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“When I Was Growing Up My Mother Cooked Dinner Every Single Day”: Fat Stigma and the Significance of Motherblame in Contemporary United States

Amy E. Farrell

English abstract: Contemporary narratives about fatness focus incessantly on the mother, yet recent fat studies literature has only slightly addressed this phenomenon of motherblame and fat stigma. By extending the research that I touched upon in Fat Shame: Stigma and the Fat Body in American Culture (New York University Press, 2011), this essay explores the roots of motherblaming in early 20th century psychology—particularly in the work of Hilde Bruch and Phillip Wylie—and the connections to more recent narratives in US film, literature and popular culture that link mothers to the horrific spectacle of the fat child and fat mothers to the destruction of their families and communities.

Most viewers remember Morgan Spurlock’s award-winning 2004 documentary *SuperSize Me: A Film of Epic Portions* for a number of reasons: its condemnation of the fast food industry, particularly McDonalds; the clear deterioration of Spurlock’s health as he moves through his month long binge on big macs and French fries; the grotesque spectacle of a man’s blood and intestines as he undergoes gastric bypass surgery and the less disgusting but still gross image of Spurlock vomiting after one particularly large “supersized” meal.¹ Not as memorable, but nevertheless significant, I would argue, are the first few minutes of the film. It begins with a shot of school-age kids—at summer camp presumably—joyfully shouting “Pizza Hut, Pizza Hut, Kentucky Fried Chicken and a Pizza Hut. McDonnnnnalds, McDonnnnnalds, Kentucky Fried Chicken and a Pizza Hut. I like food. I like food. Kentucky Fried Chicken and a Pizza Hut. You like food. You like food. Kentucky Fried Chicken and a Pizza Hut.” The kids are smiling, energetically doing hand movements that accompany the verbal jingle. The camera zooms into a particularly large—both taller and fatter—Black boy and white girl who sit in the front row. The film then moves to a shot of a waving American flag, as the filmmaker and narrator Spurlock says “Everything

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1 *Super Size Me: A Film of Epic Portions*, DVD, directed by Morgan Spurlock (2004, New York: Samuel Goldwyn Films/Roadside Productions).

is bigger in America. We have the biggest cars. The biggest houses. The biggest stores. The biggest food. The biggest people. Congratulations. Nearly 100 million Americans are now overweight or obese.” The film then quickly turns to the filmmaker’s own personal history. We see snapshot after snapshot of his (thin and white) mother through the years, mostly in the kitchen, with an apron on or a dishtowel thrown over her shoulder, smiling at the camera. Spurlock narrates, “When I was growing up, my mother cooked dinner every single day. Almost all my memories of her are in the kitchen. And we never ate out. Only on those few special occasions. Today families do it all the time. And they’re paying for it.” The camera then turns to a food court in a mall, various groups of families and couples eating out of fast food bags and trays. Camera shots linger on the fat stomachs of men and children, the big buttocks of women. As the opening credits roll, the soundtrack is of Queen’s “Fat Bottomed Girls.” Images of fast food cover over a display of earlier shots of a young, thin, white boy, presumably Spurlock himself; the lyrics move from “I was just a skinny lad/Never knew no good from bad” to “Left alone with big fat fanny/She was such a naughty nanny/Heap big woman you made a bad boy out of me.” In Spurlock’s narrative, then, the good mothers of the past—such as his own—have disappeared, allowing the “sluts” of fast food to ruin (fatten) America. Presumably his vegan chef girlfriend Alex Jamieson—whose quinoa salads show up in the film as a counterpoint to all that junk food—is the good woman, the model for a renewed, healthy motherhood in America.²

The last twenty years have seen a proliferation of narratives such as the one in Spurlock’s award winning documentary that connect mothers—either implicitly or explicitly—to the “obesity epidemic.”³ These narratives pre-suppose a connection between fatness and the nation, as the fat body has, since the middle of the 19th century, increasingly signified primitiveness, excess, and the inability to control oneself and function successfully within the United States.⁴ Some of

2 Ironically, Jamieson is now Spurlock’s ex-wife and an omnivore. It turns out she was eating meat and animal products for years in the privacy of her own home. Alexandra Jamieson, “On Women, Food and Desire,” accessed November 19, 2014, <http://alexandrajamieson.com/im-not-vegan-anymore/>.

