Women Without Bodies: Autonomy, Empowerment, and Embodiment in Southern Women

Martha Peyton Ford

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WOMEN WITHOUT BODIES: AUTONOMY, EMPOWERMENT, AND EMBODIMENT IN SOUTHERN WOMEN

By Martha Peyton Ford

A thesis submitted to the faculty of The University of Mississippi in partial fulfillment of the requirements of the Sally McDonnell Barksdale Honors College.

Oxford
May 2022

Approved by

________________________
Advisor: Professor Andrew Harper

________________________
Reader: Professor Elizabeth Venell

________________________
Reader: Professor Catarina Passidomo
DEDICATION

For Koko, Mama, Eliza, Emma, Rose, Nina, Reagan, Neely, and all the nameless women who taught me how to move.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This thesis would not have been possible without the help of Andy Harper, who has been a patient and encouraging mentor; Daniel Lawrence, who has been a kind, thoughtful, and supportive companion; and my family, who have loved and supported my curiosity from the beginning. I am so grateful for the exploration, celebration, and meaningful inquiry that has accompanied this thesis— all of which would not have been possible without my network of love, support, encouragement, and late-night chocolate chip cookies.
ABSTRACT:

This thesis explores the relationship between rural, upper-class, Southern, white women and their bodies. In my attempts to understand this relationship, I analyze sources from the fields of gender studies, philosophy, and psychology, utilizing concepts such as the Cult of True Womanhood, the newly-emerging field of body memoirs, and the long-lasting but elusive idea of Southern ladyhood to make sense of cultural expectations of Southern women and their bodies. This research, alongside my use of autoethnography and oral history, serve as an anchor for my analysis of women’s relationships to their bodies, in which I use myself, my mother, and my maternal grandmother as subjects.

This thesis asks both about the tangible physical changes experienced—pregnancy, aging, changes in appearance—and the intangible fluctuations of confidence, strength, discomfort, and embodiment experienced throughout one’s lifetime. In doing so, my intent is to explore regional societal expectations of women as experienced by these three women. Themes of duality emerge—a distance between the presented woman and the inner woman, a separation between outer and inner selves—alongside a complete but inarticulable understanding of what is expected of their appearance and presentation. In all, this thesis hopes to complicate common understanding of women’s lived experiences by attempting to articulate how it feels for these women to live in their bodies. It makes no attempts to speak for all women, but rather anchors its meaning in the simple act and power of storytelling, hoping to deepen an understanding of these women’s relationship with their bodies and complicate notions of Southern ladyhood.
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What would happen if one woman told the truth about her life?

The world would split open.

– Muriel Rukeyser
INTRODUCTION

When I was eleven and a half my grandmother gifted me a book entitled *How to Be a Lady*. It had a textured, royal blue cover, almost leather but not quite, soft to the touch, the type you want to stroke across your cheek. The inscription in the cover reads, “Mattie, Be a Lady! Love Always, Koko and Papa.” Command, exclamation point. This is the first time I remember the countless lessons-- spoken and unspoken-- about proper behavior, protocol, and all the actualizations of womanhood from my childhood put into words on paper in front of me. It was the first time, perhaps, I understood these behaviors as a guidebook to be followed, a long lineage of proper behavior to adhere to.

This project asks, what is the relationship between rural, upper-class, Southern white women and their bodies? By examining this relationship, I hope to confront the roles of gender, class, and region in the lived experience of the body. In this thesis, I employ auto-ethnography to question this relationship, a practice that interrogates the researcher as a “site of inquiry and knowledge regarding a particular topic,” rather than relying on “the other” (Shedden 19). Self-inquiry has been crucial to my world for as long as I can remember; this method, then, lends itself well to this project, as my interest in relationship to body stems directly from years of living in my body and monitoring how it feels. It is only recently that I have been able to find the words to ask any sort of fruitful questions about how my body feels and what is expected from it.
My experience with privilege and womanhood has shaped my life in deep and meaningful ways. This thesis, then, results from my relationship to privilege and my short lifetime’s worth of experiences that have informed my understanding of both my body and the bodies of the women in my family. I hope to begin to make sense of the intertwined webs of the tangible and the intangible, bridging the gap between one’s senses of place, gender, class and the lived, known experiences of the body. I hope to interrogate the way those seemingly intangible forces seep into the tangible body, particular to this group of women in this pocket of the South.

In pondering this project, I kept returning to the concept and construction of women’s bodies—what the forces are that make them into what they are, how it feels to live in them, how that might be different than the sense of self presented to the rest of the world. As indicated, these are trends present in my own life, ones I had assumed were present for other women in their experiences of being in relationship with their bodies. Initial research, however, revealed few studies of women’s relationship to body in terms of mobility, usability, or identity, but rather most focused on aesthetics—weight loss practices, body image, diet trends. This gets exactly to the heart of what I’m interested in talking about: do we as a society understand women’s bodies strictly in terms of sexuality, size, and aesthetic? Is there room or necessity to talk about women’s bodies in terms of utility and relationship, connectivity and capability?

