what the Archer would bring to the show that was different from the string of characters who said things about my body in a scene that would eventually develop into a tableau at the dinner table.

The development of my scripts also reflected my journey toward making peace with the way that my relationship with my mom had encouraged both of us to pursue diets and to celebrate together each time I lost weight or embarked on a new diet program.

“Bird Back” included brief references to my relationship with my mom, friends, other family members, and strangers who had commented about my body, which

developed into a full dinner table scene in “Bird Song.” The script did not yet include a focus on my relationship with my mom, though she was one of the people who had made multiple comments about my body and whose comments were included.

A conversation we had about my body size the September after I wrote “Bird Back” inspired me to create the Well-Meaning Archer, an attempt to both accept that good intentions had led my mom to talk about my body and to make plans to establish boundaries with her in the future to avoid a repeat conversation.

My writing of the Archer influenced me to mentally draw boundary lines and assert my rights to own my body and only talk about it when I felt so inclined. In my mind, I played a scene multiple times in which I had a conversation with my mom about not talking about my body. I was not brave enough to have this conversation orally, so I sent a letter asking for her help and establishing boundaries. Today, I am uncertain whether the letter ever arrived, but writing it and sending it helped me to be more confident. In turn, my need for the Archer in my script became less potent. By the time I wrote “Bird Song,” I was ready to move from my own need for the Archer and more deeply consider what my audience, including family members, needed from the Bird.

My consideration of my relationship with my mother and the ways we had both evolved our own body image and views of diet culture together helped me to rewrite the Archer into a character that would encapsulate my mom in all her humanity and complication, and more accurately reflect our relationship and the way dieting and eating has interacted with that relationship. Though the original monologue of the Archer was important and represented an experience that many of my audience members expressed having been through themselves, the Archer only represented one facet of our

relationship. The newly developed character reflected the complicated ways in which our relationship has influenced us both in terms of body image and dieting, ways which have at times been delightful. Part of my reasoning in changing this character to more accurately represent my mom was that in “Bird Song” I wanted to explore the reasons that diet culture can be appealing and sometimes even seductive; this relationship is a specific part of my life that showcases the ways that cycling through diets can temporarily feel good and encourage repeat occurrences.

A Phone Call: A Bird Takes the Reins

(Melissa walks into her duplex. She has just come from an appointment with a doctor, who announced that her best option for regulating her cycle is to get weight loss surgery. She has heard of doctors discriminating because of body size but has only recently started experiencing it. She is still reeling from the appointment and beginning to feel a touch of anger. She dials her mom and waits for her to answer.)

MOM: The bitty baby girl!

MELISSA: Hi, Mom.

MOM: What’s up?

MELISSA: I just got back from the doctor.

MOM: How’d it go?

MELISSA: Not very well.

MOM: What happened?

MELISSA: Oh, he was more interested in talking about my weight than in actually talking about my health.

MOM: I’m sorry. What did he say?

MELISSA: Basically, that I just need to lose weight by dieting. Didn't give me any specific things to try, of course.

MOM: I hate that.

MELISSA: Oh, and he also mentioned weight loss surgery. He said that if I were ten years younger he'd say to just get weight loss surgery and then take some time to recover, but I'm too old for that now.

MOM: What an idiot.

MELISSA: Yeah.

MOM: Have you thought about changing doctors? He needs to respect you.

MELISSA: I don't know.

MOM: (*conspiratorially*) What do you weigh now?

MELISSA: I'm not telling you that!

MOM: Why not? It's not like I can talk. Look at me.

MELISSA: No. I just don't want to tell you.

MOM: Why not?

MELISSA: I'm more than my weight.

(To Melissa's amazement, the conversation quickly turns to other things, and her mom does not seem hurt by this part of the conversation. She breathes a sigh of relief and listens to her mom talk about her brother and sister-in-law.)

Collaboration as Method: Rewriting the Bird

(Melissa clutches her script to her chest, careful to not let the pages fly into the cold wind. It is a cold night, and she shivers as she walks toward the building where she will

rehearse her solo performance with her director. Despite the cold, Melissa is warm with excitement. She enjoys the icy wind, because it wakes her up for her evening rehearsal. When Melissa enters the building, Xiomara is sitting at a table, looking over some materials. Melissa hurries over to her, excited about her revelations between their last joint rehearsal and today.)

MELISSA: Hi.

XIOMARA: Hey, Melissa. How was your day?

MELISSA: It was pretty good. How was yours?

XIOMARA: Tiring. I've been looking forward to this all day.

MELISSA: Me too.

XIOMARA: I know it's work, but it feels so rewarding being here.

MELISSA: I know what you mean.

XIOMARA: We have a few minutes if you want to relax.

MELISSA: Okay. *(Pause. Melissa sits down by Xiomara.)* I was doing those exercises you gave me.

XIOMARA: That's great. *(Chuckling)* Imagine that, an actor actually doing their work.

MELISSA: I had an epiphany of sorts.

XIOMARA: Oh, yeah?

MELISSA: I was writing down questions for some of the characters. Here they are.

(Melissa shuffles through her pile of papers and withdraws some pages with handwritten notes. She hands them to Xiomara.)

XIOMARA: This is great. Can I keep these for now?

MELISSA: Sure. Well anyway, I was thinking about what Notch would be thinking before her entrance.

XIOMARA: Yeah.

MELISSA: I started writing some questions, and they're there, but I realized that they're basically a lot of the same things that the leader is thinking before she starts the meeting.

XIOMARA: Tell me more about that.

MELISSA: I guess Notch is a meeting leader too, and she's starting to bleed into the leader.

XIOMARA: What is Notch's purpose? What does she bring to the show that's different?

MELISSA: I mean, I guess she's tough and old, but it's getting more difficult to make that difference work.

XIOMARA: I see.

MELISSA: What do you think?

XIOMARA: I agree. I think Leader and Notch are two characters that are really similar, and each character needs to bring something different, because if they don't, why are they there? You see what I'm saying?

MELISSA: Yeah.

XIOMARA: I've actually had some of the same thoughts about Well-meaning Archer.

MELISSA: I've been struggling with her too. I'm worried, because I don't want to hurt anyone's feelings or have people think badly of them. Especially my mom. The Well-meaning Archer has morphed into a mix of friends and family members, but I'm not sure she'll see that.

XIOMARA: The Archer is also saying a lot of the same things that people are saying in your dinner table scene. What is her purpose?

MELISSA: She says those helpful things, but they're like arrows, because they pierce me and are actually hurtful.

XIOMARA: See, that's what I'm saying. A lot of what you have in the dinner scene is those helpful things that hurt. How is the Archer different?

MELISSA: Hm.

XIOMARA: I just want you think about these things.

MELISSA: Yeah.

XIOMARA: Are you ready to get started?

MELISSA: Let's do it.

(Melissa stands and goes to her chair for her improvisation activity. Xiomara shuffles her script and notes. She nods at Melissa, and Melissa begins walking around the chair, preparing to morph into the character Xiomara chooses. She has a lot to think about, but for now, she will simply act.)

Finding Utopia in Writing the Bird

When I wrote *Tooka* for performance, I investigated new ways of being in my body, or versions of a better future, or utopia, for me and my audience. In finding this better future, I employed multiple characters, all for a performance enacted with my own body. Jill Dolan asserts that “the monopolylogue form seems particularly suited for investigation as a site of utopian performatives because it models the fluidity of cultural identities and offers a method through which performers and spectators might experience them” (*Utopia in Performance* 67). I embodied multiple identities with differing

perspectives about body image and dieting; by embodying these characters, I could understand and reconcile the varying perspectives and thoughts I had encountered in my autoethnographic and textual research. By extension, I also offered my audience the chance to reconcile these conflicting viewpoints. My embodiment of multiple identities also brought a sort of harmony to these different characters; if they could live together within my body, certainly they could find ways to live together and accept each other in the world beyond my body and performance.

My performance of “Bird Song” presented my audience with a glimpse of what could be in the future, if we all work toward body acceptance. Though not everyone in the audience had a body like mine, I was certain as I performed that most, if not all, of my audience members had experienced shame because of their bodies, been told to change their bodies, and/or attempted to change their bodies. By embodying multiple identities on stage, I could connect with audience members with varying backgrounds and bodies. I was not simply Melissa, with my body; I was Tooka and multiple other characters. Together, the audience and I rehearsed a revolution for change, imagining together ways that we could deconstruct diet culture and usher in body positivity in our lives outside the theatre. In Chapter 4, I present the script for “Bird Song.” It was through this script that I could present a rehearsal for a revolution.

The Bird Prepares

(Tooka smiles at the audience and shakes her wings.)

TOOKA: Are you ready for my big debut? I’m ready. Sit back and breathe. The bird is coming to entertain you!

(The stage becomes a bird land, filled with flowers and small birds. Tooka takes center stage. Blackout.)

Chapter 4: The Bird Sings

The Bird Performs

(Spotlight up on Tooka, center stage. She takes a deep breath and opens her arms wide.)

TOOKA: This is my song.

Theoretical Considerations of a Bird's Song

As I rehearsed for a revolution of fat liberation, or body acceptance, it was necessary to partake of revolutionary acts. Included in these acts were confronting the audience with my own authorship of my body and my resistance to patriarchal structures, and confronting them with their own complicity in diet culture and placing them in a position of vulnerability along with me by turning my gaze on them multiple times during my performance.

By claiming the stage for myself, I actively worked against patriarchal expectations for my body and my self as a woman. Jeanie Forte asserts:

The female body as subject clashes in dissonance with its patriarchal text, challenging the very fabric of representation by refusing that text and posing new, multiple texts grounded in real women's experience and sexuality. This strategy is understood particularly in relation to Lacanian psychoanalysis which "reads" the female body as Lack, or Other, existing only to reflect male subjectivity and male desire. (220)

I was the subject of my show, focusing on my own story and will instead of on a male as subject. As I explored in Chapter 3, I consciously chose to focus on characters who would likely be read as women and to let the men in the audience see through my perspective as I had been trained to see through theirs. The multiple texts that Forte

mentions are made literal in my script and performance of “Bird Song,” manifesting in multiple characters and multiple stories and scenes. My body did not meet all the patriarchal standards for male desire, such as the expectation that I take up as little space as possible – beyond having a body that extends beyond the current standard of thinness for women, I took up the whole space of the stage, claiming that space, and I also at times claimed space in the audience by interacting with and walking among audience members; thus, I did not exist in my performance to reflect men’s desire and their subjectivity.

Forte further asserts: “Not merely a reflection of feminist theory, women’s performance art provides a visible basis for the construction of a feminist frame of reference, articulating alternatives for power and resistance” (235). Through my body in performance, I could claim power by claiming the stage, and I was also able to resist cultural demands that I remain invisible and disempowered in my fat body. My body in performance became a site of resistance, offering the audience new ways of seeing the fat body and, in my embodiment of multiple characters, multiple body types.

I further resisted patriarchal readings of my body and my self by turning my gaze back on the audience several times during “Bird Song,” whether I was delivering dieting advice as a meeting leader, casting them as me as I repeated words spoken to me about my body, shouting words of encouragement for a workout, telling them a scary story, or simply acknowledging their presence and talking to them as Tooka. Of these moments, the most confrontational moment was when I embodied the oppressors in my life who had made comments about my body, confronting the audience and myself with the weight of those words and our own complicity in participating in a culture which would deem such words appropriate.

By challenging the audience with my gaze, I also challenged patriarchal assumptions about and demands of my body. Rebecca Schneider writes:

The degree to which the seer is invisible, shrouded in the detached authority of his dislocation, is the degree to which he is blind-sided – vulnerable to being caught seeing. To be caught seeing, to be rendered visible, is ironically to be blinded or, within the terms of the perspectivalism, to lose one’s prerogatives as disinterested viewer. To be rendered visible is to be rendered blind, to be feminized, which is to say, castrated. (81)

By truly seeing the audience and looking back at them, I caught them seeing and rendered them visible, or blind as Schneider asserts. If I castrated the audience by seeing them, my moments of looking back at the audience also temporarily forced them to discontinue their identification with a male or patriarchal gaze and see my body from a new perspective. I fought against my own identification with men in looking at my own body during the writing of “Bird Song”, as I explored in Chapter 3. By turning my gaze back on the audience, I also fought their identification with how men would view my body (or how the patriarchy would teach them to view my body).

By seeing the audience and being seen during my performance, I could bodily engage the audience in the performance:

The secret is that the viewer and viewed are entangled in sensuous contact, sensuously complicit in the scene – bodies *are* engaged. Thus, even as we are “habituated” to tents of dislocation in perspectivalism, the sensuousness inherent in copying, in mimesis, as well as the way in which the eye is always already an

organ of tactility, resists the very separation to which the perspectival viewer habitually subscribes. (Schneider 89)

In my performance and our mutual gaze, the audience and I engaged with each other, no longer separated by their position as seer and my position as performer. This engagement was necessary as we envisioned together new ways forward toward body positivity, allowing us to come together during the performance and rehearse being a team in a revolution. In denying my audience their position as viewers ensconced within patriarchal ways of seeing my body, I gave them a connection to me and to my characters.