3 I have placed “obesity epidemic” in quotation marks in order to mark the phrase as in itself worthy of scrutiny. Neither a neutral term nor a factual statement, “obesity epidemic” is a term that identifies fatness as a medical malady, one that is contagious and spreading. Throughout this essay I will use the terms “obesity” and “epidemic” only when appropriate to identify the dominant discourse regarding large body size. Otherwise, I will use the term “fat,” in line with contemporary fat studies scholarship.

4 For a more complete exploration of this argument, please see my book, *Fat Shame: Stigma and the Fat Body in American Culture* (New York: New York University Press, 2011).

these stories focus on the fat mother herself as the root of familial and national pathology; others center on the mother who may be thin or fat, but who intentionally or ignorantly causes her child to be fat. Frequently these popular representations emphasize the centrality of the failed mother to our current “obesity” crisis; others, such as Spurlock’s film, allow the figure of the mother to hover throughout the text, made all that more powerful by the unspoken, presumably commonsense, cause and effect relationship between motherhood and the body politics of the nation.

Motherblaming, of course, is nothing new. As Molly Ladd-Taylor and Lauri Umansky write, “Fundamentally, the ‘bad’ mother serves as a scapegoat, a repository for social or physical ills that resist easy explanation or solution. Scapegoating, as a process,” they continue, “does not engage principles of equity or evenhandedness; it seeks pockets of vulnerability.” And mothers, I would argue, are certainly an endlessly available “pocket of vulnerability,” historically blamed for everything from diseases (most recently autism) to poverty (welfare moms), from juvenile delinquency to homosexuality. Although particular scrutiny has regularly fallen on mothers of color, poor mothers, working mothers and mothers who are sexually active outside of heterosexual marriage, no women—even those who aren’t mothers—are exempt from the possibility of mother blame. Indeed, one of the historic trends Ladd-Taylor and Umansky identify is the continual cultural anxiety over *which mothers* and *which type of mothering* is most guilty of causing cultural, social, and individual problems.⁵ As the eugenicists in the first half of the 20th century would argue, who is *fit* to be a mother? Or, put slightly differently, what kinds of mothers will best reproduce a citizenship *fit* for the nation? In late 20th and early 21st century United States, I would argue, the fat mother, or the mother of a fat child, is a particularly resonant “pocket of vulnerability,” a figure who simultaneously connects the taint of suspicion surrounding motherhood with the cultural panic about fat and its presumed threat to the nation.⁶

5 Molly Ladd-Taylor and Lauri Umansky, introduction to *Bad Mothers: The Politics of Blame in Twentieth-Century America*, ed. Molly Ladd-Taylor and Lauri Umansky (New York: New York University Press, 1998), 22.

6 For earlier work on eugenics and motherblaming, see Wendy Kline, *Building a Better Race: Gender, Sexuality, and Eugenics from the Turn of the Century to the Baby Boom* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001). For earlier work on eugenics and fatness, see Kathleen LeBesco, “Quest for a Cause: The Fat Gene, the Gay Gene, and the New Eugenics,” for earlier work on motherblaming and working moms see Nathalie Boero “Fat Kids, Working Moms, and the ‘Epidemic of Obesity’: Race, Class, and Mother Blame,” both in *The Fat Studies Reader*, ed. Esther Rothblum and Sondra Solovay (New York: New York University Press, 2009).

The Fat Mother

In the United States, one of the names most associated with motherblaming is that of Philip Wylie, who coined the phrase “momism” in his bestselling *Generation of Vipers*.⁷ Published first in 1942 and then reissued with lengthy annotations in 1955, Wylie argued that American civilization was imploding from within, allowing entry to the dual threats of fascism and communism. Every institution, from science to religion to politics, came under his biting attack. He described schools as “the instrument of stupidity and lies,” organized Christianity as “insectile sects,” and believers as “a hypocritical and self-righteous polyglot of interfering morons.”⁸ His most biting and thorough attack, however, fell upon the mothers of America. “The mealy look of men today is the result of momism and so is the pinched and baffled fury in the eyes of womankind,” he wrote.⁹ With their hands on their husbands’ checkbooks and their twisted emotional manipulations of their sons’ affections, they literally “sucked into pliability” the men in their lives, preventing them from recognizing or fighting all that was threatening to “American freedom, American security and even to American existence.”¹⁰ “The nation can no longer say it contains many great, free, dreaming men. We are deep in the predicted nightmare now and mom sits on its decaying throne—who bore us, who will soon most likely, wrap civilization in mom’s final, tender garment: a shroud.”¹¹ Interestingly, the dangerous mothers Wylie described were not poor, or unmarried, or women of color—the typical targets of eugenics and the early welfare state. Instead, these were the middle class, white, married mothers who were valorized in early television sit coms and *Life Magazine*. Rather than celebrating these “good mothers,” Wylie painted them as unlikeable creatures, whose husbands they harangued to bring in more money and whose days were spent eating, drinking, smoking, meddling in the affairs of her neighbors and children, teaching her children to take their place in the “gynecocracy” she had created.¹² How could we recognize the “destroying mother?”:

She is a middle-aged puffin with an eye like a hawk that has just seen a rabbit twitch far below. She is about twenty-five pounds overweight, with no sprint, but sharp

7 Phillip Wylie, *Generation of Vipers, Newly Annotated by the Author* (Larlin Corporation, Marietta, GA, 1978 [1942, 1955]).

8 *Ibid.*, 82, 300.

9 *Ibid.*, 210.

10 *Ibid.*, 206, xviii.

11 *Ibid.*, 196.

12 Wylie, *Vipers*, 207.

heels and a hard backhand which she does not regard as a foul but a womanly defense. In a thousand of her there is not sex appeal enough to budge a hermit ten paces off a rock ledge. She none the less spends several hundred dollars a year on permanents and transformations, pomades, cleansers, rouges, lipsticks, and the like—and fools nobody except herself. ...

She smokes thirty cigarettes a day, chews gum, and consumes tons of bonbons and petits fours. The shortening in the latter, stripped from pigs, sheep and cattle, shortens mom. ... She drinks moderately, which is to say, two or three cocktails before dinner every night and a brandy and a couple of highballs afterward. She doesn't count the two cocktails she takes before lunch when she lunches out, which is every day she can.¹³

In other words, this dangerous mother is a fat, short glutton, who emasculates her husband and sons and teaches her daughters to become just like her.

We might laugh at this outrageous portrait, so obviously misogynist despite his claim in 1955 that he should not be “tagged as Woman's Nemesis” because he “loves women more than most men.”¹⁴ But before we laugh too hard, we must remember that his work was convincing enough that the US Armed Services conducted “official” studies that confirmed “momism” as a cause of homosexuality.¹⁵ Wylie's “Momism” was a mid-century popularization of Freudian theory that pinpointed the inability of boys to separate from overbearing mothers as a central cause of homosexuality. And, central to the discussion here, Wylie's work is important because it reminds us not only that *no mother* is exempt from cultural blame as a social hazard, but also that *fat* mothers should be particularly scrutinized for their threat to family and nation. Fat works as a sign that the mother is out of control, interested only in the satisfaction of her corporeal desires, brutal and selfish in her relationships, destructive of her children. Either too weak or too perverse, her will is insufficiently, incorrectly maternal, with dire consequences for the children.

Popular representations in the last twenty years certainly demonstrate the contemporary viability of Wylie's suspicions about fat mothers. The film *What's Eating Gilbert Grape?* is perhaps most frequently mentioned by my students in this genre of “fat mother films”; although it came out in 1993, just around the time most of them were born, the film has had a long and popular life on video, DVD, and

13 Ibid., 215.

14 Ibid., 195.

15 Jennifer Terry, “‘Momism’ and the Making of Treasonous Homosexuals,” in Ladd-Taylor and Umansky, *Bad Mothers*, 176-182.

Netflix.¹⁶ Based on the eponymous 1991 novel by the novelist Peter Hodge, it stars Johnny Depp as the older brother Gilbert, Leonardo DiCaprio as the almost 18 year old mentally disabled brother, and Darlene Cates as the 500 pound mother who has gained a tremendous amount of weight and hasn't left the house since her husband committed suicide seven years earlier. The fact that Cates herself was chosen to star in the film after appearing on the talkshow *Sally Jesse Raphael* in an episode on agoraphobic fat women lends a veneer of veracity to the film, demonstrated as well by the number of fans who regularly make the pilgrimage to the Texan house where the film was shot.¹⁷ Many critics have argued that the film portrays the mother Bonnie Grape with sensitivity, revealing both the kinds of cultural humiliation she faces (neighborhood kids jump up to see her through the window, for instance) and the depth of her motherly love, as she does (painfully and slowly) make her way to the town's jail, where her disabled son has been wrongfully imprisoned. Cates herself said that she receives letters from people who have seen the film who write, "I will never look at a fat person the same way as I did before."¹⁸