Scope

While the scope of my project is meaningful to me, it is not a genuine or accurate representation of all women in the South, of people whose stories are worth listening to in the South, of people with complicated and nuanced relationships to their bodies in the South. Indeed, those categories are vast and sprawling in ways that should invigorate and excite the South and
We as Southerners. These qualifiers instated for this project—white, upper-class, rural Southern women—were chosen intentionally. In many respects, the limitations of this thesis are tied to the limitations of what has been traditionally defined as being within the bounds of Southern womanhood. This is not to imply that there is any universal experience of Southern womanhood or that any one experience of or in the body can accurately represent the experience of all individuals who look, sound, or act alike. Therefore, the value of this project comes not in its ability to represent an entire group of people, but rather in its ability to share stories in an earnest attempt to better understand the lived experiences of very particular women.

This is a project about specific women and their experiences. Those women are myself, my mother, and my grandmother—three generations of women in the American South. I chose these women based in part on my access and proximity to their stories, but also as a way to continue inquiry into my own relationship with my body within a Southern landscape. In recent years, I have gained new awareness and deepened my relationship with my body. This was a process augmented, for me, by my introduction into rock climbing—a sport that led to a deep inquisition of my body and the things it was capable of doing. My journey into climbing and the freedom it gave me spurred my interest in similar processes (or lack thereof) in the lives of the women around me. This is a project about women: their voices, their bodies, their experiences. I hope to, as much as possible, remain centered on womanhood without relying solely on man-woman binaries or the perspective of women as “other.” Though, certainly, male perspective and the male gaze will impact this piece, it won’t dominate.

The women I interview are white, putting them in a place of privilege in American society. Additionally, they are upper or upper-middle class. This privilege is one of the concepts this thesis explores: how does privilege impact movement, one’s ability to use their bodies
freely? How, why, and what does it feel like for privilege to demand certain behaviors and experiences?

The women I interview are from and of the rural South, thus allowing exploration into the way that place defines experience. The relationship between place and identity is a crucial tenant of cultural inquiry and, thus, is fundamental to this project’s development. The South has a long history of holding its women to a regional standard, particularly the upper-class white demographic explored here. The concept of the “Southern lady” is a highly cultivated persona rooted in decades upon decades of work and creation. Though seemingly outdated, its tentacles extend into present Southern society, this thesis will argue, in ways felt distinctly by women and their physical bodies. Thus, despite the understanding that there is no Southern exceptionalism, this project interrogates the idea that setting defines experience, that-- as they say-- geography is destiny. One of the primary contentions of this thesis is that bodies are intimately informed by place and geography. Thus, by studying Southern bodies, one is inherently studying Southern space, culture, and geography.

The women discussed here are all cisgender and heterosexual. This demographic is considered to be the traditional archetypal Southern woman and, while the South is growing and expanding its understandings of gender in ways more inclusive and explorative than these bounds, this line of inquiry remains focused on the lasting effects of the traditional Southern lady archetype.

Methods

As is implied by the in-depth description of who is included in this research and who is not, there is no way to make blanket assumptions about any group of people. As bodies can be
understood as cultural tools, one’s relationship to their body is fundamentally multifaceted and complex, reflective of the culture in which it grows. There is no way that this project could possibly cover all the ground necessary to make full sense of these relationships, as the tendrils span greatly across time and discipline. The best way, then, to understand this project is as a collage of sources and disciplines, stories, and fields of insight. Stylistically, this project is somewhat unique in academia in that I am both author and subject. This auto-ethnography approach, I hope, will enliven the stories and allow for an intimacy between subject and reader. This approach– a mixture of collage and auto-ethnography– is valuable for a number of reasons. Uplifting women’s voices and experiences serves to empower women and allows for societal introspection into the ways life looks, feels, sounds, and tastes for women. That, fundamentally, is meaningful. Beyond that, however, talking to an array of women in my family and interrogating myself gives an understandable scope for this project; since these women all populate the same pocket of the South, there is a higher likelihood of shared experiences or forces. This project explores the way those forces interact.

My voice and experiences are integral to this project; as will be seen, I have spent a lot of time thinking and writing about my body and the ways it has been allowed to move and also encouraged not to move. I have spent years thinking about what it feels like to live in it, about the things that it could do if I asked it to, about the reasons I have been hesitant to ask. Within the bounds of auto-ethnography, I hope to lean into those thoughts and experiences in order to benefit the project as a whole. In keeping with the understanding of this project as a collage, it is important to note that my approach to body is only one of many.

The practice of auto-ethnography finds its roots in the goal of expanding understandings of anthropological practices by including the author and their experiences in the study itself.
Further, “...the positionality of a researcher is emphasized, in terms of race, gender, and class in the context of their own experiences, in an attempt to highlight the multiplicity of truths” (Shedden 19). The premise of auto-ethnography privileges the concept of the “‘multiple truths’ of lived experience” (Shedden 20). By questioning one’s own experience, the framework is created to look at the rest of the world differently. Indeed, auto-ethnography is “an approach to research and writing that seeks to describe and systematically analyze (graphy) personal experience (auto) in order to understand cultural experience (ethno)” (Ellis, et al. 1). It is often understood as a combination of autobiography and ethnography, making both the process and the product integral parts of this form of research.