Documenting My Political Act

It is important I document my own political and transgressive act of performance. In *Transforming Visions: Feminist Critiques in Communication Studies*, edited by Sheryl Perlmutter Bowen and Nancy Wyatt and published in 1993, Langellier et al. assert in their essay “Performing Differences: Feminism and Performance Studies,” that “indeed, feminist criticism and performances exist, although much of this activity is unpublished performance and therefore difficult to access and assess” (88). By including my script in this dissertation, I am documenting and preserving my own performance and my critique of it and of diet culture. It is this documentation that will allow other scholars to enter into dialogue with my work as artist and scholar.



Figure 2 Picture of a bird

Introducing the script

The Tooka bird has not always spoken for me, with me, and to me. She developed as a silent manifestation of my creativity, a way of being in my body when I was feeling playful. My husband had known of her for years, having declared on more than one occasion that I was a bird, a statement with which I would readily agree. When I needed a voice for expressing what I had been going through my whole life with body image, a voice to stand up for me and to embrace the pain and vulnerability I was finally letting in when I decided to work on my body image instead of dieting, I chose her. I initially tried to write a script using my own voice as Melissa, but I immediately recoiled from that action, whether because it was too painful or because I needed a voice who could accept my journey without judgement. Tooka was a happy yet vulnerable persona, able to embrace the totality of my experiences without judging them.

What follows is the final version of the script I performed on March 2 and March 4, 2016. I have included notes to clarify the action that occurred onstage, and after the final version of the script, I also include excerpts from (not much) earlier versions of the script. Much was cut and condensed for the final version, making for a dynamic performance and a short, not always clearly written version of the script. I have adjusted the formatting for inclusion in this chapter, changing the script from the playwriting format I originally used to a format that better fits a written work. Action is set apart in (parentheses) and *italicized*. I updated the action/stage directions to reflect the way I performed this piece, with the hope that it will come to life for the reader.

Bird Song

March 2016

(Stage is bare except for three cubes at center, a small cube downstage left, a bass guitar and amplifier upstage right, and projections on a screen that show bird feathers, beautiful and close enough to the feather that it is perhaps not clear that these are bird feathers.

As a single light fades up on the bass guitar, a recording of an interview begins playing in the semi-darkness.)

INTERVIEWER (V.O.): What is something that you think that people don't know about you?

TOOKA (V.O.): That they don't know about me? Well, sometimes I like to sing, and, and my voice gets very loud. But then, see, sometimes you can't sing when you go out because people don't like it. They tell you not to, and then see, they're mean, and they say, Why you singin', you shouldn't be singin'. So that's one thing about me that I don't know that everybody knows about me, that I sing a very loud song at home.

(Cue "I'm Every Woman" by Whitney Houston. Slowly the lights fade down, then fade up in a different place, at a door stage right of the audience.

Enter LEADER. She carries a bag of supplies for this meeting. The bag, like her, is stylish. The audience does not yet know that her supplies are two bottles of Coke Zero, to keep her energized, and a jar labeled "Weight Loss Lottery" with slips of paper informing the audience members who draw exactly what has happened to their weight when they attend this meeting.

LEADER runs across the front row, giving high fives to everyone seated there. She does a glamorous turn, then points to the audience as the music fades.)

LEADER: Good evening! Welcome to tonight's WW360 meeting. I see a lot of new faces tonight! Remember to stay after for orientation, all you newbies! If you're an oldie, you can still stay after for orientation, and we can do a refresher. Are we feeling good? Ready for the weight loss lottery? Let's do it! I can see already that some of you came with less of yourselves today. Let's see who's a winner – and a loser (*wink*) – on the scale! Don't forget, if you didn't have a great week, you can always use your free pass. Just let me know when I get to you.

(LEADER sets the bag on a cube. She pulls out the "Weight Loss Lottery" jar and shuffles the tickets by shaking the jar around, winking at the audience. She goes to a few people, offering the lottery. To each lottery ticket, she has an answer. She can be stern, sympathetic, excited, and if someone lost 5 pounds, it's time for a group celebration! What follows is an account of each possible ticket – there were always four – and LEADER'S response to each.)

TICKET: "Lost 2 pounds."

LEADER: Two pounds! Would you like to share what made you successful? (*As soon as the person opens his/her mouth to speak, the LEADER cuts him/her off with*) Okay, thank you!

TICKET: "Lost no weight."

LEADER: (*sympathetic*) Sometimes the body holds onto the weight for a while. You'll probably lose it soon.

TICKET: "Gained 2 pounds."

LEADER: (*stern*) Do you know what you did? (*Generally, the audience member either says “Yes?” or shakes their head in confusion.*) But you’re not going to do it again. (*To this, the audience member says “No?”*) Okay.

TICKET: “Lost 5 pounds.”

LEADER: Lost five pounds! (*Leads the audience in applauding the audience member. Once all these tickets have been drawn, though not necessarily in that order, the LEADER retreats back to cubes with jar.*) We’ll get started with the meeting in just a minute. (*She takes out a bottle of Coke Zero and takes a nice, long, jittery drink. Then she catches sight of the audience again and sets the bottle down, putting her high energy persona back into place.*) Hi, everyone. Are we ready to start? Last week’s topic was Eat Less, Get more energized. (*LEADER indicates the projector screen behind her, which now contains the following quote.*) Here’s a quote from one of our websites: “After all the news came out last night, you might be wondering what I ate after dinner. Did he eat a huge bowl of ice cream? No! He had his ‘fake’ ice cream (0% fat Greek yogurt w/ frozen berries and Fiber One). And a spoonful of ice cream” (taken from manmeetsscale.com, a website blog which is no longer available in its entirety. David Kirchhoff wrote this in his Weight Watchers shortly after resigning from his position as CEO of Weight Watchers). Guess what? He’s more energized than ever. Turn to your neighbor and talk about your successes this week with eating less and having more energy. (*Same ritual as before at the cubes. LEADER takes a big swig of Coke Zero.*) I got on the WW wagon back in 1999. I lost the weight. It was a lot more complicated back then. I fell off the wagon too, of course. But I got back on and lost the weight, and I’m a lifetime rider on that wagon. I fell off the wagon too, of course, and then I came back,

and now I'm a lifetime member. It's pretty easy to get on that WW wagon nowadays. You kickstart that wagon, a two-week kickstart, and you learn to choose the right foods. There's absolutely no measuring or weighing those first two weeks. Lots of riders lose a lot of weight during that time. You know, I did the new plan just recently, and without even trying, I lost 3 lbs! Excuse me just a moment. *(Same ritual as before. More Coke Zero this time.)* I'll be frank. If I gain weight, I get two weeks to lose it. If I don't, I lose my job. We promote health. Paying for your wagon ride motivates you to be healthy and happy. Now that's incentive to stay on track. *(LEADER indicates the projector screen behind her, which now contains the following quote.)* Here's another great quote, from a member: "Time and time again, I ALWAYS come back to the [WW] way of life. I know it might sound corny but it just works!" (<http://irresistibleicing.com/2014/01/weight-watchers-inches-and-my-blog.html>). *(Same ritual.)* I cannot say enough good things about the WW. You know what? When I was 22 and I graduated college, I gained 7 pounds, and I didn't want to have low self-esteem. I went to the WW and learned how to eat, and I lost that weight and kept it off. The best part is, you're required to eat treats every day. You might eat a slice of butter, or some wagon-branded candy for your treats. We require it, because then you can stay on the wagon. Excuse me. *(Same ritual, though a bit different. This time, LEADER takes out an entire 2-liter bottle of Coke Zero from her bag and takes a big sip. She holds onto the bottle as she jumps up and energetically bounces to center stage. LEADER indicates the projector screen behind her, which now contains the following quote.)* Listen to this super awesome quote! "[The WW] is a new way of eating, it's not just a diet. No food is off limits" (<http://rustycab.com/10-reasons-why-weight-watchers-works/>). I like to make a soda cake with diet Coke, and then I cut it

really small, so then I can have two pieces if I want. It makes me feel like I'm having more. You know what else? If I'm really hungry, I can eat an extra apple! We're all adults here. We know how much we need to eat. (*LEADER begins picking up her bags, packing her things as she speaks to the audience.*) Remember, if you gained, it's probably because you had a bad week that caught up with you. If you lost, well, you did something right. I hope to see less of you next week! (*LEADER begins walking toward the exit with her bags.*)

(A clip of Tooka calling for cookies plays in the space. LEADER stops and listens. As she listens, she drops her bags and begins a transformation into a bird. After a few moments, LEADER has disappeared and the performer is now TOOKA. TOOKA looks around curiously, her bird head tilting from side to side. She catches sight of the guitar and slowly, cautiously approaches it. She picks up the bass guitar and puts it on, then looks out at the audience. Plays a riff. She begins to sing a song, slowly becoming bolder and flirting with the audience as she continues her song.)

TOOKA: (*Singing, still playing the bass*)

I got curves

Ow

You like that?

Mmmmmm

Some people say

I should be smaller

But I'm here

And I like it

Big, small, and in between

I been all three

I like it

(Bows and takes off guitar.) Hellooo! *(If the audience responds, a nod and a wave. If the audience doesn't respond, a second try.)* I say, hellooo! *(A smile and a nod.)* My name is Tooka, and I'm a tooka bird. *(Bird call)* Tookieeeeeeeeees. *(Pause)* Tookieeeeeeeeees.

(Walks around the space, searching for her tookies. Sniffs them, locates them behind the cube.) Tookieeeeeeeeees. Tookieeeeeeeeees. Tookieeeeeeeeees. *(Looks behind the cube.)*

Tookies! *(Pulls out a bag of cookies.)* Tookies! *(TOOKA sits and chats with audience.)* I like tookies. That's why I'm a Tooka bird. I call for the tookies, and they appear. And then they stay... *(pinches back)* right here. Most women say that things go to their hips, but I'm a bird, so it goes to my back. No, really. It's not the tookies. It's the mean old lady who comes to punish me when I eat the tookies. She puts guilt in my back, and then it looks really big when I look in the mirror. Happens right after I eat French fries too. The bird back puffs up. You might like to meet the mean old lady.

MEAN OLD LADY: *(Bares her teeth. Chomps loudly at the audience with her teeth.)*

TOOKA: *(Closes her cookie bag and drops it between the cubes.)* The old lady doesn't like it when I eat tookies. Never has. She wants me to eat steaks and salads with no dressing. She says they're healthy. They make your bird back shrink and then the steak sits in the bird tummy for a long time, to make it strong! *(Cheerfully)* I'm an herbivore. My dog's not a vegetarian. If my husband and I suddenly died, she would eat us both. It would be an act of love. All the more reason to keep a little extra bird back, so she can have a tastier meal. *(Pause. Tooka looks at the audience seriously.)* I've had a smaller

bird back before. Sometimes it's a little smaller. Sometimes it's a lot smaller. I can show you the reactions to my size, the many compliments and advice from friends, family, and strangers if you'd like to join me at the dinner table. *(TOOKA grabs a smaller cube and sets it center stage, then sits down. After a moment, she transforms into the first character, now eating dinner. Each character has their own mannerisms and ways of speaking, and their personalities are revealed through their relationships with the food they eat, serve, and play with at the dinner table. These lines are delivered directly to various audience members, casting them in the role of Tooka as she hears this for the first time. The only exception is that the first part of the first line is delivered to the dead space in the center aisle, before turning and casting an audience member as Tooka's mate and arguing with him.)*

MONSTER: Why are you so fat? She is beautiful. She could die. She could get diabetes. She could die. She could get diabetes and die.

MAN ON THE STREET: Hey girl, you smokin! You know you smokin! Smokin!

MOM: No, you were a lot smaller then. You looked *good*.

COACH: I would never discriminate because of weight. There are some girls on the team who could stand to lose twenty pounds.

AUNT: Those pants are pretty tight, huh? We're worried about you. We think you've gained weight.

GRANDDAD: *(Quietly)* I think she doesn't want the cake because of what we said to her.

TONY: You're the first girl I've been on a date with who I can really be myself with. I think we have a connection. And you're smart, too. I like that.

LESLIE: Did you fall and flatten your chest?

GABE: Now, you dress appropriately. You look nice. You're one of those girls you could take home to mom. But this girl... Really? *Maxim*? You do not do that and expect to keep your job. Come on.

JILL: Her boobs actually are bigger. Must be all the hormones from that birth control.

MAN IN THE STREET: Excuse me. Excuse me, Beautiful! Will you marry me? Well, then how about dinner. You're 17? Oh, man.

UNCLE: Are you sure you haven't lost too much weight? You're awfully small.