As all cultural meaning is relative, perhaps it is true that this film is *more* sympathetic than other cultural representations of fat mothers. But certainly this does not necessarily mean that it *is* a sympathetic portrait of a fat woman. Indeed, for all intents and purposes, Bonnie Grape has abandoned her children since the suicide of her husband, leaving her older daughter Amy to cook and clean ("she is practically a mother," the narrator Gilbert says as he introduces his siblings), her youngest daughter Ellen to wallow in teenage anger, and her oldest son to care for and manage the seriously disabled youngest son Arnie. The mothering that she does do is rather twisted. She insists on a large party for Arnie's 18th birthday, but she can't do any of the work to prepare and won't even go outside to greet the guests. She frequently holds Arnie tightly, murmuring cloying endearments and nearly smothering him with kisses as she presses him to her huge breast; in another scene, however, Arnie's dinner time antics cause her to yell uncontrollably,

16 *What's Eating Gilbert Grape?* DVD, directed by Lasse Hallström (1993, New York: Paramount Pictures).

17 Jeff Labrecque, 2/16/14, "'Gilbert Grape' at 20: When Johnny met Leo...," accessed November 19, 2014, <http://insidemovies.ew.com/2014/02/16/gilbert-grape-at-20-when-johnny-met-leo/>; Howard Koplowitz, *International Business Times*, August 10, 2012, "Gilbert Grape mom Darlene Cates Undergoes Dramatic 250-Pound Weight Loss, Seeks Acting Comeback," accessed November 14, 2014, <http://www.ibtimes.com/gilbert-grape-mom-darlene-cates-undergoes-dramatic-250-pound-weight-loss-seeks-acting-comeback>.

18 Koplowitz, "250-Pound Weight Loss, Seeks Acting Comeback."

stomping her feet so much that Gilbert notices the floorboards are sagging underneath the dining room table they have dragged into the living room so that Bonnie never needs to leave the couch. That night, Gilbert and his friend realize that Bonnie's size is literally causing the floor to crumble beneath them, a not too subtle sign that this fat mother is responsible for the disintegration of the entire family's foundation. When she dies, she further troubles her children, as the authorities cannot see a way to carry her body out of the house without bringing in a crane, a spectacle of humiliation none of the children want to face. Gilbert's decision to burn down the house, with Bonnie's body inside, frees the children tremendously. Amy goes to work in a bakery in a new town, the younger sister Ellen moves with Amy to start in a new school, and Gilbert and Arnie go off happily with Gilbert's new girlfriend in her (thin) grandmother's airstream. The burden of caring for Arnie, who can indeed be quite demanding, appears to be light as a feather compared to the heavy weight of caring for and living with the fat mother. Everyone's life is better now that the fat mother is dead.

Jami Attenberg's 2012 novel *The Middlesteins*, reviewed in the *New York Times* with the headline "Suburban Sprawl," presents another powerful image of the fat mother as menace.¹⁹ Selfishly refusing to seek help, lacking willpower, grotesque in her size and sickness, Edie wrecks havoc, her pain reverberating through those closest to her—spouse, children, grandchildren—and out into the community at large, to her law firm and synagogue. Edie's fatness is both the flashpoint for this Midwestern family's disintegration and the signifier of all the characters' lost hopes, strained relationships, and failure to connect with the ones they love within the context of their bleak, commercial landscape. Bitter over her responsibilities as a mother and the (in)action of her husband, Edie turns primitive:

She cracked open the McRib box and eyed the dark red, sticky sandwich. Suddenly she felt like an animal; she wanted to drag the sandwich somewhere, not anywhere in this McDonald's, not a booth, not Playland, but to a park, a shrouded corner of woods underneath shimmering tree branches, green, dark and serene, and then, when she was certain she was completely alone, she wanted to tear that sandwich apart with her teeth. But she couldn't just leave her children there, could she? You didn't need to be a graduate of Northwestern Law to know that that was illegal.²⁰

19 Julie Orringer, "Suburban Sprawl: *The Middlesteins* by Jami Attenberg," December 27, 2012, accessed December 30, 2012, http://www.nytimes.com/2012/12/30/books/review/the-middlesteins-by-jami-attenberg.html?pagewanted=all&_r=0, Jami Attenberg, *The Middlesteins* (New York: Grand Central Publishing, 2012).