Autoethnography felt like an apt, though not perfect, descriptor for this project’s methods. Rather than shy away from, auto-ethnography embraces the “innumerable ways personal experience influences the research process” (Ellis, et al. 2). Autoethnography is beneficial for this thesis for the ways it “retrospectively and selectively writes about epiphanies that stem from, or are made possible by, being part of a culture and/or possessing a particular cultural identity” (Ellis, et al. 4). The purpose is often to “study a culture’s relational practices, common values and beliefs, and shared experiences for the purpose of helping insiders (cultural members) and outsiders (cultural strangers) better understand the culture” (Ellis, et al. 4).

Over the course of the next five chapters, I will explore these themes in a variety of ways. To begin, there will be a research chapter, exploring themes of Southern womanhood, body memoir, varying philosophies of the body, and body experiences. Following the research chapter will be a prelude – a journal entry I wrote in the midst of the thesis process that serves to introduce major themes and set the tone for the piece. Following the prelude is a chapter focusing on my grandmother, the chapter entitled “Elizabeth,” which uses multiple oral histories,
personal photos, and family history to inform its content. Following this, there will be one on my mother, entitled “Martha Lyle,” drawing from the same sources—oral histories, family knowledge, and old journals. Finally, there will be a chapter on me, entitled “Mattie,” referencing journal entries, an oral history, and my memories. Between each, there will be interludes, included to serve as palate cleansers and tone shifts between chapters. Any journal entries contained will be indicated as such by italicization. Finally, this thesis will end with a conclusion, a summarizing chapter hoping to make sense of what these reflections have told us and ponder the questions that it leaves unanswered.

This thesis examines what factors cause that friction between privilege and mobility and how this translates to other women of a similar social class. It grapples with the way bodies dictate notions of belonging and status while also analyzing the lived implications of such. Beyond that, though, this thesis is— I hope—exploratory, celebratory, inquisitive, and maybe even insightful. The body is the setting in which all of life— all the day-to-day realities—happen, it is our vessel for understanding the world. I think women’s bodies can tell us something about the South, something about privilege, something about the nuance, complication, facade, and the lived expression of womanhood.
Gender Studies

There has been much research done about the body, expanding across realms of gender studies, philosophy, memoir, and beyond. In her collection of essays, *Unbearable Weight: Feminism, Western Culture, and the Body*, Susan Bordo spends much energy examining and questioning women’s relationship to the body. In analyzing Delmore Schwartz’s poem “The Heavy Bear,” she writes that “the body as animal, as appetite, as deceiver, as prison of the soul and confounder of its projects: these are common images within Western philosophy” (Bordo, *Introduction*, 3), marking the body as hungry and longing. As a feminist body scholar, Bordo reckons with ancient understandings and philosophies on man’s relationship to body, saying “Plato imagines the body as an *epistemological* deceiver, its unreliable senses and volatile passions continually tricking us into mistaking the transient and illusory for the permanent and the real. For Schwartz, the body and its passions are obstacles to expression of the ‘inner’ life; his characteristically modern frustration over the isolation of the self and longing for ‘authenticity’ would seem very foreign to Plato” (Bordo, *Introduction*, 3). It seems to me that Bordo is saying that Plato’s understanding appears premodern in today’s philosophical landscape—while Plato understands the body as existing in opposition to the mind, relying too heavily on emotions and gut in such a way as to confuse the logical, rational brain. Schwartz, on the other hand, understands the body as existing in opposition to or in the way of one’s “inner
life—” the more sensitive, more earnest, more virtuous versions of oneself. In both expressions, 
the body is a barrier, an obstacle to the betterment of the self. If only one might transcend the 
body, distance themselves completely, they might be the better for it. In Bordo’s interpretation, 
“that which is not-body is the highest, the best, the noblest, the closest to God; that which is body 
is the albatross, the heavy drag on self-realization” (Bordo, Introduction, 5). That sentiment—this 
hope for transcendence—comes up repeatedly in my interactions with the woman around me.

Bordo, further, argues that there is an explicit gendered connection to this dualism, as 
women are cast as the body— in the words of Simone Beauvoir, “weighed down by everything 
peculiar to it” (Bordo, Introduction, 5), while men transcend the body, cast as the mind, the 
overseer, the spirit. Bordo argues that “if… the body is the negative term, and if woman is the 
body, then women are that negativity, whatever it may be: distraction from knowledge, 
seduction away from God, capitulation to sexual desire, violence or aggression, failure of will, 
even death” (Bordo, Introduction, 5). I am not sure if such a gendered split exists in my 
understanding of the world I am analyzing: in my teaching of the world, men are intrinsically 
tied to the body, but in ways liberated, capable, and free. In becoming more confident, stronger, 
and more in tune with what my body could and could not do (and heaven forbid pushing against 
those barriers!), I felt distinctly as though I was becoming more masculine. I believe women are 
expected to transcend the body, to separate from any harsh, difficult, grotesque, abrasive, 
unladylike expressions of self. In the shaping of the world introduced to me in childhood, the 
best women are those you do not think of as having muscles, or genitals, or desires, or 
frustrations. This is likely rooted in long-lasting understandings of proper Southern womanhood, 
a concept that took root in the 1800s. This concept of True Womanhood centered around four 
cardinal virtues— piety, purity, submissiveness, and domesticity. A woman was to be judged on
these accords—“a fearful obligation, a solemn responsibility, which the nineteenth-century American woman had— to uphold the pillars of the temple with her frail white hand” (Welter 152).