PHARMACY WORKER: Excuse me. I don't want to offend you, but... I've seen a lot of girls come in here, and some of them are pretty, you know, but you...you kinda built like a sista. You got that nice...

MOM: You look so small around here. (*Indicates hips, lower abdomen*) You're so much smaller than those other girls.

DEAN: Theatre? Oh, I'm totally into that. Yeah, I'm totally into art. My friend does body art, like tattoos and stuff.

TOOKA: That last one like the bird back so much he wanted to grab it, but the bird wouldn't let him! (*She stands and dances around her small cube as she delivers the next poem.*)

My bird body

Is nobody's business

But mine

My bird body

Is mine mine

Mine

I'm taking back the night

(Tooka takes her final pose and elicits audience applause. She then approaches the audience, looking very serious.) Would you like to hear a story? *(Gauges the crowd's reaction and begins asking a select few audience members to join her onstage.)* You might get scared, though. Is that okay? It's a scary story, okay? *(Gauges the crowd's reaction again. She instructs the three audience members to sit facing her, in front of the group of three cubes where she will tell her story. She sits on a cube to begin her story.)*

Well, okay then. Snuggle in close, and I'll tell you the story. One time, there was a bird.

She was a nice bird. She walked around pecking at things and eating things and doing many things that birds like to do. She was a happy little bird, and she liked being a bird.

Birds like to be birds. Then, one time, she found out that some birds are skinny birds and some birds are medium birds and some birds, like her, are big birds. *(Ominous)* Then she came. It wasn't the Mean Old Lady. Oh no, this was much worse. It was...the Monster!

(Lunges at the three audience members, flapping threateningly.) She was a mean old monster. She had skin that hung from her bones in shreds. Her eyes were beady. Her mouth trembled, and her teeth were bared. She looked like she wanted to eat the bird!

(Begins walking around the stage, splitting her attention between the three audience members who have joined her and the rest of the audience.) The bird was scared! She hopped from one foot to other, trying to escape the monster. *(Hops, demonstrating, then resumes her monstrous walking.)* But the monster kept coming after her, shouting and dripping foam from its mean old mouth. It grumbled and rumbled, and it came closer and closer. The bird did not know what to do. It opened its mean old mouth and said,

(Imitating Monster) She could die. She could get diabetes. She could die. She could get diabetes and die. *(As Tooka)* The bird hopped back and hopped behind her bird mate. Then, with a big, loud roar, he said, *(As Mate, in a roaring voice)* That's rude. *(As Monster)* She could die! *(As Tooka)* The monster kept coming, following the bird and her mate, foaming and rumbling and grumbling. Her bird mate pecked and snarled, and he and the monster fought a mighty battle. *(Pause, quieter now)* He did not defeat the monster, because he couldn't, but the bird and her mate got away. The monster gave up and grumbled and rumbled away, to find other birds and to feed its rotting teeth with sour juice to prepare it for other battles. *(Quiet, ominous)* To this day, we don't know where the monster went. Beware, because it could come...for you! *(Jumps at one of the audience members onstage with her. Amid the ensuing laughter, she escorts the audience members back to their seats.)* That was a scary story. I got scared. Did you? Did you like the story, though? Me too. I'm scared I might meet a scary mean old monster again. *(Looks at the audience, then at her bass, then defiantly at the audience. She rushes to the bass, eager to express herself with music. Puts on guitar, plays a riff. Singing)*

My bird body

Is everybody's business

But mine

I can look

But they can look

And they can touch

They can talk

And they can decide

How big my bird body

Is supposed to be

It gets a little bigger

Not so good

It gets a little smaller

That's real good

It gets a lot smaller

Smaller

Smaller

Smaller

(TOOKA continues playing the same note as she repeats the word "smaller," getting faster and more anxious until she plays the wrong note. On playing the wrong note, she stops playing abruptly and looks out at audience for a moment, frantic. Turning her face to the sky, she calls for her tookies.) Tookieeeeeeees! *(Walks in search of her cookies)*

Tookieeeeeeees! *(Stops C and looks up beseechingly)* Tookieeeeeeees! *(Wailing)*

Tookieeeeeeees! *(Looks around mournfully for a moment, then resumes singing a more cheerful song. Singing)*

Tookies is good

Tookies is nice

Tookies you eat

Tookies at night

Tookies tookies tookies

Tookieeeeeeees

(Speaking) Tookies is the best! They make you feel nice, and then you eat them. *(Rubs her tummy)* Let me tell you what, though. When I was on the wagon I used to just not eat anything bad, except for when I did eat bad things later, and then I ate lots of bad things. When I was on the wagon, I would go to bird parties and just count out some bad things, and then I would eat them and then I would stare at them for the rest of the night.

(Dreamy sigh) I was having a love affair with the bad foods. It was nice. But now, see, I don't have the same kind of attraction to them. I don't daydream about them all the time anymore. It's like when you have a crush on another bird. With totorn, it didn't matter how long it had been since I last ate it; the first taste was always like the first time. And sometimes it was really hot, and that was nice. Take is sweet. Sometimes take shows up at work, and it surprises you, and you like, oh take, you so sweet. It's embarrassing, but sometimes I like to lick it. But tookies. Like sometimes, you bake tookies for class, and then you get to work with the raw ingredients, and you get to find out everything about them, what's inside, how they smell, how they feel, both before and after baking them. You spend all your time around them, and then you learn a lot, and you can smell them, and they look so nice, and you know much more than before, and then you think about them even more than before. Tookies has that nice chocolate smell, but then it's not just chocolate, and when they bake you smell them all over the nest, and you know when they come to visit because they smell so pretty. They taste pretty. Sometimes you say, Well I just want to introduce my friend to tookies, it's just for my friend, but then you taste one, and it's so good. *(Sensual)* Mmmmm. *(Pause. Wistful)* It's nice, and I miss having crushes on my food. *(Pause. Tooka lifts her beak and sniffs. Phone rings.)* Oh, I forgot, I'm expecting a call. Is that okay? *(Searching the stage)* Where is it? *(Approaching an*

TOOKA: Sorry, I had to take a phone call. I hope you were okay out here. You know, I was just thinking about how nice it was when I used to get back on the wagon. I'd always have a big feast with my special friend the night before getting back on, and then we'd get so full we'd just roll around like bird eggs! *(Laughing, Tooka demonstrates being very full and walking funny. Her arms are out wide to accommodate her fullness, and she leans back into the walk, sticking out her stomach, walking slowly.)* See, it's fun. *(Selects a few audience members.)* Would you like to try it. *(Tooka brings the audience members on the stage with her and coaches them to walk like she has been walking. She makes little comments, such as "It's kind of like walking on the moon." After a couple minutes, she thanks the audience members and escorts them back to their seats.)* Now, wasn't that fun? We've been having so much fun that I'd like to call in another bird friend for you to meet. This bird likes to be super active, all the time! I have to call her with a special bird call. Are you ready? *(Tooka turns her back to the audience and turns her face in profile, calling out to the side of the stage.)* Hello? Hellooooooooooooo?
(Tooka turns and calls toward the other side of the stage, now Notch. She alternates directions each time she becomes Tooka or Notch again.)

NOTCH: Hellooooooooooooo to you.

TOOKA: Hellooooooooo!

NOTCH: Hellooooooooo to you.

TOOKA: Tookieeeeeees!

NOTCH: No tookies!

TOOKA: Tookieeeeeees!

NOTCH: No tookies!

TOOKA: Tookieeeeeeeeees!

NOTCH: Sweeeeeeeeeaaaaaaaaaaaat!

TOOKA: Tookieeeeeeeeees!

NOTCH: Sweeeeeeeeeaaaaaaaaaaaat!

TOOKA: Oh, here she comes!

(She turns to the side and claps sharply, now Notch. Notch repeats exercise motivational phrases from the internet. Notch runs to the cubes, treating them as various pieces of exercise equipment, doing a different exercise for each motivational saying in her line. Two of the lines she delivers to audience members. She even looks in an imaginary mirror and checks herself out as she delivers the second to last motivational saying, before hopping on the “treadmill” to sprint during the last saying.)

NOTCH:

Your brain gives up before your body.

Better sore than sorry.

The difference between try and triumph is a little umph.

You don't get the ass you want by sitting on it.

Making excuses burns zero calories per hour.

Today it hurts. Tomorrow it works.

If your heart doesn't feel like it's going to rip out of your chest, you are not working hard enough!

(Notch becomes Tooka and tires quickly, then stumbles off the treadmill. She doubles over, struggling to catch her breath as she wheezes.)

TOOKA: Wasn't that fun? My friend always says that if you work hard enough, you'll fly. I'd like to fly! Maybe I should try it? (*Tooka stands and spreads her wings. She wobbles precariously for a moment, then jumps and lands in a heap.*) Well, that didn't work so well, did it? Suppose I try again? What do you think? (*Tooka elicits some response from the audience before continuing. After getting a response of some sort, she nods and stumbles toward the small cube downstage left, flapping her arms. She stops short of the cube, breathing hard yet again.*) Do any of you know how to fly? Could you tell me the first step? (*Tooka takes the audience's instructions and tries the first thing.*) Now what? (*Tooka tries more and more suggestions. Eventually, she runs a circle around the space, flapping her wings. When she comes back to her starting place, she stumbles and stops, clearly exhausted. She thinks a moment, then*) You know, I think I know someone who could teach us to fly. Should I call her? Okay. I'll go get my friend Bliss.

(*Tooka sits on one of the center cubes and turns, reaching behind her. She reveals a soft chiffon scarf, which she floats into the air and down in front of her body. She is now Bliss. As she speaks, she holds the scarf lovingly, caressing it and running it over her body.*)

BLISS

These soft curves

That hold you at night

Whisper sweetly

To me

I love you

My body is pleasing

Soft and blended

Colors

Like your favorite paintings

Supple flesh

These breasts

Like a painted goddess

Waiting to hold you

Comfort and arouse you

This body

Sleeping beside you

And lying under your

Soft gaze

These legs

Strong, they dance

(Soft music. Bliss dances around the stage, twirling and floating the chiffon scarf as she dances. At the end of the dance, she stops, becoming still and standing tall. She smiles at the audience.)

Soft and gentle

Waves of bliss

Happiness enfolds you

Your stomach is strong

It keeps the life

Flowing through you

Your head lifts up

Up to the wind

You take flight

Your bird wings

Beating

Against your body

Strong bird wings

Strong and sure

Fly fly fly

Fly away home

Little bird

Take to the winds

Spread those wings

Soar high

(Bliss twirls with the scarf. Mid turn she transforms into Tooka, the turn becoming exuberant and not quite as graceful. Tooka steps out of the turn and laughs. Tooka runs around the stage, jumping flapping her wings, "flying.")

TOOKA: I can fly! Flying's fun! *(She runs with the scarf to the center cubes, then drops it behind the cubes, out of sight.)* When I have hatchlings someday, I'm going to take them flying every day. I remember when I was a hatchling. *(Pause)* Would you like to meet Hatchling Tooka?

(After a response from the audience, Tooka sits, now Hatchling Tooka.)

HATCHLING TOOKA: Hi. My name is Tooka. (*Shyly*) I'm a bird. (*Hatchling Tooka taps her toe and generally acts shy.*) It's nice to meet you. Sometimes I do this (*pulls back skin on her arm*) and then I look like the other birds. Sometimes the other birds don't like it, though, because I sit down and it, my tummy does this (*demonstrates her stomach*) and they don't like it. Sometimes I lay down, and then my tummy looks smaller. (*demonstrates*) But my one friend, her tummy doesn't have a pooch, and it doesn't have that one part. My mama bird says that all lady birds have that part that goes here (*indicates lower abdomen*) but my one friend, she doesn't have it.

My friend Jewel Bird says the other birds think I'm fat and ugly. She said she's fat and ugly too, so it's okay, but I told her she's not fat and ugly, and I don't think I am either.

Sometimes I don't finish my lunch, and my teacher doesn't like it. She's mean. One time, my brother he, um, she made him eat his whole lunch, and then he threw up, and then she made him clean it up.

I went to the bird center with Mama Bird today. I can read lots of things now. Today, when one of the birds was leaving a bird meeting with Mama Bird, I read the sentence next to all the pictures. (*Reads*) "You can do it too." (*Confused*) The bird was happy, and she said Thank you, honey, and she was excited about it. She smiled at me. I like the pictures of my Mama Bird the best. We took an after picture next to the Christmas tree.

I went to bird school, and I was trying to get my supplies when the bird in front of me turned and said, You're so fat and ugly. I thought about telling my Mama Bird, but I was too embarrassed.

TOOKA: It took many, many years to tell my Mama Bird what had happened.

HATCHLING TOOKA: I like to reach my talons into the food cage and get more bird food. Sometimes I get the bird drinks too. There's a lock on the cage, but if I wiggle just right I can get the food. It tastes good.