20 Attenberg, *The Middlesteins*, 97.

While Edie doesn't abandon her children at that moment—she knows that it is illegal!—as soon as her husband arrives she walks by herself “to the far corner of the restaurant, to the booth closest to the bathroom, where no one ever sat but the employees on break, looking back only once at her husband gathering up the children...She pulled out the newspaper from her purse. Edie took a bit of her McRib and flattened out the front page. Was this really happening to her?”²¹ The reader knows that this is a sickening scene on multiple levels: the excess of a McRib sandwich after having already downed a BigMac and fries, the smell of the bathroom mingling with that of the McRib, the fight with her husband, the toys from the kids' meals broken and strewn about the trash and empty ketchup packets, the recognition that this is the beginning of her downfall (from married professional woman to working class—it's where the employees sat!—animal) and the family's dissolution. But Edie, primitive in her desires, lacking in maternal love, cruel to her husband, thinks that moving to the table on her own is “perfection.”²² The chubby teenage daughter is only able to escape a similar fate through a violent rejection of her mother, almost a “roar” that turns into a “pile of dark, chocolate vomit, which landed in a thick puddle on the kitchen table.”²³ The mother dies an ungraceful death, slumped next to a refrigerator, the freezer door open, a pint of ice cream dripping from her hand. The family fumbles to recover after Edie's ugly demise and death, only the granddaughter and the (thin) father able to turn to each other in a sobbing mess.

The Mothers of Fat Children

Fat mothers provide a locus of cultural condemnation, a figure perceived to be unfit for the responsibility of reproducing a nation. Equally condemned in popular representation, however, are the mothers of fat children. These mothers may or may not be fat themselves, but they are held responsible for their children's size, and thus for the “*obesity epidemic*” itself. We certainly saw this cultural denunciation in action in the 2011 Public Health Campaign in Atlanta, Georgia, Strong4Life. Notorious for its fatshaming advertisements seen on television ads and billboards across the city, Strong4Life featured the pictures and voices

21 Ibid., 99.

22 Ibid.

23 Ibid., 128.

of children who lamented what it was like to be a fat.²⁴ In one, a heavy woman walks across what looks like a stage, with two folding chairs facing each other. The fat woman first sits down in her chair, followed by the large boy who sits across from her. As he sits in the shadow, the camera zooms in. He asks plaintively, “Mom, why am I fat?” The camera then zooms out; we see the mother visibly slump, her head bowed. We then hear a large BOOM, as if his fate and her guilt have been sealed. In another, we see a doctor and a nurse bending over a male patient in an operating room. “What do we have?” the doctor asks. The nurse answers, “Heart attack. 5’9”, 300 pounds, 32 years old.” “How the hell did that happen?” the doctor asks. The camera then rewinds, and we see the patient’s life flash before him. We see him stopping at fast food car windows, eating birthday cakes, hiding candy bars in his dresser. And, finally, we see him as a baby in his high chair; his mother is feeding him French fries after he has thrown the plate of peas on the floor. “I can’t believe you’re feeding him fries,” another woman says. “It’s the only thing that will shut him up,” the mother says, smiling tensely through gritted teeth. Most fundamentally, then, it is the *mother* who has failed this child, too weak to tolerate his tantrums, too lazy to find another way to nurture him, too stupid to know that she has set him on a path that will wind its way into the emergency room when he is still a young man. When the doctor asks, “How the hell did this happen?” the answer that the short video provides is clear and succinct: a bad mother.

As the cultural panic surrounding “childhood obesity” gains momentum, its whipping boy (of course, in this case a whipping girl) is the mother. Historically, a whipping boy was a young boy assigned to a prince as he was growing up in 15th and 16th century England; when the prince did something wrong, the boy was whipped instead of the prince, both because the prince could not be whipped and, presumably, because seeing someone close to him being punished so severely for his actions would make him attentive to good behavior. In 21st century United States, legally and culturally we hold children to be innocent. Too young to be held responsible for their actions or their desires, and thus too young to be held responsible for their body size, we “whip” the mothers.²⁵ The fathers might get some degree of blame, but generally, as

24 “Stop Childhood Obesity: Why Am I Fat?” accessed November 19, 2014, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ySlzX_iDUKs&list=TLz1-HS_VwY6g; “Rewind the Future,” accessed November 19, 2014, <https://www.youtube.com/user/Strong4LifeGA>.