The virtuous Southern lady is but one of the many tropes expected of women. It is important that we recognize the ways women are susceptible to gendered, often biased, understandings of bodies and roles, even when such understandings may harm them. Bordo articulates it as “the continuing historical power and pervasiveness of certain cultural images and ideology to which not just men but also women (since we live in this culture too) are vulnerable” (Bordo, *Introduction*, 8). Since women are “associated with the body and largely confined to a life centered on the body (both the beautification of one’s own body and the reproduction, care, and maintenance of the bodies of others), culture’s grip on the body is a constant, intimate fact of everyday life” (Bordo, *Introduction*, 17). This intersection of body and culture encapsulates the complications of place on the landscape of the physical body. It is with this sentiment that this thesis becomes more than just a study of women’s bodies, but a study of the South; if one’s body is tied inextricably to the landscape in which they were raised, the place in which they spend their daily lives, then any study of body is explicitly a study of place. One’s body is the ultimate expression of place, both on an intimate, emotional, personal level— my body is the place in which the whole of life plays out— and on an empirical, pedagogical level— the body is a cultural tool, one that is defined by the forces it interacts with and the long history of the place in which it lives.

Bordo approaches the intersection of body and culture by explaining the gray zone in which they intersect. She argues that it is incorrect to read the body as either exclusively biological or exclusively cultural, but rather that it exists as a mix of both. This idea is rooted in
Marx’s philosophy in the ways he “[reimagined] the body as a historical and not merely a biological arena, an arena shaped by the social and economic organization of human life and, often, brutalized by it” (Bordo, Introduction, 33). The body cannot be understood simply as a universal, impenetrable concept—“it makes a difference, he insisted, whose body you are talking about— one that tills its own field, or one that works on an assembly line all day, or one that sits in an office managing the labor of others” (Bordo, Introduction, 34).

Intrinsic to this project is Bordo’s stipulation that “our bodies are necessarily cultural forms; whatever roles anatomy and biology play, they always interact with culture” (Bordo, Introduction, 16). This creates an inner binary, a separation between inner and outer worlds. “Through routine,” Bordo claims, “habitual activity, our bodies learn what is ‘inner’ and what is ‘outer,’ which gestures are forbidden and which required, how violable or inviolable are the boundaries of our bodies, how much space around the body may be claimed, and so on. These are often far more powerful lessons than those we learn consciously…” (Bordo, Introduction, 16). Again referencing philosophical predecessors, Don Hanlon Johnson delineates connections across generations, relaying Karl Marx’s position that “a person’s economic class affected his or her experience and definition of ‘the body.’... Michel Foucault carried on these seminal arguments in his analysis of the body as the focal point for struggles over the shape of power” (Bordo 16). This power structure is intimately tied to women's relationship to fashion and desire, making women less the doers and more the done to here. Bordo articulates this by saying:

I think it is crucial to recognize that a staple of the prevailing sexist ideology against which the feminist model protested was the notion that in matters of beauty and femininity, it is women alone who are responsible for their sufferings of the whims and bodily tyrannies of fashion. According to that ideology, men’s desires bear no responsibility, nor does the culture that subordinates women’s desires to those of men, sexualizes and commodifies women’s bodies, and offers them little other opportunities for social or personal power. Rather, it is in Woman’s essential feminine nature to be
(delightfully if incomprehensibly) drawn to such trivialities and to be willing to endure whatever physical inconvenience is entailed… Set in cultural relief against this thesis, the feminist “anti-thesis”—the insistence that women are the done to, not the doers, here; that men and their desires bear the responsibility; and that female obedience to the dictates of fashion is better conceptualized as bondage than choice—was a crucial historical moment in the developing articulation of a new understanding of the sexual politics of the body (Bordo, *Introduction*, 22).

Bordo is right to invoke Foucault’s philosophy of the body as he has informed much modern discussion on the subject. For Foucault, power is “non-authoritarian, non-conspiratorial, and indeed non-orchestrated; yet it nonetheless produces and normalizes bodies to serve prevailing relations of dominance and subordination” (Bordo, *Introduction*, 26). This means that we must veer away from understanding “power” as something people possess and instead lean into seeing it as “a dynamic or network of non-centralized forces” (Bordo, *Introduction*, 26). Further, those forces must be understood as not random or haphazard, but configured to assume particular historical forms, within which certain groups and ideologies do have dominance. This dominance, however, is sustained not from above, but through “multiple processes, of different origins and scattered location, regulating the most intimate and minute elements of the construction of space, time, desire, embodiment” (Bordo, *Introduction*, 27). When conceptualized in the landscape of feminist thinking, Foucault’s understanding of power from below proves particularly useful. In power from below, “prevailing forms of selfhood and subjectivity (gender among them) are maintained, not chiefly through physical restraint and coercion (although social relations may certainly contain such elements), but through individual self-surveillance and self-correction to norms” (Bordo, *Introduction*, 27) (emphasis added). In the words of Foucault, “there is no need for arms, physical violence, material constraints. Just a gaze. An inspecting gaze…” (Bordo, *Introduction*, 27). Foucault, thus, posits that self-surveillance and the threat of public shame spurs rigidity from people otherwise free to act as
they please. This concept of the inspecting gaze is highly relevant to this interrogation, as much of the alterations and restrictions both in his estimation of power and seen in the experiences of women here are self-enforced and self-surveilled.