TOOKA: I don't know why Bubba Bird needed his own food cage anyway.

HATCHLING TOOKA: That big yellow bird looked at me today and cawed, Shoo pig, don't bother me. I didn't chirp back with anything mean, but I wanted to later. He always smells like sour alphabet soup. I wish he would move, but he never has.

(Hatchling Tooka turns and lies down on a different cube, transforming into Teenage Tooka.)

TEENAGE TOOKA: I started that special diet in 17 magazine. They said to put a whole can of mushrooms on my spaghetti.

TOOKA: That was a lot of mushrooms.

TEENAGE TOOKA: I got Twizzlers instead of chocolate, and I drank a diet Coke, and I got my popcorn without anything on it. I think that's okay.

I ate a burger without the bun and some lettuce for supper. My aunt asked if I was going on a diet, and I said yes. She was happy for me.

(Very upset) I didn't get on the drill team. I don't understand. I think maybe it's my weight, and my Mama Bird thinks so too, and so does my bird friend.

TOOKA: Then someone dropped, and I got to be on the drill team anyway.

TEENAGE TOOKA: I told Mama Bird I want to go to fat camp. She said if I was really serious about it, she would trust the bird center a lot more with my health. We talked

about it for a while, and she's going to let me go to the bird center, and then I can stay right here.

I had my first meeting today at the bird center. That bird is old friends with my mama bird. When we met, she said that I look healthy, and I would be fine at the size I am now, but she'll work with me if I really want to lose weight. I was flattered, but I'm 17 and I know what I want. I want a smaller bird back.

TOOKA: Sometimes I wonder what would have happened if I had listened to my old bird friend. But what happened next was pretty exciting.

TEENAGE TOOKA: I'm ready to peck my bulge off!

(Teenage Tooka dances around, pecking at herself. Soon she tires and plops down on a center cube.)

TOOKA: Hatchlings sure can peck a lot. They can peck and peck, and they just keep going. It sure is tiring for us older birds, let me tell you what. Why, when I was a hatchling, I could go and go and go. I often flew around and chirped because I was very excited about my peckings. Even when I wasn't trying to have a smaller bird back for a while, I still pecked because it was a lifestyle. That's why they say that it's not a diet, it's a lifestyle, because you get to do it all the time, even if your bird back stays the same or starts to grow. *(Leaning in)* You know, the more I talk about it, the more I'd like to start pecking again. Sounds nice, doesn't it? I think I even remember how. Let's do it together.

(Tooka reaches between the cubes and pulls out a dieting kit, with pellets and a manual.)

Ready? Okay. Breakfast. One pellet. *(Eats a pellet. Waits for a bit, getting hungry, then excitedly)* Lunch. I'm awfully hungry, so I'll do four. Four pellets. *(Shoves four pellets into her mouth and gobbles them up. Waits for a bit, getting hungry, then excitedly)*

Dinner. (*Removes the pellet bag, now empty, from the kit.*) Oh dear, I've run out of pellets. I was only supposed to have two for lunch and two for dinner. Now I don't have any. What to do? Oh, I have a manual! Let's see what it says. (*Reading manual*) In case of running out of pellets, drink plenty of water. (*Takes out water, swigs it. Waits for a moment. Still hungry. Returns to manual*) Flapping can greatly reduce hunger symptoms. Fly around the room a few times. (*Stumbles around, trying to fly, then collapses onto the small downstage left cube. Returns to manual*) Brush your beak. Sometimes the minty taste will tell you you're not really hungry. (*Brushes her beak. Waits a moment.*) Oh dear. Something must be wrong with me. I'm still hungry. (*Returns to manual*) In case of dire emergency, one small berry may be consumed. Be sure to take small bites, because then it will last longer. (*Runs back to center cubes. Takes out tiny berry from dieting kit.*) Mmmm. Good for the tummy. Small bites. (*Tooka prances around the stage. Between each tiny bite, she shuffles and prances, humming cheerfully. After the last bite:*) That really hit the spot! (*Smiles widely. Sits down in a heap after a moment*) Still hungry! What can I do now? (*Returns to manual*) Hello, bird. If you've reached this point in the manual, you're obviously doing something wrong. You need to get real and shape up, or this program simply will not work for you. You're an adult bird. You should know if you need an extra berry during the day. Are you really hungry? Do you think you should be hungry? Are you used to eating more? Don't let bad habits keep you from your goals. Put this manual down and meditate. (*Tooka sets down the manual and gets into a meditation pose. She breathes deeply, centering herself. When she speaks, it is as if in a trance, words slow and flowing together.*)

Pecking and perching

Flying and flapping

Um, bird back

Um, please to hush

You will shrink

Just trust me

You will shrink

(Tooka takes on the voice of the bird back, a deep, rumbling voice.)

BACK:

Rumble, rumble

Grumble, grumble

No you don't

Feed me now

Or I will grow

TOOKA:

Um, bird back

Um

Um

Um

Bird back

To be pleased

(Tooka jumps up and shakes her feathers. Tooka picks up the manual and, with a grand

flourish, begins reading.) The last resort! Dear bird, if you have reached this page. You

are beyond help. You need to grow up and take responsibility for your own bird back. We

cannot make you follow the plan. If you choose to follow it, you will see. Your tummy will shrink, and the bird back will soon follow, and the hours of pecking will be well worth your trouble. So just ignore your rumblings and grumbings, and remember why you're here – to get smaller, not to get larger. Good luck, bird. *(Tooka begins to get sad, then spots something. Excited)* There's a footnote! Listen to this. We made this bird plan to help birds everywhere to shrink their bird backs. If you have come to the end of this manual and require more help, we will allow you to come in and consult for a reasonable fee. There is no shame in getting help. Please come to our birdhouse, and bring the required fee. We will get your bird back smaller in no time at all. Bring a bird friend, and you will enjoy a second consultation at half price! *(Tooka begins hopping and chirping excitedly.)* Did you hear that? I can come in for a reasonable fee! Wait, there's more! *(Reading from manual)* For a limited time, you can get two boxes of our special pellets for twice the cost of one box. Just bring the required fee and a little extra for these special boxes. *(Turning and clapping her hands)* What a bargain! Isn't that so exiting?! Let's celebrate! Look, here's a song in the manual! *(Tooka runs to the bass guitar and puts it on. Places manual where she can read from it. Plays a celebratory riff. Singing)*

This bird back
Is a very big back
It grumbles and it rumbles
Grumble rumble
I like my back
I love my back
I love it so much

I want to make it less

It gets smaller

And much smaller

Smaller and smaller

Less and less food

More and more flying

Less food

More flying

Less food

Less food

Less food

(Tooka abruptly stops playing and stares out at the audience, looking bewildered. Slowly removes the guitar and places it on the stand. Walks to the center cubes and sits, deep in thought.) Sometimes, I think about the old days, when those plans and things made me feel good. Oh, they felt nice. *(Pause)* I don't do that anymore, but you know what? I'm happy. The bird back's happier with me now too. It doesn't grumble and rumble at me near as often as before. You know what else? My bird back likes it when I sing, too. The bird back doesn't care if sometimes I'm off key. It just likes my bird song. *(Stands and approaches audience.)* Do any of you have nice bird songs? Have you tried to learn your bird songs yet? *(Taps her chest)* They're in here, deep down inside. Did you know that? Sometimes it takes many, many years to find your bird song. Sometimes other birds and monsters and mean old ladies don't want you find your bird song. They just want you to spend all your time pecking. But I like my bird song. I think it's pretty nice. It was pretty

hard to find my song. I thought I found it, many, many times, but then it kept changing and evolving. Bird songs evolve, and many times they become stronger. When birds sing together, it's a beautiful sound. Have you ever heard birds singing together? I have. It makes me feel good. It would make you feel good, too. Would you like to hear my bird song? *(Gets audience response)* Listen close, and you'll hear it.

(Recording starts. Tooka turns and walks to the center cubes. She looks off into space, taking in the recording. A bird slowly takes flight on the projection screen behind her.)

INTERVIEWER (V.O.): What are your goals?

TOOKA (V.O.): For what?

INTERVIEWER (V.O.): Um, for being the bird that you want to be in your life.

TOOKA (V.O.): For being the bird I wanna be? Well, I would like to get confident enough to sing, even when people tell me not to, for one thing. And I would like to, you know, be happy. Of course, I wanna have little baby birds. And I have a birdband who would fertilize the eggs for me. And then I wanna teach those to fly.

INTERVIEWER (V.O.): One last question. When you think about your bird shows, and particularly your own work in telling your story and you know, doing your own solo bird performance work, why is what you do so important to you?

TOOKA (V.O.): Well, I think it's important to share your bird song with people who listen. And I think it helps other birds come up with their own songs. And I think that that's a big thing for me. And sometimes when you can do different bird things and people laugh, then sometimes they think more about it later. You know, they're not just like, you know, you're, that bird's wrong. Sometimes if you can make 'em laugh, then they laugh and they enjoy it, and then later on they say, well that bird had a point. You

know. So that's one thing that I like to do, is to make people laugh, to make birds chirp, and have their own songs.

(Tooka turns and watches the flying bird for a moment before the lights and projection fade.)

(End of play)



Figure 3 "Bird Song" Curtain Call. Photo courtesy of Rebecca Allen Photography.

Notes: Changes to the Script and Final Notes on Process

What follows is a section of notes pertaining to the events and research captured in this script. I wrote this script autoethnographically, focusing on both my own experiences with dieting and body image, and also my research in and experience with various diet programs and ways that my culture has dealt with my body, be it thin, fat, or in between.

Leader: The Reality of Weight Loss Programs

Leader reflects the reality of various workers in the weight loss industry, including meeting leaders for weight loss programs that require meetings of multiple people in the same program.

During my years of dieting, I only experienced the meeting leader in one program; in most of the programs I tried, I was either following a program from the internet or a program in a book by someone I trusted to be an expert (Dr. Phil McGraw), or I was in a program that required one-on-one meetings with the workers who counseled me. Often, these workers I met with were charismatic, and there were a couple with whom I had great chemistry, one of them being my mom's friend, a woman whom I had known since I was a little girl accompanying my mom to her shifts at the Diet Center. This woman was to be my first real guide in the culture of dieting, and the healthiest guide, balancing her concern for my welfare with her belief that dieting might be healthy and was certainly not harmful. I was well-acquainted with the way that these one-on-one meetings worked by the time I began college, and I continued to engage in programs with this type of interaction. While these women did not need to lead groups of people in meetings, I suspect that they would have been well equipped to do so, with their charming personalities and ability to embrace feelings of enthusiasm, brush off feelings of disappointment, and give me the obligatory "I know you can do this" talk during weeks when the usual "cheating" I engaged in resulted in weight gain instead of weight loss.

I was 27-years-old by the time I began attending Weight Watchers, intending to lose weight before my wedding (I did). I already knew that my body was unpredictable,

rewarding me one week with weight loss for sneaking that ice cream cone and gaining weight the very next week when I did the same thing. I was a cynic, knowing that diets do not guarantee predictable weight loss results, yet not knowing how to live without putting myself on frequent diets. Earlier that year, I had suffered from gastritis for a whole month, and I had been quite pleased with the weight I lost because of my appetite waning from a combination of the physical pain of the illness and the butterflies in my stomach while I was first dating my partner. My appetite came back in full force after we both said, "I love you," and with it, the weight I had lost. The year before that, I had tried SlimFast, and I had enjoyed it, partly because taking a shake or a bar to class seemed much easier than eating real food. By the time I joined Weight Watchers, I was ready to do my dance with dieting and enjoy my short term "success."

I went to a variety of meetings with different leaders during the three years in which I was a member, and I also snuck into meetings the year after that to help me in researching my folklore project and writing my short script for my class in auto/biographical performance. Some meetings were in spaces that allowed for leaders to use a projection system that played a presentation much like a Power Point, with occasional live action commercials advertising the latest innovation, be it a method of eating or a new product. Each leader would elicit audience comments, then respond with an affirmation of how that person's experience shows that the program really works. Few members challenged the leader, and it was generally members who were hardest on themselves and the other people in the room; each member knew and could repeat the platitudes essential to the program.

In writing and revising *Leader*, I wanted to capture both the charisma of each leader and the darkness of that role and what it represents. My leader was openly addicted to Coke Zero, a decision that reflected my new awareness of the role of diet soda in allowing dieters to starve themselves yet continue to feel full in their stomachs.

“Pacifying hunger by drinking coffee or diet soda. This is a common dieting trick to assuage hunger pangs without eating or calories” (Tribole and Resch 44-45). I had, of course, done that very thing without consciously thinking about what I was doing. I had gone through periods, while dieting, when I drank two or three cans of diet soda in a day. Something about drinking the soda helped me stay on my diet, and I suspect it was a unique combination of the air bubbles making my stomach feel full and the caffeine giving me a false boost of energy when I was not getting enough energy from my food.