25 For a full discussion of the presumed “innocence” of children regarding their body size as well as the presumed responsibility of parents, particularly mothers, see Sondra Solovay, *Tipping the Scales of Justice: Fighting Weight-Based Discrimination* (Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 2000).

in the case of the explanations for male homosexuality in the first half of the 20th century, they are critiqued for being distant. The mothers are the ones who shoulder responsibility for the children's body size, appearing to *actively* cause the child's obesity. In other words, if the child is fat, there must be an unfit mother.

Hilde Bruch, the 20th century psychiatrist most well known for her work on eating disorders and anorexia, pinpointed the problems of mothers in her important 1957 work, *The Importance of Overweight*. Writing at the same moment that Philip Wylie's concept of "momism" was very popular, Bruch's 412-page tome describes case after case of fat children whose mothers took center stage as the cause of their child's adiposity. She described mothers who were sickeningly domineering and career focused and others who were perversely fixated on the health and size of their sons' testicles. She believed that the children's fatness was caused by overeating as a coping mechanism in response to the neuroses and perversions of their mothers; encouraging weight loss if the problem of the mother was not solved would only make the children more psychologically ill. Yet it was difficult to solve the problem of the mother; summarizing the cases of childhood obesity, Bruch believed that "the intense dependence of these children on their mothers, or conversely, the extraordinary domination which these mothers exercised over their children, defied all efforts to change the abnormal behavior." Whether springing from a desire to protect or to control the child, the "relentless maternal domination," causes a pathological atmosphere in which the child becomes fat.²⁶

Bruch's idea—that a mother's twisted or incompetent maternal love causes children's fatness—certainly circulates today in popular representation. One might look, for instance, to a critically acclaimed novel that came out around the same time as *What's Eating Gilbert Grape?*, Wally Lamb's 1992 *She's Come Undone*.²⁷ In Lamb's novel, the protagonist Dolores is a very unhappy, fat young woman. After her first months of college, she contemplates suicide and ends up in a mental institution. Her story is sad: Her mother had a nervous breakdown after the stillborn birth of her younger brother and was hospitalized for months; her father abandoned the family; she was raped when she was 13 by a neighbor the whole family trusted; she has no friends; her schoolmates mock her; and one of the young men in her college dorm—her roommate's boyfriend—sexually assaults her in front of the entire dorm and no one intervenes. In her teenage years, she is very unlikeable,

26 Hilde Bruch, *The Importance of Overweight* (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 1957), 188, 208.

27 Wally Lamb, *She's Come Undone* (New York: Washington Square Press, 1992).

pushing away teachers and family members, swearing and insulting anyone who tries to help. Throughout all this, her mother sticks by her, seeking both punishment for the rapist and help for her daughter, wrapping her in love but also pushing her to quit watching television, to graduate from high school and to go to college. Truly, one is struck in reading this novel by how strong this mother has been, fighting her own hardships, battling her own demons, and sticking with this teenager through these horrible years. Yet, what does the therapist prescribe as Dolores' cure? Weight loss, of course. But also something else: the male psychiatrist Dr. Shaw needs to "reparent" her. Dolores swims naked in the hospital's swimming pool, which symbolizes the womb. After the first session, Dr. Shaw allows her to be in a bathing suit (she's been born!), and they relive all the major events of her life; she re-experiences life with her father; with Jack, who raped her; with the other kids who bully her, but none of this really seems to matter. Only when she finally blows up *at her mother* (the one who actually stood by her and helped her!) is there a real breakthrough—a violent scene, where she literally fights her mother, who is "played" by the therapist:

My arms, my fists, flew with anger let finally free. I lashed out at her, walloped her, smashed at her with the truth.

All those things you used to buy me to eat and I'd eat them, sit up there in my room and eat them, swallow the truth, eat your dirty secret.²⁸

That "dirty secret" is just that the mother slept with Jack; this, however, was *before* the rape, when the whole family trusted and liked him. Once he rapes Dolores, the mother rejects Jack completely and seeks his imprisonment. In this passage, however, Dolores continues in her frenzy until she finally stops hitting and yelling, and looks up:

I saw Dr. Shaw then. Saw him wet and shaken in the Gracewood pool. Blood dripped from his nose. A ribbon of blood floated in the water. He wrapped me in his arms. I cried against his neck and he hugged me and took my shaking. I don't know how long we rocked there like that, but my sobbing and trembling was gradually overtaken by a profound exhaustion. I felt more tired than I'd ever felt in my life.