The inspecting gaze is one of the concepts I explore through women’s experience, as it is women’s experiences I am interested in analyzing. This is a thesis distinctly not about men despite the fact that they are relevant to this conversation and intimately shape women’s movement through and placement in the world. This does not cast men as the enemy, however, as– in the words of Susan Bordo– “Within a Foucauldian/feminist framework, it is indeed senseless to view men as the enemy: to do so would be to ignore, not only power differences in the racial, class, and sexual situations of men but the fact that most men, equally with women, find themselves embedded and implicated in institutions and practices that they as individuals did not create and do not control– and that they frequently feel tyrannized by” (Bordo, Introduction, 28). It is evident, then, that the exclusion of men from the focus of this piece is not out of distaste or distrust of men, but because of the foundational importance of sharing women’s stories, separated from men. These words from Adrienne Rich’s convocation address to the Douglass College class of 1977 feel apt: “... One of the devastating weaknesses of university learning, of the store of knowledge and opinion that has been handed down through academic training, has been its almost total erasure of women’s experience and thought from the curriculum, and its exclusion of women as members of the academic community ….What you can learn here (and I mean not only at Douglass but any college in any university) is how men have perceived and organized their experience, their history, their ideas of social relationships, good and evil, sickness and health, etc. When you hear about ‘great issues,’ ‘major texts,’ ‘the mainstream of Western thought,’ you are hearing about what men, above all
white men, in their male subjectivity, have decided is important” (Rich 232). While four
decades and some change has certainly altered and improved the landscape of gender dynamics,
accessibility, and representation, the bones of Rich’s statement still hold weight. Still, women’s
stories are not told at the rate of men’s. Still, the mere act of telling women’s stories from
women’s perspectives is worthwhile and undervalued. Still, there is much to be said about the
world of women invisible from the outside world.

When approaching this project, one of the sole limitations I wished to instate was to
avoid weight as the primary focus. I wanted to talk about a more complicated relationship to the
body than one purely defined by the number on the scale. As my interest in and research on
women’s relationships to their bodies grew, I was bombarded with articles about weight loss,
diet practices, and exercise regimens for women. This was deeply frustrating, as it seemed to
simplify the complex and potentially rewarding relationships women could have with their
bodies beyond simple aesthetics or productivity. I did not much want this project to center
around appearance at all, but rather on the feelings of expression, suppression, relationship, the
give and take that can come from the body. Obviously, these different facets of relationship to
the body are not mutually exclusive. Once I started interviewing the women in my family and
digging through my own journal entries, I came to see that weight and appearance are integral
to our understandings of our bodies, a frustrating marker of progress and acceptance, but a
relevant marker nonetheless. This mindset shift is reflected in Bordo’s reflections that when
women wish to be thin because they believe that the only way to succeed in our culture is to be
skinny, “it is described as flawed reasoning, a misperception of reality that the therapist must
work to correct.” More accurately, however, “from a feminist/cultural perspective, this approach
ignores the fact that for most people in our culture, slenderness is indeed equated with
competence, self-control, and intelligence, and feminine curvaceousness (in particular, large breasts) with wide-eyed, giggly vapidity” (Bordo 55). This is to say, there is deep truth and legitimacy in the lived experience of women. Though in an ideal world, the perception of thin women as more adept would not be true, the world that informs the psyche of women insists that it is true. The lived experience of thousands of women—me, my mother, my grandmother all included—insists that it is true.

The process of owning or finding autonomy for one’s own female body, of breaking beyond those confines of weight and aesthetic, is a theme heavily broached by Bordo. In an essay entitled “Whose Body Is This?,” she delineates “a psychological struggle characteristic of the contemporary situation of women—” saying that “a constellation of social, economic, and psychological factors have combined to produce a generation of women who feel deeply flawed, ashamed of their needs, and not entitled to exist unless they transform themselves into worthy new selves (read: without need, without want, without body)” (Bordo, Whose Body?, 47). As is clear from the tone, Bordo situates this placement of womanhood with the body front and center as the battleground for these opposing forces. The body is read as explicitly bad and burdensome, something to rid oneself from, but she notes that it is not the body that demands this, but rather a combination of social, economic, and psychological factors. She goes on to implicate mothers in this process of body imagining, saying “… the mother-daughter relation is an important medium of this process. But it is not mothers who are to blame… for they too are children of their culture, deeply anxious over their own appetites and appearance…” (Bordo, Whose Body?, 47). This serves to group all women into the same class of experiences, at least as far as issues of weight, appearance, and acceptability are concerned. This is a generalization I
am not comfortable making, as my research has shown that there are a wide variety of factors influencing one’s movement through the world.

Body Memoirs

Much of the research for this project has been centered in other people’s writings on and reflections of their own bodies. The texts that have most readily informed my work in this regard are Kiese Laymon’s *Heavy*, Roxanne Gay’s *Hunger*, and Emily Ratajkowski’s *My Body*. Though each is markedly different in narrator, scope, subject matter, and thesis, all nonetheless inform my writings, reflections, and inquiries. This category of text exemplifies the complicated ways people handle relationships with their bodies.