I also wanted to capture the common things told me, sometimes by leaders, when I weighed in. Each response to the weight loss lottery tickets is based on the common things I heard during my time at Weight Watchers. Perhaps most common was the admonition that I knew what I had done and how not to do it again if I gained weight (I did not know, because the same behaviors would produce loss one week and gain the next).

The Monster: A Harrowing Tale

The Monster in the script is based on a real encounter, a case of verbal harassment that occurred when my partner and I were in Hawaii in January 2015, attending an academic conference at which I presented a paper I had written the previous year for a class. I had turned 33 in November 2014, and knowing that if we wanted to have children we would only have a limited number of years left to make that happen, we decided that

attending our favorite conference in Hawaii would be a good way to prepare ourselves for beginning our journey into trying to conceive several months later.

The day that I met the Monster, a woman whose name I never knew, we had treated ourselves to a couple's massage and hydrotherapy at the fancy spa at the conference hotel. We had opted to stay at a cheaper hotel on a different street a couple blocks away, and after getting a post-massage lunch, we decided to bypass our hotel and pick up some things at a small grocery store to prepare ourselves for that night's dinner.

As we walked, I was marveling at the fact that my body, bigger now than it had been during our previous trip to Hawaii when I was in the throes of chronic dieting and, as it turned out, highly susceptible to catching the stomach flu on our airplane yet happy to lose a pound or two if I had to be sick, was still quite capable of receiving a massage, fitting onto the massage table, and fitting into the hydrotherapy tub with my partner. At the same time, I was exhausted from the amount of walking, and some of the shoes I had chosen for this trip made my feet and my hips feel all the effects of walking, giving me little to no support.

We continued walking toward the grocery store, and I had fallen behind my partner a few steps, no longer intent on keeping up with his longer stride, letting my short legs take me at their own pace instead of forcing them to go faster. It was at this moment, when I was physically exhausted, both from walking and from recovering from my massage and hydrotherapy that she seemed to appear next to me from nowhere.

I heard a voice say from next to me, "Why are you so fat?" My mind did not immediately register the words as I started to turn toward the voice, ready with a smile for a stranger whose voice I automatically assumed would say something friendly. My

body, though, knew immediately that this was wrong. I went weak and started shaking all over, and moments later my mind caught up with my body and digested the information. A stranger had walked up to me to harass me, something that had not yet happened to me in my adult life. I had been harassed plenty of times by classmates as a child in school, but I had always known my tormentors. As an adult, I had spent most of my years dieting my body down to a thinner size, and when I did regain the weight I was at most a size 12 for those years. It was not until I turned 30 that my body rebelled and began gaining more and more weight to protect me from that next diet, pushing me up to a size 20 by the time we got on the plane for Hawaii. I had read about harassment in my Fat Studies materials but had never experienced it until now.

I turned to look at her, a drastically skinny woman with skin made leathery by too much sun, her face stretched into mean taut lines even as the skin wrinkled and sagged. My instinct was to run, to get away from this Monster, as I would later name her. That instant reaction prevented me from saying anything in response. No words left my mouth as I looked ahead to my partner in a panic. Fortunately, he immediately heard her words, and his mind registered them much more quickly than mine had.

He stepped in front of me, informing her, “That’s rude. My wife is a beautiful woman.”

What followed from her was a stream of verbal assault directed at me, though addressed to him, which I used verbatim in the final script of “Bird Song.” As she continued her verbal assault, I stepped behind James, my most pressing need to get myself away from the danger, worried that she might physically try to harm me. I danced around him, avoiding being in her direct line of sight, during that brief encounter.

As she left to go across the street, he shot a parting remark at her, requesting that she “Push your anorexia on someone else.” After that, we went back to the hotel and spent some time there lying on the bed exhausted, me crying and him seething. Eventually we ordered pizza and made use of the hotel’s free DVD rental policy so we could spend the night in and lick our wounds.

Writing Strangers and Friends into the Script

The section of the script that flows from one person to the next, each with their own one-liner pertaining to my body, is a straight forward recounting of these encounters based on my own memory of each event. My reasoning for including all these disparate characters and their words was that I wanted to highlight the intersection of my identities as a woman and as a fat person. As a woman, regardless of my size, I have been objectified countless times, told by men I barely knew that I was pleasing to them in some way. As a woman, regardless of my size, I have been told by well-meaning family members and friends how great I looked when I lost weight, during some of the unhealthiest times of my life. As a woman, regardless of my size, friends and strangers have felt entitled to make invasive comments about my body, be it about my size, the size of my breasts, the roundness of my butt, or my general desirability as a female specimen. As a fat person, I have been told the “truth” by strangers and family, the family convinced that my fat was a result of unhappiness and the strangers looking for an outlet for their own self-hatred.

These comments were originally ordered by body size in the script, counting down the pounds from my largest size to my smallest size. This order meant that the comments did not necessarily fall chronologically, given my size fluctuations over the

years. In the original script, the first comments are things people have told me at my current size 20, and the comments work from that size down through the sizes, the last comments being ones I heard as a size four woman. As I worked with my director, I made three changes to this sequence of commentary. First, I whittled down the comments so that repeated thoughts would be cut down, so as not to throw the same thoughts at the audience time and again. I also whittled down this section because it ran a bit longer than seemed appropriate for its place as part of a one-hour show. The second change I made was in the order. Though I tried to keep the order mostly intact, my director encouraged me to change lines around so that the audience would not have to endure me delivering multiple harsh comments, one after the other; they would have more space to breathe and process what had been said if I varied the order so that a negative comment might be followed by a more humorous comment. Because I was delivering these lines directly to the audience as though they were me, giving them that space was an essential part of making the performance endurable. This space also proved essential for me as performer, as I discovered that saying these things to others was considerably more difficult than hearing them said to me had been. The third and final change I made was to cut the music cue at the end of the original sequence, below, along with that person's last line "Dance with me," because after we had crafted this sequence as occurring at a dinner table, dancing and playing that song no longer fit with the rhythm and style of the performance.

What follows is the sequence of comments in its original form in the first draft of the full-length solo script, ordered from my largest to smallest body size and including some repetitive statements I heard about my body or my general desirability as a larger or thinner woman:

Strangers and Friends: The Original Sequence

MONSTER: Why are you so fat? She is beautiful. She could die. She could get diabetes.

She could die. She could get diabetes and die.

MAN ON THE STREET: Hey girl, you smokin! You know you smokin! Smokin!

MOM: No, you were a lot smaller then. You looked *good*.

COACH: I would never discriminate because of weight. There are some girls on the team who could stand to lose twenty pounds.

AUNT: Those pants are pretty tight, huh?

GRANDDAD: Have you been eating peanut brittle?

AUNT: We're worried about you. We think you've gained weight.

GRANDDAD: (*Quietly*) I think she doesn't want the cake because of what we said to her.

LESLIE: Did you fall and flatten your chest?

TONY: You're the first girl I've been on a date with who I can really be myself with. I think we have a connection. And you're smart, too. I like that.

GABE: Now, you dress appropriately. You look nice. You're one of those girls you could take home to mom. But this girl... Really? *Maxim*? You do not do that and expect to keep your job. Come on.

BRENDAN: Oh yeah, I'm totally into theatre. The whole acting thing. Like, when I was a kid, I was a child actor, in this, in this Robert Rodriguez movie. (*Pause. Soulfully*)

You're beautiful, you know that?

BRAD: I don't think you can know if you're in love unless you have something physical together.

MAN IN THE STREET: Excuse me. Excuse me, Beautiful! Will you marry me? Well, then how about dinner. You're 17? Oh, man.

CIRCUS ACROBAT: I see you, in the circus, I do my tricks for you. You so beautiful, eyes so beautiful. You make my heart... *(Taps his chest)* So beautiful.

PHARMACY WORKER: Excuse me. I don't want to offend you, but... I've seen a lot of girls come in here, and some of them are pretty, you know, but you...you kinda built like a sista. You got that nice... *(Indicates a butt with his hands)*

JILL: Her boobs actually are bigger. Must be all the hormones from that birth control.

MAN IN THE MALL: Beautiful smile. I just want to be your friend. Beautiful smile. Just your phone number. No, I just want to be your friend. Phone number.

UNCLE: Are you sure you haven't lost too much weight? You're awfully small.

DATING SERVICE AGENT: You're thin. You can afford to have candy.

MOM: You look so small around here. *(Indicates hips, lower abdomen)* You're so much smaller than those other girls.

DAD: You look great. After you, princess. I just can't believe how great you look. That's great.

SUMMER: Girl, look at you. Svelte!

MOM: I thought you looked really good. I was thinking you didn't even need tights. You're so slender.

DEAN: Theatre? Oh, I'm totally into that. Yeah, I'm totally into art. My friend does body art, like tattoos and stuff.

(Cue Nine Inch Nails, "Closer")

(Intense) Dance with me.

(Dances toward imaginary woman, thrusting hips forward, around the stage. When the music fades or cuts, turns back into Tooka.)

TOOKA: That last one like the bird back so much he wanted to grab it, but the bird wouldn't let him!

The Well-Meaning Archer: Origins and Re-envisioning

The Well-Meaning Archer transformed from an archer based on my interactions with my mom to more complicated, well-rounded, focused picture of her as a character. The character name acted as a place holder; I did not know what to rename this character and did not dwell on that question during the rewriting and rehearsal process. Naming the character was not the most important task on my agenda as we prepared for performance. The character was originally an archer in a shorter script I had written two years prior, which featured Tooka and some of her bird friends. The original monologue and interaction with Tooka and her friends was as follows:

The Well-Meaning Archer Takes the Stage

(Enter the WELL-MEANING ARCHER. TOOKA continues dancing for a few moments. TOOKA freezes and her wings slowly wilt when she sees the WELL-MEANING ARCHER. TOT and TUPPY watch the WELL-MEANING ARCHER warily.)

WELL-MEANING ARCHER: It is I, the well-meaning archer! Hello, good friends. I've come to offer my support.

TOT: Really?

TUPPY: That's great!

WELL-MEANING ARCHER: Tooka! I've come to help out! Embrace me!

(TOOKA timidly goes to WELL-MEANING ARCHER. WELL-MEANING ARCHER gives TOOKA a quick bear hug. WELL-MEANING ARCHER pulls TOT and TUPPY into the hug, squeezing them all happily.)

WELL-MEANING ARCHER: Darlings! I heard you're starting a revolution!

TUPPY: Yes! She gets it!

WELL-MEANING ARCHER: Of course I get it! I've started many myself. Have you picked out a gym and a meal plan?

(TOT and TUPPY laugh. TOOKA watches WELL-MEANING ARCHER with wide eyes.)

TOT: Good one!

TUPPY: Yeah. Meal plans. You should do an imitation of the old lady.

(WELL-MEANING ARCHER positions herself at the side of the stage and prepares her bow and invisible set of arrows.)

WELL-MEANING ARCHER: Just looking at Tooka, I can tell you all need my help.

TOOKA: Um, birds...

(WELL-MEANING ARCHER begins shooting imaginary arrows at the birds as she spouts her next lines. Each well-meaning barb has an accompanying arrow. As the arrows start coming, the birds dart around the stage, trying to avoid them.)

WELL-MEANING ARCHER: Tooka, I can tell you've gained a lot of weight since I last saw you. Are you eating because you're sad? I'm here to ask questions and listen. I know all about stress eating. It's so bad. I don't want that to happen to you. I can watch you. I can tell you when you've eaten too much, and I can tell you when you're doing a good job. I'd be happy to keep track. Let's start this weight loss revolution. I can even watch your weight for you. I'll let you know any time I notice you've gained weight. I don't

mind being on the job just for you. I can also let you know if you get too small. That's a sign of eating disorders, you know. I noticed you have bags of cookies, popcorn, and cupcakes. You're a better person than I am for NOT eating them and eating something good, like a salad. Salads are super healthy, and they taste good too. I can give you all my low calorie recipes. I'm here to help. In no time, you're going to love yourselves and your brand new bodies too. I'm all about self-love. All you need to get there is a little time and effort, and once the pounds slide off, there you are. You love yourself! I want you to love yourself, and I know from personal experience that this is the way to go.

TOOKA: WAIT!

(WELL-MEANING ARCHER pauses in the middle of preparing another arrow and looks curiously at TOOKA.)

WELL-MEANING ARCHER: Yes, darling? I'm always here to listen.

TOOKA: I'm sorry, Well-meaning Archer, but could you give us a minute and then we can talk?

WELL-MEANING ARCHER: Well, I suppose we could all use a rest. This self-love is hard work.

(The birds circle and confer. WELL-MEANING ARCHER sits down heavily, exhausted. She examines her arrows and glances toward the birds. She thinks hard and chooses a different arrow to have at the ready. The birds separate and face WELL-MEANING ARCHER. WELL-MEANING ARCHER struggles to her feet, still exhausted.)