"How are you doing?" he whispered, finally. "Are you okay?"

"When I came here, I was this fat...And now—"

"And now what, Dolores?"

"I'm empty."

He hugged me, cradling my head. "You're triumphant!" he said.²⁹

28 Lamb, *Undone*, 277.

29 Lamb, *Undone*, 278.

In other words, Dolores' healing only happens once she has *blamed* her mother and *symbolically destroyed* her, presumably because the mother was incapable of (magically) bestowing a thin body or self-love to her daughter. True, later in the novel Dolores explains that her mother was actually just a human being, "fragile," a "victim herself", neither a "saint nor a whore."³⁰ But the turning point of the novel is the moment when she turns on her mother, thrusting the responsibility for her mental illness and her body size on the only one who had actually unconditionally loved her.

Not all the guilty mothers of fat children come off so easily, however. Many are "monster moms," whose cruelty and brutality know no ends, and who cause their children's obesity. The 2009 film *Precious*, and Sapphire's 1996 novel *Push* on which the film is based, highlight a particularly obvious example of such a monster mom.³¹ In both, the vicious, fat mother (played by Mo'Nique in the film) not only sexually abuses the child herself, but also hands Precious (played by Gabourey Sidibe) over to the father, who regularly rapes her resulting in two pregnancies, once when she is 12, another when she is 16. The mother is a *mean* woman, stealing from Welfare, watching TV endlessly, and calling Precious horrible, degrading names. She also forces Precious to cook and eat until she's senseless, a central image of both the novel and the film. In the novel, the mother, who herself is "so big she no longer fits in the bathtub," calls her daughter a "fat cunt bucket slut! Nigger pig bitch!" when Precious returns from the hospital after giving birth to her first child. Lying on the floor after her mother's beating, she then is forced to get up and make dinner: "greens, cornbread, ham hocks, macaroni 'n cheese" and then pies. She doesn't want to eat, but her mother makes her. She eats until she is senseless. "Eating, first 'cause she make me, beat me if I don't, then eating hoping pain in my neck back go away. I keep eating till the pain, the gray TV light, and Mama is a blur; and I just fall back on the couch so full it like I'm dyin' and I go to sleep, like I always do; almost."³² As if the novel's portrayal of the mother is not evil enough, the film makes her even more egregious, as she throws a full size television down the stairs, nearly killing Precious and the newborn infant on the spot. And, significantly, the film also emphasizes the size and skin color difference between the evil "real" mom and the virtuous "savior" mom, Precious' teacher Blue Rain, who not only is

30 Ibid., 279.

31 Sapphire, *Push*, (New York: Vintage, 1996), *Precious: Based on the Novel 'Push' by Sapphire*, DVD, directed by Lee Daniels (2009, Santa Monica, CA: Lions Gate Films).

32 Sapphire, *Push*, 20, 21.

more light skinned than the mother but is also exquisitely thin, wearing clothes that emphasize her svelte body size.

Surveying the landscape of contemporary US popular culture, one sees many representations of these bad, fat mothers, or these bad mothers of fat children. They are everywhere. Some, like Precious' mother, are evil. Judith Moore's 2005 memoir *Fat Girl* highlights a wicked mother, thin herself, who literally whips the daughter, forces her onto starvation diets, mocks and belittles her, causing her to turn into a woman "too fat for love."³³ Some are loving, but smother their children with food because of their emotional neediness. The mom in the 2012 Scenarios USA, prizewinning short film, *The Tale of Timmy Two Chins*, features such a mother, a Hispanic woman who, after the death of her husband, daily cooks a spread of food so huge for herself and her son that it could feed the entire neighborhood.³⁴ Some fat mothers show up simply as a signifier of inadequacy, such as in the recent feel-good movie *St. Vincent*, starring Bill Murray as the misanthropic, alcoholic, gambling neighbor who begrudgingly cares for the young boy who lives next door.³⁵ Over and over, the film tells us how insufficient the single mother is, how in need the young boy is of male attention, even if it's with such an unlikely character as Vincent. Significantly, we *know* this mother, played by Melissa McCarthy, is not enough for her son: she is fat, a sign of both her own unhappiness and her own inability to keep a husband. It is by now a cliché, an easy way to code a mother as evil or her mothering as a problem: make her fat or make her child fat.