Kiese Laymon’s 2018 memoir *Heavy* interrogates the world he grew up in through the lens of his body. Laymon understands societal forces to be best understood by his physical body. In this way, the form of memoir is particularly useful and poignant; particularly in childhood, Laymon most easily understands his positioning in the world viscerally, recognizing that his body understood things his mind could not. Laymon expresses this juxtaposition between knowledge of the body and knowledge of the mind, saying

My body knew things my mouth and my mind couldn’t, or maybe wouldn't, express. It knew that all over my neighborhood, boys were trained to harm girls in ways girls could never harm boys, straight kids were trained to harm queer kids in ways queer kids could never harm straight kids, men were trained to harm women in ways women could never harm men, parents were trained to harm children in ways children would never harm parents, babysitters were trained to harm kids in ways kids could never harm babysitters. My body knew white folk were trained to harm us in ways we could never harm them (Laymon 27-28).

Thus, though operating in different worlds and vastly different types of bodies, Laymon’s framework for viewing the body as the lens through which one understands the world is
foundational to this study. In Laymon’s framework, hierarchies are understood through the body—white people trained to be more harmful than Black people, straight kids more harmful than queer kids, boys more harmful than girls, men more harmful than women, parents more harmful than children. These hierarchies, while unexpressed by his mind, live on in his body, the vessel through which the world is understood and internalized.

Roxane Gay wrote her memoir *Hunger* because “more often than not, stories of bodies like mine are ignored or dismissed or derided… They think they know the why of my body. They do not” (Gay 5). She articulates the baggage of what she has been taught about her body, that women should be “slender and small. We should not take up space. We should be seen and not heard, and if we are seen, we should be pleasing to men, acceptable to society. And most women know this, that we are supposed to disappear, but it’s something that needs to be said, loudly, over and over again, so that we can resist surrendering to what is expected of us” (Gay 13).

Gay breaks her memoir— and, further, her life— into a “before” and an “after—” “before I gained weight. After I gained weight. Before I was raped. After I was raped” (Gay 14). Gay was raped at twelve years old. In response, she began to eat, understanding that “to be fat was to be undesirable to men, to be beneath their contempt,” thinking that “if [her] body became repulsive, [she] could keep men away” (Gay 13). She describes both a closeness to and a distance from her body, saying that “in some ways, it feels like the weight just appeared on my body one day… in other ways, I was intimately aware of every single pound that accumulated and clung to my body… my family’s concern became a constant chorus of nagging, always well intended, but mostly a reminder of how I was a failure in the most basic of my human responsibilities— maintaining my body” (Gay 116).
In the following three-hundred pages, Gay crafts a narrative that understands hunger not only as a woman’s need for physical nourishment, but a deep desire for justice, for respect, for validation. She wonders, towards the end of the text, “who I would have been if this terrible thing had not happened to me, if I hadn’t spent so much of my life hungering so much” (Gay 300). She imagines another Roxane, one thin, married, successful, confident. “...Put another way, I’ve been thinking a lot about feeling comfortable in one’s body and what a luxury that must be. Does anyone feel comfortable in their bodies?,” she asks (Gay 300). Perhaps in elaboration, she articulates “feeling comfortable in my body isn’t entirely about beauty standards. It is not entirely about ideals. It’s about how I feel in my skin and bones, from one day to the next” (Gay 18). Gay uses this memoir as an act of rebellion against those who believe her body to be not worth explanation or acceptance, saying that with writing this book she is laying herself bare: “here I am showing you the ferocity of my hunger. Here I am, finally freeing myself to be vulnerable and terribly human. Here I am, reveling in that freedom. Here. See what I hunger for and what my truth has allowed me to create” (Gay 304).

Emily Ratajkowski’s My Body similarly articulates a striving towards better understanding and caring for her body, a longing for bodily autonomy and control. Ratajkowski’s career as a high-level supermodel positions her— and more particularly, her body— in the public spotlight. Like Gay, Ratajkowski understands hierarchical power in society, noting that “the most desirable, attractive woman was always the most powerful in any given room” (Ratajkowski 43). This creates a perceived ambivalence and confidence in her body, a sense of power understood by “normal” women everywhere wishing to have her look. She writes that she is “never self-conscious about being naked,” something that people think comes from the publicly-recognized beauty of her body. “‘It’s just not that simple,’ I want to respond, but I know
that then I’d have to tell them about how I dissociate when my body is being observed, how I don’t even really recognize my body as me” (Ratajkowski 103). This distance between body and self is a recurring theme across disciplines and stories, marking a troubling pattern. She details her distaste even for the dentist, explaining her hate of the idea of being told by a stranger, “likely a man… you should really take better care of yourself. I want to be the one in control of my body,” she posits, “even if that means denying it” (Ratajkowski 102). This straining for autonomy, again, marks a theme in the body memoirs assessed here.

What do Laymon, Gay, and Ratajkowski’s stories have in common? Each detail a complex and often fraught relationship with body, a relationship constantly in development and ones that require vulnerability. Each details anger, shame, and disgust. Each divulges sexual trauma. Each understands that their visceral bodies have been shaped by the experiences of their past. Each illuminates an understanding that a healthy relationship to body is a day-to-day process, requiring care and reflection. Each seems to be left unsettled in their body. Each seems to hope for something more.