WELL-MEANING ARCHER: Well, darlings? Are you ready to talk some more?

TOT: Not exactly.

(The birds advance slowly on WELL-MEANING ARCHER, smiling at her.)

TUPPY: You must be very tired.

TOT: Looking after birds is a big job.

TOOKA: And we know you mean well, but...

(TOOKA grabs the bow and arrows from WELL-MEANING ARCHER.)

TOOKA: *(kindly)* None of these are helpful.

TUPPY: *(taking the bow and arrow from TOOKA and setting them aside)* We'll just take these and put them here.

TOT: And then you can rest. You look tired.

TOOKA: You do look sleepy.

WELL-MEANING ARCHER: But what will you do without me?

TOOKA: We'll still call on you. Just not your bow and arrow.

WELL-MEANING ARCHER: Oh. Well, I suppose I can go rest for now.

TOT: Have a nice nap.

(WELL-MEANING ARCHER slowly leaves the stage, looking sleepier and sleepier as she exits. The birds look at each other then out at the audience.)

(Excerpt from my ten-minute script, "The Bird is Back.")

The Well-Meaning Archer Talks on the Phone

Below, I have written a transcription of the exact phone conversation I had as Well-Meaning Archer the night of my second performance of "Bird Song." The talking points listed in the script guided me for each rehearsal and performance, and this transcription reflects the basic rhythm I fell into in my performances, with each performance varying by only a few words here and there:

Tooka, it's me. (*Notices the audience, smiles at them.*) Oh, hi. Um, we talk on the phone every week. (*To Tooka*) Nobody. Yeah. Yeah, I'm just watching some TV. Oooh. Mark Harmon's looking good. Oh, I'm too young for him. Well, I'm starting a new diet plan tomorrow. Mmmhmmm. It's one of those newfangled things, starts with a Z, uh... (*To audience*) Do you know a diet plan that starts with a Z? (*Responds to audience suggestion that it is called Zoom*) Zoom? Zoom? Zoom? (*To Tooka*) Um, Zoom maybe? Okay. Yeah. All right. Well, anyway, so you know what I had to do. Mmmhmm. Oh, I had Chinese. (*Laughs*) Oh! (*To audience*) Whenever we start a new diet plan, we must feast the night before. (*To Tooka*) Mmmhmm. Oh, well, and now I'm making cookies. Mmmhmm. I know. I do make the best cookies. You wonder why you like 'em so much. (*Mouths "so good" to audience*) Uh huh. Uh huh. No, I'm listening. Oh, are you still so upset about that? She was a mean old monster. Yeah. Well. (*Laughs*) You know, if somebody walked up to me and said you're fat, I'd say (*Laughs*) really? That's news to me. (*To audience*) Oh. But if I had been there, she wouldn't still be breathing. (*To Tooka*) Yeah. Well, no, you know what you need to do. Yeah. Have your bird mate take you out to a nice restaurant. Uh huh. Yeah. Yeah. Make sure there's chocolate things for dessert. (*Makes pleasure face at audience*) Yes. Well, of course you can go to a movie. Get some buttered popcorn, some candy. Oh. No, yeah. Kirstie Alley gained weight again. Mmm, poor thing. Uh huh. Yeah. Oh. Yeah. Oprah looks good, though. Yeah. Yes, I will send you those walking tapes. You'll love them. They're very motivational. Yeah, it's, um, that, uh, um... (*To audience*) Motivational sp-walker person. Has short hair. Does anybody know who I'm talking about? No? (*To Tooka*) Well, anyway, you'll like her.

Yeah. You'll like it. Mmmhmm. Oh. Well, I should let you go do that, then. Okay. I love you, too. Bye bye. Bye bye. (*To audience*) Sorry, I have to pee.

A Note on the Audience's Suggestion of Zoom

I attempted to research the Zoom diet after this performance and discovered multiple diet plans using the word "Zoom" on the internet, all of which promised to "zoom" the dieter to weight loss and, sometimes, muscle tone. Perhaps the strangest of the sites I investigated was one advertising sunglasses in the middle of sentences pertaining to weight loss products. "The top Weight Loss Diet Program Looking to get the best weight reduction eating plan prepare? Discover the very best oakley sunglasses sale weight reduction eating plan prepare cheap oakley sunglasses in order to commence scaling down sizes today" (<http://www.experienceproject.com/stories/Throughout-The-Holidays/2217650>). I did discover a brand of energy pills named Zoom that promise to aid people who are constantly "on the go."

Throwing out Old Definitions of the Archer

As explored in Chapter Three, as the Well-Meaning Archer developed and I had the luxury of time between performing "Bird Song" and the upsetting encounter with my mother about my weight, my director steered me toward finding something new to say about my mother, something beyond the hurtful things that people say in their attempts to be helpful. As my director pointed out, these hurtful things were already explored in my performance of various people at the dinner table. By searching for something new, I discovered that there were other things I needed to include about my relationship with my mom, universal experiences that my audience would connect to their own lives. Among these universal experiences were: the tendency of family and friends to love and comfort

each other with food; having that diet buddy who will not only go on a diet with you but will also engage in a “last supper” with you the night before; those conversations people often have about celebrities’ bodies; and other experiences the audience may have thought about from their own lives.

Notch: A Complete Transformation

Notch began as a character in a one-act script I wrote as the culminating project in my first folklore class with Elaine Lawless in the spring of 2014. Notch developed simultaneously with Leader; Leader was designed for performance, whereas Notch was designed for reading. They were essentially the same character, built for different purposes, a problem my director would encourage me to solve during our time developing the script and rehearsing it. The solution I found was to focus on a completely different aspect of diet culture and body image for Notch: the dangers of exercise addiction. I had experienced a brief bout of exercise addiction in my early 20s, only lasting for six months, but it was an experience that continues to haunt me and most often registers as reluctance to regularly exercise. Below I have included my original rendering of Notch in a monologue from the script I wrote for my ethnographic project, followed by a monologue from the early stages of transforming Notch from a tough old lifetime dieter into an exercise addict. Sections of Notch’s monologue later became part of Leader’s speech to the audience at the beginning of the show.

Notch: The Origin

NOTCH: Well. Well, well, well. Hello there. My name is Notch. I’m a Notch bird. My good friend Tooka asked me to stop by. Mmmhmmm. I know what she’s trying to do. Mmm, mmm, mmm. She’s probably told you all about her bird back. Well, let me tell

you about mine. I don't do that silly bird calling either. You don't call your food, you measure it. Naches. Naches. I got on the WW wagon back in 1983. I lost the weight. I fell off the wagon too, of course. But I got back on and lost the weight, and I'm a lifetime rider on that wagon. I still fall off the wagon occasionally. I have this other bird friend, and sometimes we go out to eat... Well, you know what we always get, and I'm not going to lie about it. Nachos. Next week we're meeting at the office for lunch, and we're having a Smart Ones and a Lean Cuisine. It's pretty easy to get on that WW wagon nowadays. You kickstart that wagon, a two-week kickstart, and you learn to choose the right foods. There's absolutely no measuring or weighing those first two weeks. Lots of riders lose a lot of weight during that time. One mother-daughter team lost 9.8 lbs! The slightest loss I've seen is 2 lbs. I kickstarted my wagon just the other week, and I lost 3 lbs. without even trying. The best part is, you're required to eat treats every day. You might eat a slice of butter, or some wagon-branded candy for your treats. We require it, because then you can stay on the wagon. And did you know, there are five full weeks in January. If you're paying to ride the wagon monthly, that's a whole extra week that month. You should check out some different wagon drivers. It depends on your personality. We have quiet, reserved drivers, like this professor who stands and talks, and some of them are bubbly, outgoing, super-excited people. You might need some encouragement before you get on the wagon. I like to look in the mirror without any clothes on over my feathers or my bird back. You can't lie to yourself then. You might dress up in a bird dress and think, Hey, I look pretty good. But if you're naked as a bird, you cannot lie to yourself. You see yourself like you really are.

Notch: Early Stages of Transformation

(Notch runs to front of stage and does a fantastic exercise move to show off her strength.)

NOTCH: Hey, everyone! Wow, Tooka didn't tell me how many of her bird friends would be here tonight. That's okay, though. I can talk to all of you. *(Notch sits at times but has so much energy she must often walk around or do little exercises. This is not nervous energy; rather, it is strength and agility and a need to use her muscles.)* I've talked to Tooka many times about nutrition and fitness. We're old friends, that's right, we are, and I have a lot of information for her, and for you too. I'm sure everyone here has counted pellets in their life, at least once. Show of hands? Yeah, we've all done it. I've found it's helpful to keep you choosing the most powerful pellets, because you only get a certain amount of pellets, so you want the ones that pack the biggest punch. I do that, and I also have those days once a week when I eat things like nachos. Sometimes I call them – Notches! – and most times I call my power food – Shaaaaaake! I find that if I want to do an adequate amount of flying and perching and lifting with my talons, shakes and special pellets are the most useful foods to eat. Then I save those other foods for my weekly bird feast. Here's the thing, though, and I hope you don't get discouraged. Not all birds are built like eagles. We can't all have those huge wings and powerful talons, and we can't all have those gigantic, brawny beaks. Some of us are just built to have smaller beaks and smaller talons, and that's okay. A lot of us just need to work on making our feathers more sleek and defined, and honing those beaks and talons to the sharp weapons they're meant to be. How do you do that? Jumping into it and becoming more toned and defined isn't going to happen overnight. This is a migration, not a hop to better health. You have to build the strength in your wings, and you have to sharpen your beak and talons over time.

Ideally, you should start with lifting small branches and work your way to big branches, and work from flying short distances to flying long distances. You don't want to have bad bird form. Pick branches that you can lift slowly and cleanly. I don't want to hear you screeching in the next cage because your branch is too big. In my personal regimen, I fly most days for about an hour, and then I lift branches, do perches, that sort of thing a few times a week for two hours. I know what you're thinking, because I've heard Tooka's excuses. What about school? What about work? What about my bird friends? My bird mate? When will I sleep? Let me ask you this. Would you put off building your nest or visiting the bird bath because of school or work? No? Then you shouldn't cut back on your flying and strengthening. When I miss those nine seconds of REM, I don't complain about it. I'm happy, because I'm spending that time strengthening my bird body. You have to make time to take care of yourself. Oh, is Tooka going to complain about that time she didn't lay eggs for several months? She never looked better, and I'm sure she would agree that she never felt better. She needed more protein, sure, but she made flying and strengthening her number one priority, and it paid off. Missing your roosting time, or missing those meetings with bird friends, or dealing with that bird exhaustion that creeps in, it's all worth it. It's a small price to pay for being able to push yourself to the edge of that cliff, and when you hit that edge, you might just fly.

Bird Song: A Last Look at Process

(It is evening time in winter, the sky already dark. The parking lot is still full of cars, the sidewalk still busy with pedestrians. Various people walk through the cold night, hurrying toward their destinations, fighting the chill. The air is crisp and clear, the sky twinkling with stars.)

The classroom and former gymnasium that houses multiple theatre classes is still and silent. A few lights are on, making it possible for students and professors to find their way to the large bank of light switches and illuminate the room for their after-hours rehearsals and meetings. There is no danger of vandalism. The door is automatically locked, and only those chosen few with their IDs set to unlock the door may gain entry. Enter Melissa. She is one of those chosen few with the ability to enter the space by using her ID card. She walks at a brisk clip toward the gymnasium, still early for her rehearsal and wanting to make sure she will arrive early and have time to use the restroom upstairs.

The night is cold around her, and she burrows into her parka. Her pants offer little warmth. She has chosen them for their flexibility and ease of movement, not for their compatibility with the winter chill. Her legs feel bare in the cold night air, not quite numb enough for her to ignore the discomfort.

*In her gloved hands, she clutches a poster board, her latest assignment from her director. On the board, she has created a collage of pictures and phrases from magazines. She is silently grateful for the temporary subscription to *Homes and Garden* gifted to her by her mother-in-law, and grateful for her reluctance to throw away journals and magazines, even those she does not read. Those issues of *Homes and Garden* have given her enough material to make this collage without buying more magazines or using ink to print pictures from the internet. She finds herself smiling again, thinking about presenting her collage to her director. This is a collage about *Tooka*, and Melissa feels she captured the essence of *Tooka*.*

Melissa makes her way down the stairs to the door and uses her ID card to open the door. She quickly places a small cushion to hold the door open. Doing this is against the building rules, she knows, but it means that she can run up to the restroom and not worry about her director waiting in the cold for her while she is up there.

Melissa takes off her coat and carefully lays her collage on a table, along with copies of her initial full script, with the notes she has been taking on those pages, a copy of the latest version of her script, and the notebook paper and pen she has learned to bring with her each time. She sets her laptop bag and purse on the floor, then walks quickly to the door opening to the rest of the building. She places a small cushion to hold that door open as well, having been locked out of the classroom at least once when the heavy door closed.