The centrality of the missing father in *St. Vincent* is a typical trope within these derogatory narratives regarding fatness. Whether through a natural death (as in *Tale of Timmy Two Chins*), a suicide (as in *What's Eating Gilbert Grape?*), or divorce and abandonment (as in *She's Come Undone* and *Middlesteins*) the father is simply *not there*, causing significant pain and damage to those left behind. Hilde Bruch had described this much earlier in her 1950s psychoanalytic narratives, noting that the fathers of fat children were absent, either physically not present, emotionally unavailable, or too weak-willed to be much of a presence in the household. The men in Phillip Wylie's work were equally absent, unable to play much of a determining part in their children's lives. There is a presumption built into this "absent father" narrative that the mere presence of a manly man is sufficient. As *St. Vincent* so clearly illuminates, the father (or father substitute) is really enough for

33 Judith Moore, *Fat Girl: A True Story* (New York: Plume, 2005), 195.

34 *The Tale of Timmy Two Chins*, directed by Nancy Savoca (2012, Brooklyn, NY: Scenarios USA)

35 *St. Vincent*, directed by Theodore Melfi (2014, New York: The Weinstein Company).

the family; he is not under the powerful cultural scrutiny that mothers endure. This is where the motherblaming narrative returns, then, even when the fathers' absence is noted. For, it is often the mothers themselves—fat, overbearing, ugly—who push the men in their lives away. Even in cases of extraordinary abuse by the fathers, such as that we see in *Precious*, the film lingers in much more detail on the actions of the evil mother. Her ultimate act of abuse is failing to protect *Precious* from the father, thus bringing back full circle the narrative that ties the evil and inadequate mother to the child's oversized body.

It might be tempting to see these narratives connecting motherblaming and fatness simply as mundane plot conventions, so ubiquitous that they are boring, expected, irrelevant. Their very ubiquity, however, should cause us to take note. Even First Lady Michelle Obama's "Let's Move" campaign fits snugly into this narrative of motherblame and fatness, as the symbolic mother of the nation works to combat "childhood obesity." These stories normalize an environment that increasingly distrusts and punishes mothers and fat people: fat women who don't "qualify" for fertility treatments, fat children taken away from their mothers, fat mothers who lose custody of their children.³⁶ Central to the discourse and policy making of the current obesity crisis is the spectacle of the guilty mother, whether she is there explicitly or implicitly, whether she acts in ignorance or in violence, whether she is fat, or whether she causes fatness. These narratives, it's also important to remember, have been in circulation for a long time, having their roots in the 19th century psychoanalytic discourse that pointed its fingers at "domineering" mothers, in early 20th century eugenic discourse about fit mothers, and in mid 20th century ideas about the pathology of "momism." Taking aim at the one place that women have, ideologically if not always legally or in lived experience, held some power and authority—the home—these narratives simultaneously pathologize both mothering and fatness. Fat mothers and mothers of fat children who have more privilege—wealth, whiteness, education—will have more resources to challenge discriminatory practices. As we have

36 For an article that demonstrates the ways that all girls and women are perceived as "potential mothers," and thus will feel the effects of motherblaming, see John Kral, "Preventing and Treating Obesity in Girls and Young Women to Curb the Epidemic," *Obesity Research*, 12, 10 (2004): 1539-1546. For evidence of the ways that scholars legitimate removing fat children from their homes, see Lindsey Murtagh and David S. Ludwig, "State Intervention in Life-Threatening Obesity," *Journal of the American Medical Association* 306, 2, (2011): 206-207. For further reading on the effects of the "war on obesity" on women and children, including custody disputes and legal cases, see April Michelle Herndon, *Fat Blame: How the War on Obesity Victimized Women and Children* (Lawrence, Kansas, University Press of Kansas, 2014).

seen in various custody disputes and legal cases, poor women, women of color, and women with less education will be at a disadvantage when trying to circumvent or resist the politics of a state and culture that punishes fatness and mothers. In the end, though, such discourses of motherblaming and fatshaming limit every woman (whether she is fat or thin, whether she is a mother or not) and every fat child, as they reinforce the idea that all women and all fat children must always be under scrutiny for their threat to the family and to the nation.

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