Psychology

The power that relationship to one’s body holds in the psyche is becoming a more developed field. In his text The Body Keeps the Score: Brain, Mind, and Body in the Healing of Trauma, Bessel Van der Kolk articulates that, in dealing with survivors of trauma, there are several methods of rehabilitation. Talk therapy and drugs are helpful sources for some, but he notes that “... imprints from the past can be transformed by having physical experiences that directly contradict the helplessness, rage, and collapse that are part of trauma” (Van der Kolk 4). This empowerment of body articulates the importance of mind-body connections, illuminating
the ways that the body lives, and has the potential to remedy or worsen, the workings of our minds. Certainly, both are crucial to the healthy life of humans, but too often for those of us in academia, there becomes an imbalance. “I discovered that my professional training,” Van der Kolk says, “with its focus on understanding and insight, had largely ignored the relevance of the living, breathing body, the foundation of our selves” (Van der Kolk 91) (emphasis added).

This mind-body connection, however, sometimes goes awry. In the words of Antonio Damasio, “sometimes we use our minds not to discover facts, but to hide them… one of the things the screen hides most effectively is the body, our own body, by which I mean the ins of it, its interiors” (Van der Kolk 95). This “screen,” while effective for the sake of productivity and the avoidance of self-reflection, finds fault in those very same origins. The screen, Damasio explains, “tends to prevent us from sensing the possible origin and nature of what we call self” (Van der Kolk 95). Thus, it is important to reconnect to our bodies in order to understand ourselves holistically.

Even beyond the brain, the body understands and senses what is valuable and helpful for the safety of the self. These gut feelings make for a more complete understanding of the world, particularly when those emotions cannot be fully articulated. In other words, “our gut feelings signal what is safe, life sustaining, or threatening, even if we cannot quite explain why we feel a particular way. Our sensory interiority continuously sends us subtle messages about the needs of our organism” (Van der Kolk 98). This interaction deepens one’s sense of self and, further, expands one’s understanding of the world around them. “If you have a comfortable connection with your inner sensations–” Van der Kolk writes, “if you can trust them to give you accurate information– you will feel in charge of your body, your feelings, your self” (Van der Kolk 98).
Van der Kolk goes on to detail the interactions existing between the subconscious brain and the emotions stored inside one’s body. While there are a wide array of ways to channel our feelings into productive and manageable clauses, he narrows in on writing as one of the most effective ways to achieve this goal. He explains that when we talk with strangers, “our social editor jumps in on full alert and our guard is up,” but that “writing is different. If you ask your editor to leave you alone for a while, things will come out that you had no idea were there. You are free to go into a sort of a trance state in which your pen (or keyboard) seems to channel whatever bubbles up from inside. You can connect those self-observing and narrative parts of your brain without worrying about the reception you’ll get” (Van der Kolk 240). It seems likely that this is why I personally have always turned to journaling to process my feelings, why so many of the entries contained in this document are so earnest and raw.

Writing is not the only process that helps illuminate and deepen one’s relationship to their body. Van der Kolk writes of success prescribing yoga to patients he is treating, harkening back to his philosophy that one of the primary ways to reconcile trauma is a “bottom up” method, a means of “allowing the body to have experiences that deeply and viscerally contradict the helplessness, rage, or collapse that result from trauma” (Van der Kolk 3). He notices that for most survivors, “once you start approaching your body with curiosity rather than with fear, everything shifts” (Van der Kolk 275). He includes an anecdote from a patient who had outstanding success with yoga in which she details an experience after her second yoga class: “After the class I came home and slept for four hours. This week I tried doing yoga at home and the words came to me ‘Your body has things to say.’ I said back to myself, ‘I will try and listen’” (Van der Kolk 273). This approach strikes me as deeply wise. We are working towards trying to listen.
Body Experience

Iris Marion Young’s text “Throwing Like a Girl: A Phenomenology of Feminine Body Comportment, Mobility, and Spatiality” has been hugely informative for this project. She explains her use of terms, specifically that of “body experience,” a term used to go beyond taking bodies as “objects or things to observe, study, or explain—” instead, they take the aim to “describe subjectivity and women’s experience as lived and felt in the flesh” (Young, Introduction, 9). One of the primary questions with which this collection of essays grapples asks, “To the extent that women occupy relatively disadvantaged positions in gendered power and role structures, how, if at all, is our subordination embodied?” (Young, Introduction, 9).

Young spends a fair amount of time delineating the distinct niche that comes with her study of gender, explaining that all women’s experiences are unique, that indeed we “reduce women’s condition simply to unintelligibility if we ‘explain’ it by appeal to some natural and ahistorical feminine essence” (Young, Throwing Like a Girl, 29). Keeping that in consideration, retaining the fact that “there is no eternal feminine essence,” there is nonetheless “a common basis which underlies every individual female experience in the present state of education and custom” (Young, Throwing Like a Girl, 29). This unity, however, “is specific to a particular social formation during a particular epoch” (Young, Throwing Like a Girl, 29).

With that delineation made, Young goes on to analyze a study that compares the throwing of a baseball between young girls and young boys, a study that shows a marked difference in body positioning and throwing style, thus broaching the legitimacy of the claim of “throwing like a girl.” Young explains that the differences seen by Straus and his researchers are that “girls do not bring their whole bodies into the motion as much as the boys do. They do not
reach back, twist, move backward, step, and lean forward. Rather, the girls tend to remain relatively immobile except for their arms, and even the arms are not extended as far as they could be” (Young, *Throwing Like a Girl*, 32). That is to say, girls work more to constrain their bodies.