She makes a dash up two sets of stairs to the bathroom. Sometimes she amuses herself with thoughts of how much she enjoys running to the restroom every chance she gets. It is one more way she is turning into her mother, Melissa muses as she opens the restroom door.

Minutes later, she emerges into the darkened hallway of the main part of the building. Melissa loves being in this hallway when all classes are finished in the building. She loves the sense of mystery in that semi-darkness, amuses herself with reading the signs warning students to make no noise in the large open hallway. One bench across from the restroom has a sign warning that only students there to see a certain advisor may sit on the bench. The bench is always empty when Melissa comes up here, at this time of night and during the daylight hours.

On the way back downstairs, Melissa lingers to read the announcements and calls for research participants. There is always at least one research study being done that focuses on obesity, and she always feels that familiar pull of dieting addiction when she reads those announcements. Once an addict, always an addict, she thinks to herself. She is addicted to being told what to eat and how to exercise, and the simple fact that she has not been on a diet in almost three years does not make her addiction to the experience any less real or the promise of falling back into it any less intoxicating.

She shakes her head and leaves the board, knowing that her health is more important than indulging in harmful dieting practices for the sake of the high that diets always gave her, at least when beginning them. Acknowledging this pulling inside toward that method of self-harm has enabled her to embrace the ambiguity of being healthier now but feeling nostalgic about those old days in her writing and rewriting of her full-length script.

Melissa bounds down the steps and enters the classroom. Her director is there, setting up chairs for their first exercise.)

XIOMARA: Hi, Melissa.

MELISSA: Hi. Do you want the chairs like last time?

XIOMARA: Hmm, well, no. Wait, yeah. Yeah. We'll do something similar. Let's start at the table with an icebreaker, though.

MELISSA: How was your day?

XIOMARA: It was good. Busy.

MELISSA: You know, after rehearsal last night, I went home and ate a lot of pasta. I was really hungry.

XIOMARA: Yeah, well I guess you kind of earned it.

(Melissa feels her cheeks heating up. After all her work with body image, she still feels the need to try to justify her eating habits by sharing them with people. She wonders if performing this full-length piece will help her let go of that need for validation and approval. She does not know what to say now.)

XIOMARA: Okay, I'm ready. Let's get started.

(Melissa pulls a chair up to the table and shifts her papers around, unveiling her collage to show to Xiomara.)

MELISSA: I have this, too.

XIOMARA: *(pleased)* Oh, you finished it? You're such a good actor, doing work on your own.

MELISSA: Yeah.

XIOMARA: Well, why don't we do this for the icebreaker then, and we'll do the icebreaker I had planned for tonight next time.

MELISSA: Okay.

(Melissa and Xiomara sit facing each other. Melissa clears her throat, excited and nervous. She loves showing off her creativity, but she feels a little embarrassed of her efforts. Xiomara is a talented and innovative visual artist, with skills that are beyond Melissa's limited knowledge of making collages using glue and magazine pictures. Xiomara studies the collage for a few minutes, while Melissa sits anxiously and looks at the collage with her. Melissa glances up to gauge her reactions every few seconds. She is unable to read Xiomara's face. Though they have been working closely together on this project, she does not know Xiomara's expressions well enough to know what she thinks of Melissa's efforts.)

XIOMARA: Wow. This is really good.

(Melissa smiles. This is high praise, indeed, coming from someone as talented as Xiomara.)

XIOMARA: Tell me about the images you chose.

MELISSA: *(indicating which images she is referencing)* First, I liked this quote “It’s time,” because it is time. Tooka is coming into herself and taking the stage. It’s also time for me, to love my body. Then, this little pink flower made me think of Tooka because she would live around flowers like these in her natural habitat. Then, I liked the quote “We’re incredibly slow.” Sometimes Tooka walks really slow and small, like this.

(Jumps up and demonstrates a tiny walk, then sits back down.) Of course, there’s a dog, because Tooka loves her little dog, and I included the quote “I Am’ Not a Vegetarian,” because Tooka talks about her dog eating her in the script. She’s an herbivore, but her dog is not. I chose “I did it,” because it seemed like a Tooka thing to say. She’s pretty proud when she does things. And then there’s a green plant here, something that would be in Tooka’s home. I chose a picture of tookies, because they’re her favorite. There would be tookies in Tooka’s world. There’s more greenery here, some tropical looking plants. I chose “Tried and truly delicious,” and I really like it because it refers to both the foods that Tooka likes and Tooka herself. Things like tookies and totorn are tried and truly delicious, but Tooka also stands the test of time. I like the quote “Full of promise,” because I think that Tooka’s world is full of promise, and I think that she has a lot of good things ahead of her. Then this picture is actually from a Tide ad, but I thought it looked kind of like a peacock, very colorful and bold. I like the quote “Feels good, does good,” because that’s what Tooka does, and it also refers to things that are good for you,

like eating enough and moving, that feel good and then do good for the body. Then I really liked this picture of the boy with the watermelon, because that's the kind of enjoyment Tooka has when she eats certain foods. She just closes her eyes and loses herself in them. And I like that it's a little kid, because I think Tooka still has some of that childlike innocence. I chose the Kool-Aid man, because he looks delicious, but this was part of an ad where on one side of the page he's running on a treadmill and he looks really unhappy about it, and if I'd had room I would have included that, because it's just really interesting how there's this picture of him enjoying being Kool-Aid but then another picture where he's miserable because he's trying to conform to society's expectations.

XIOMARA: Oh, that's really interesting.

MELISSA: Then I chose the quote "Life is too short to follow the rules" because I think that Tooka would agree. She's decided not to follow a lot of the rules, because life is too short. Then, here's a little dog with a ball, again to symbolize Tooka's dog. The last picture is a collection of flowers and plants, and there's a little bird on the edge of the pot.

XIOMARA: Oh, I didn't see that.

MELISSA: So, that's it.

XIOMARA: I can see Tooka in here, and it makes her clearer to me. I like these sayings. You know, "Feels good, does good." I wonder if these phrases could somehow be in the show, not in the script but maybe on the wall. Just little magazine sayings that really show Tooka.

MELISSA: Another really interesting thing is that a lot of these ads that had the quotes were about diet foods and losing weight. I thought it was fascinating how there are these

really positive things they say, but then these sayings are not about positive things. The ads are promoting the opposite of what these sayings promote. So, everything in the collage has a double meaning, because there's the positive thing that the words imply, that Tooka would live by, but then also knowing the source, these quotes come from diet culture.

XIOMARA: Oh wow. I had no idea. That is really interesting.

MELISSA: Yeah.

XIOMARA: The colors, too. This one picture has more purples and oranges, but for the most part you've been organically choosing colors like blues, yellows, and greens. I think those should be Tooka's colors for your costume. What do you think?

MELISSA: I like that idea.

XIOMARA: Well, let's put this aside for now. Are you ready to get to work?

MELISSA: Yes. And I sent you my latest draft.

XIOMARA: I got it. I haven't had time to print it out, but I think the changes are really



Figure 4 Collage of Tooka's World

good and will be beneficial for the show and for your message. MELISSA: Me, too. I had some other ideas I was hoping to talk to you about tonight. Doing this collage got me thinking about Notch.

XIOMARA: Great. Let's do that when we come back after our first break.

MELISSA: Sounds good.

XIOMARA: Okay, why don't you sit in that chair like last time...

Scripting a Brave New Bird World

In my writing and performance of "Bird Song," I created a utopic performative for my audience, allowing us to resist current structures of power and imagine a new way of being in the world and of accepting and supporting a diversity of body types and sizes. In both my writing and my performance, I utilized technique, as Jill Dolan describes in *Utopia in Performance*:

I think that certain performers evoke and use it better than others, but it's through technique and precision that presence gains power, comes to point us toward those other, better worlds. If utopia, in performance, can only happen through the performative, through an action that makes it appear, then performers' technique is quite important. (52)

This technique manifested in my structuring and writing of "Bird Song," including my writing of moments that allowed mutual vulnerability between the audience and me. I used metaphor and fully fleshed out characters to create a vision of what could be for my audience. I also used technique in creating a performance that would embody this better future for my audience. I used my voice and body to evoke a newly envisioned way of living in the world and accepting diverse bodies.

By being present with my audience and using my presence, I opened us to moments of vulnerability that would enable us to connect and envision ways toward body acceptance. Speaking about a moment in Tim Miller's *My Queer Body*, Dolan asserts

“[t]his moment of literal physical interaction and emotional intersubjectivity refuses the mutual protection of the mystic gulf between stage and house, making the spectator’s and the performer’s mutual vulnerability part of the equation worked through in performance” (*Utopia in Performance* 32). Dolan is speaking about a moment in which Miller sits, naked, on audience members’ laps, and I did not get naked or physically embrace audience members. However, I interacted physically with them in moments of vulnerability, calling them on stage with me to physically enact moments, such as the section in which I told the story of the Monster on the street and the section in which I asked audience members to assist me in modeling the walking roll that is necessary after eating too much. A moment in which the audience did not physically interact with me but was invited to share in my vulnerability was when I confronted them with comments made about my body, putting them into the role of me and me into the roles of the people who had made those comments. In those moments of vulnerability, we could put ourselves in each other’s positions and see the world in new ways, allowing us to think about ways to change the world. Before we could change, we had to embrace the reality of our culture and truly make ourselves vulnerable to that reality.

At the end, after sharing these moments of vulnerability with my audience and helping them to see the world in new ways, I left them with a final moment of hope as I exited the stage. As Jeanie Forte and Christine Sumption describe Dora’s exit from the stage and entrance into new terrain in their production of *Portrait of Dora* (50), my exit at the end of this script is also a beginning, an entrance into a new world and way of being. At the end of the show, Tooka watches a projection of a bird taking flight in slow motion before standing and exiting the stage. In my performance, I imagined that I was

leaving the performance so that I could go into the world and change it. I would leave Tooka's world and enter a new world, of her and the audience's making.

The new world I exited into was a revolutionary world of size diversity and acceptance that Tooka had helped the audience to envision during my performance. By completing the transgressive and revolutionary act of performing alone on stage, I have opened the door to a new way of being and world for me in my body, a world I continue to slowly enter as I write this dissertation. In the next chapter, I conclude the journey of this dissertation but not the journey that began with writing a bird.

The Bird Bows

(Tooka resumes center stage and bows before her audience.)

TOOKA: Thank you, bird friends. It's been a journey. But we're not finished yet.

(Tooka winks and runs offstage.)

Chapter 5: The Bird Calls

The Bird's Curtain Call

(Enter Tooka. She bows grandly.)

TOOKA: The curtain call! Stay here for a little while, and we'll talk about the show together.

A Move Toward Health: Inspiration from a Bird

I walk into the living room and open my laptop. The first thing I do on the computer is open my email and check for alerts about survey responses. There are two new responses this morning. I open the third-party website, dread twisting my gut. The option of remaining anonymous seems to have opened a door for participants, or one participant, to ignore my humanity and my personal connection to my performance in the interest of justifying their own hateful feelings toward my taking the stage.

As I check for new responses, I notice that the anonymous participant submitted their response in the middle of the night, and I am unsurprised. Perhaps they could not sleep and decided that responding to my piece was a good outlet. I wonder if they would have taken more care in writing to me if they had submitted a response during the day. I will never find out.

One of the new responses temporarily stumps me. In the space in which I have given the option of providing a name and personal information or writing N/A, this participant has simply pasted a wink ;). Who is this participant? As I read back through the comments, I realize that this participant is my mother, who has inspired one of my characters and who has been an integral part of my body image journey. She told me she would fill out a survey, and she is the only participant who saw me perform in Austin,

which she references. I read the comments again and realize that we finally understand each other. She has written that she was uncomfortable with my first performances, uncertain of the message, but has realized the message with this full-length performance and thinks it is an important message. I have encouraged her to focus on her own health with her body.

One of my toughest audience members, a person who loves to see me perform and yet proves a tough case because she has been interacting with diet culture for several decades, has thought about what I am trying to say with *Tooka* and has wrestled with it right alongside me.

After that response, a few more come in. Except for the anonymous participant, each participant expresses that they are, indeed, reconsidering their own investment in dieting and their own views of their bodies. I know that the road is rocky for all of us and that I have not solved anything, but they are talking about it. Perhaps the most important thing I have done is to open a conversation.

“Bird Song” provides a tool for engaging in conversation and critiquing diet culture norms. Through using my body and using playwriting methods that highlight the elements and shortcomings of diet culture, my aim is to engage the audience in deep thought and eventual problem solving. We may not come to the same conclusions or generate the same solutions, but having the conversation is important. Giving people enough information to realize that we are having the same or similar experiences is also important. *Tooka* gives audiences a way to connect with each other and to own their own experiences. This work is important.

Starting to Fill a Hole: Birds and Performance

With my work in this dissertation, I offer new work to fill a gap in Performance Studies. Though my research in Performance Studies included reading about the body in performance and about considerations of gender, the fat body in performance was strangely absent from discussions of the body in performance and discussions of the ways that the body in performance can be revolutionary.

Yet, this dissertation leaves room for much more discussion of the fat body in performance and ways forward to body positivity using performance and writing about performance. What follows is a call to action and an analysis of what I offer, not only to Performance Studies, but also to the audience members who attended “Bird Song.”

Taking Action: A Call

The world continues to get it wrong when it comes to body image, body size, and body health. As I finish writing this dissertation, I call others to action. This work must be continued. People are dying because they are not receiving proper healthcare, they are being misdiagnosed, and they are destroying their bodies with dieting and malnutrition. Articles continue to abound about the dangers of obesity and about the next miracle diet. We are told every day that fat kills and that dieting is the answer. This advice is killing us.

As an act of resistance and revolt, I wrote and performed a solo performance in which I explored issues in diet culture and the alternative of body positivity. Through my act of resistance, I attempted to help the audience envision a new way of being and living that would lead to renewed health for people of all body shapes and sizes. I also

challenged them to go out into the world and change it, by challenging them to think about their own experiences with dieting and body image.

A Bird's Mission

Through my political and transgressive act of performance, I illuminated new possibilities for the audience and gave them ways forward toward body positivity. As I discuss below, my act of performance was political both because I am a woman and because my performance was personal. This political act was particularly transgressive because I claimed authority over my life and body. As well as being transgressive, this act was also a revolutionary act, offering the audience new possibilities and leaving them with impressions and memories of my act that were made memorable because it was a performance.

For me, as a woman, claiming the stage and speaking in front of an audience was a powerful political act. Repeating the words of performance artist Deb Margolin, Jill Dolan says, “for a woman, standing up in front of people is a radical political act, expressing, as it does, the desire to speak. At that moment of speaking, [Margolin] says, you’re one point at which the universe expresses itself, at which you ‘grab a fistful of experience and redistribute it through theater’” (*Utopia in Performance* 56). By claiming the stage and speaking my truth for an entire hour, I was redistributing experience and expressing universal truths about body image and diet culture in addition to my own personal truths. My body became a site for discovering truths and for reimagining the world in this political act.

Speaking about women performance artists, Jeanie Forte asserts that “manifesting the metaphor most central to feminism, that ‘the personal is the political,’ these

performers have used the condition of their own lives to deconstruct the system they find oppressive” (Forte 219). I too used my own life to deconstruct diet culture and the ways that it oppresses all bodies, whether fat, thin, or in between. My body and my voice allowed me to take the stage in a political act of transgression and revolution, at once critiquing an oppressive system and offering ways to change or resist that system. As Schneider claims in *The Explicit Body in Performance*, “The body of the artist was implicated in the body of the artist’s work in particularly personal – which was to say political – ways” (Schneider 39). I implicated my own body in my performance, openly speaking about and using my body on stage in front of my audience. My performance was personal, and therefore political. Openly speaking about my experiences with dieting and proclaiming my decision to accept my body could not not be political. I was transgressing social and cultural norms by doing both.

My political act of performance was particularly transgressive because I claimed authority of my body, writing it in and for performance. As Schneider asserts, “*The agency of the body displayed, the author-ity of the agent* – that was the problem with women’s work” (35). I, a fat woman, had agency in the use of my body and the explication of that body in performance. I controlled the space on stage for an hour, and I controlled how my characters and their physical movement were written and performed. My main collaborator, who helped me shape the way that my body was written and performed, was also a woman, ensuring that women exerted authority in the performance. This authority, as Schneider asserts, made my act of performance both political and transgressive. Instead of adhering to patriarchal expectations of what my body should

look like, and what I should do to try to look that way, I exposed and critiqued those expectations in my performance.

As I critiqued these expectations, I also allied myself with the audience. In an early conversation with my director, I expressed Tooka's desire to befriend and confide in the audience, and we shaped her interactions with the audience based on that desire. By allying the audience with Tooka, I offered them the opportunity to also ally with each other in envisioning a better world; I unlocked the "potential of different kinds of performance to inspire moments in which audiences feel themselves allied with each other, and with a broader, more capacious sense of a public, in which social discourse articulates the possible rather than the insurmountable obstacles to human potential" (Dolan, *Utopia in Performance 2*). Together, we went on a journey in "Bird Song," the culmination of which was the idea that I had found my song when I found my voice and performed for my audience. I encouraged them to find their own songs, or voices, and by extension, to seek the fullness of human potential that Dolan discusses.

In trying to assess the effectiveness of my performance as a political act, as instigation for the audience to find their own voices and enact change, and as an envisioning of a better world, it has been difficult to definitively say what most of my audience members took away from the experience. Short of doing a long-term qualitative study of their habits and thinking, there is no way to know for sure, and even a study like that would not account for other influences of their thinking and behavior. However, Jill Dolan asserts:

we can't measure the effectiveness of art as we can a piece of legislation, or a demonstration, or a political campaign for candidates or for issues. But I do

believe that the experience of performance, and the intellectual, spiritual, and affective traces it leaves behind, can provide new frames of reference for how we see a better future extending out from our more ordinary lives. Seeing that vision, we can figure out how to achieve it outside the fantastical, magic space of performance. (Dolan, *Utopia in Performance* 20)

In my performance, I provided a new way of seeing and thinking about the body, especially the fat body. My audience experienced Tooka's world with me and engaged with the work; the traces Dolan speaks of will enable them to remember and use my performance to continue thinking about the body in new ways. I created a vision for them to take into the world and to use to change the world.

Learning to Fly: Overcoming Obstacles in Performance and Writing

Creating, performing, and writing about Tooka has not been a simple or easy process. As I created my own political act of transgression, there were several obstacles I had to overcome. I discuss four of those obstacles here. I have chosen these obstacles because they proved the most empowering to overcome.

As I prepared to perform "Bird Song," I had to overcome my fear of making a spectacle of myself and drawing the wrath of fat phobic audience members. As I discussed in Chapter 2, I decided that I must make a spectacle of myself to encourage the audience to rethink their beliefs and to promote change. Not only would I be performing in my body in front of an audience, I would also be making a spectacle of myself by expressing beliefs about dieting and body image that run contrary to deeply ingrained beliefs in my culture. I feared fat phobic comments from audience members who might be offended by the body acceptance I would be proposing with my performance. I also

worked against traditional dramatic structure and expectations others might have of me as a playwright. My work was not neatly packaged, and I did not create the dramatic arc that at least two people who responded to my work with Tooka suggested I create. I would be opening myself to more than one kind of criticism by putting “Bird Song” on the stage, and I had to, if not overcome my fears of receiving disparaging comments about my body or skills as a theatre artist, at least make peace with those fears. I accepted the possibility that someone could make vicious comments about my body and performed nonetheless.

The most difficult part of my performance of “Bird Song” was the sequence in which I stepped into the role of oppressor as I delivered lines directly to audience members which were based on comments people had made to me about my body. Some of the comments were lighthearted and easier than others to deliver. The more oppressive comments, however, proved difficult to deliver to audience members. Each time I delivered those lines, such as the angry line which begins “Why are you so fat?”, I was careful in my selection. I did not want to deliver any of those lines to someone who might have heard something similar about their own body that day. As a performer, I wanted to care for my audience and, while I challenged them, not simultaneously subject them to the same oppression I had experienced in my own life. As part of my political act, even as I embodied my oppressors, I refused to internalize my oppressors and behave as they might, by refusing to deliver lines to people who might truly be hurt by them.

Writing this dissertation has presented a new set of obstacles. One of those obstacles was the act of writing and the way it made events more real than performing them had. For example, in my performances I could distance myself from the Monster character by using metaphor and telling the story as though it had happened to Tooka and

existed in her fantastic realm. Writing about the event made it real, and I was unable to escape the reality of it having happened to me. As I wrote about the show and about diet culture, I confronted my life as a former dieter, finding an honesty that at times frightened me. As I wrote, I was forced to acknowledge that I am truly a dieting addict; calling myself an addict is not an exaggeration, as I formerly suspected or hoped it was. I also acknowledged that I was engaging in several behaviors that make the separation between dieting and eating disorders arbitrary; dieting is, indeed, an eating disorder, despite its not having been classified as one in the medical and mental health communities.

The most difficult part of writing this dissertation was revising the conclusion. In my original version of the conclusion, I went in several directions, talking about drama therapy and narrative therapy, and questioning the strength of my own performance and writing. It was this original version that I first sent to my committee chair. When we met to discuss my dissertation draft, she encouraged me to make strong claims about my work. The thought terrified me, and I struggled with uncertainty for the next few weeks as I made other changes to the dissertation, saving the conclusion for last. How could I make claims? I had already made a spectacle of myself by performing. To make claims that it was a transgressive and revolutionary political act would surely be going too far. Could I do that? I had been taught, not only to not make a spectacle of myself, but to be ever humble. I had much more experience with doubting myself than believing in myself. To write a conclusion in which I made strong claims would be to go against what I had been taught to do, which was to constantly eat my humble pie and not much else. In this dissertation I have made my claim and staked my claim, taking up space for my political

act both on stage and on paper. I have thrown away the humble pie and partaken of true nourishment, for my body and soul.

The Difficulty of Endings

I sit in front of my laptop. Writing the end of this dissertation is difficult, just as ending “Bird Song” was difficult. I wrote an ending that included a song I would sing for the audience, and then I decided that I should leave the performance open-ended, declaring that I would be singing my song and then letting the audience decide what my song was. For me, my song was the voice I had found in Tooka and used in writing and performing “Bird Song.” Through my collaboration with my director, we discovered that ending the performance with a bird taking flight would be a lovely end to the hour-long journey the audience had taken with me and would suggest that I and they would be taking flight, going out into the world with newfound wings. When I left the stage, I would be entering the world with my own new discoveries, leaving the audience to enter the world with their own discoveries and to make their own new beginnings.

As I write the end of this dissertation, however, I do not have a director with me. There is no projector screen, no moving bird image for the reader. I struggle to find a way to end my autoethnography, to wrap up my work, to conclude my thoughts.

I hear Tooka calling to me. The end of this dissertation need not be an ending but a beginning of something. My exit from this dissertation is an entrance into something else, though that something remains dark and formless, for now. As I make my exit/entrance, I leave this revolutionary act of transgression and continue to another, likely an act of performance.

For the reader, as well, I hope that the end of this dissertation marks the beginning of something else, as it did for my audience when I performed “Bird Song,” whether that new beginning be in research, performance, or everyday life.

The Bird Calls: A Call and an Action

The Bird calls

She knows not who will answer

Her sweet high voice chirps

And sings

And sighs

She calls for action

She calls for numbers

Action in numbers

The Bird comes

She comes to say

You cannot be still

You cannot be silent

For you must act

You must sing

You must join the call

Come, says the Bird

Come and join the call

The Bird's Exit

(Tooka turns and walks into the darkness, a single spotlight illuminating her. She smiles and beckons to her audience to follow her into the unknown. She walks through a door, going into an unknown place outside the theatre she has shared with her audience. She does not wait for them to follow. She simply trusts that they will. The spotlight fades. End of play.)

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VITA

Melissa Jackson Burns was born in Pella, Iowa. She began performing at an early age, regularly performing in dance recitals and performing in her first theatre show at the age of 10. She has lived in Iowa, Texas, and Missouri.

Melissa graduated from Pella High School in 2000 and continued her education, focusing on theatre in her scholarly and practical endeavors. She earned her BA in Theatre & Dance from the University of Texas at Austin in 2004 and her MA in Theatre-History and Criticism from Texas State University-San Marcos in 2009. She is also a certified teacher in the state of Texas for Theater Arts, grades K-12.

Melissa has written several plays, many of which have been staged fully or staged as concert readings. She is a recipient of playwriting and dramaturgy awards from the Kennedy Center American College Theatre Festival, Region V. A founding member of the performance group RAD, Melissa has written, co-written, directed, and performed in several performance pieces in Austin, Texas. She continues to write plays and to write solo performances featuring the Tooka bird, her alter ego who has a lot to say about diet culture and body image.

Melissa has taught several classes at the University of Missouri-Columbia, including Beginning Playwriting and Introduction to Performance Studies, in which she taught basic solo performance. She is currently the managing director for the Missouri Playwrights Workshop and house manager of the Corner Playhouse, the Department of Theatre's black box theatre.

A regular participant in regional and national conferences, Melissa has presented papers at the Midwest America Theatre Conference, the Central States Communication Association annual conference, the Gender Matters annual conference, and the annual Hawaii International Conference on Arts & Humanities.

Melissa has published book and performance reviews in both online and print journals. Her research interests include solo performance, playwriting, Theatre of the Oppressed, and Fat Studies.