Young points out that this difference between men and women’s use of their bodies continues beyond just throwing and, following the same theme, stems from women’s “failure to make full use of the body’s spatial and lateral potentialities” (Young, *Throwing Like a Girl*, 32).

Young makes the distinction that the difference between men and women’s ability to perform certain tasks hinges primarily on differences in how each sex approaches tasks rather than on simple brute strength. Women, she explains, “often do not perceive themselves as capable of lifting and carrying heavy things, pushing and shoving with significant force… When we attempt such tasks, we frequently fail to summon the full possibilities of our muscular coordination, position, poise, and bearing” (Young, *Throwing Like a Girl*, 33). Further, “women tend not to put their whole bodies into engagement in a physical task with the same ease and naturalness as men” (Young, *Throwing Like a Girl*, 33), using the example of lifting something heavy– men tend to use more helpful body form, planting firmly, while women tend to focus on shoulders and arms, not bringing the fullest capability of the body into the task.

That is to say, women tend to approach tasks with multiple layers of hesitation, what Young describes as a double hesitation– “On the one hand, we often lack confidence that we have the capacity to do what must be done” (Young, *Throwing Like a Girl*, 34), using the example of traversing across a stream: “Many times I have slowed a hiking party in which the men bounded across a harmless stream while I stood on the other side warily testing my footing on various stones, holding on to overhanging branches. Though the others crossed with ease, I do not believe it is easy for me, even though once I take a committed step I am across in a flash”
(Young, *Throwing Like a Girl*, 34). Beyond that, however, there is an added layer of hesitation. She explains that, “the other side of this tentativeness is, I suggest, a fear of getting hurt, which is greater in women than in men. Our attention is often divided between the aim to be realized in motion and the body that must accomplish it, while at the same time saving itself from harm. We often experience our bodies as a fragile encumbrance, rather than the medium for the enactment of our aims. We feel as though we must have our attention directed upon our bodies to make sure they are doing what we wish them to do, rather than paying attention to what we want to do through our bodies” (Young, *Throwing Like a Girl*, 34).

Young concludes that women tend to move as though there is a space surrounding them that they cannot move beyond—“the space available to our movement is a constricted space” (Young, *Throwing Like a Girl*, 33). That is to say, feminine existence operates as though there is less space than there truly is. Another example of this referenced by Young is the “observation already noted that in sport, for example, women tend not to move out and meet the motion of a ball, but rather tend to stay in one place and react to the ball’s motion only when it has arrived within the space where she is” (Young, *Throwing Like a Girl*, 40). Young posits that feminine bodily experience is lived as though “the body is… a thing that is other than it, a thing like other things in the world,” thus leaving the woman “rooted in immanence, is inhibited, and retains a distance from her body as transcending movement and from engagement in the world’s possibilities” (Young, *Throwing Like a Girl*, 39).

Why, then, do women live with such distance from their bodies? Well, “insofar as we learn to live out our existence in accordance with the definition that patriarchal culture assigns to us, we are physically inhibited, confined, positioned, and objectified” (Young, *Throwing Like a Girl*, 42). This is enacted in part by a simple lack of possibility—“girls and women are not given
the opportunity to use their full bodily capacities in free and open engagement with the world, nor are they encouraged as much as boys are to develop specific bodily skills” (Young, *Throwing Like a Girl*, 43), be that through young children’s play, in which girls’ is often more sedentary than boys’, the lack of practice at “tinkering” with things and developing a strong sense of spatiality, or being asked to perform “tasks demanding physical effort and strength, while as the boys grow older they are asked to do so more and more” (Young, *Throwing Like a Girl*, 43).

The trained body experience of women, however, goes beyond this simple learn-by-exclusion. Not only are they excluded from certain activities or styles of thought, they are encouraged to present themselves in particular ways in order to indicate their girl-ness:

There is a specific positive style of feminine body comportment and movement, which is learned as the girl comes to understand that she is a girl. The young girl acquires many subtle habits of feminine body comportment—walking like a girl, tilting her head like a girl, standing and sitting like a girl, gesturing like a girl, and so on. The girl learns actively to hamper her movements. She is told that she must be careful not to get hurt, not to get dirty, not to tear her clothes, that the things she desires to do are dangerous for her. Thus she develops a bodily timidity that increases with age. In assuming herself to be a girl, she takes herself to be fragile. Studies have found that young children of both sexes categorically assert that girls are more likely to get hurt than boys are, and that girls ought to remain close to home, while boys can roam and explore. The more a girl assumes her status as feminine, the more she takes herself to be fragile and immobile and the more she actively enacts her own body inhibition (Young, *Throwing Like a Girl*, 43).

Furthermore, Young argues that beyond simple training by exclusion or by proper understanding of womanhood, women move their bodies in such a way because “the woman lives her body as object as well as subject” (Young, *Throwing Like a Girl*, 44). This hinges around the fact that patriarchal society understands woman as object and mere body, a mindset easy to learn and adhere to. Young says of women and their bodies that, “...She gazes at it in the mirror, worries about how it looks to others, prunes it, shapes it, molds and decorates it. This objectified bodily existence accounts for the self-consciousness of the feminine relation to her
body and resulting distance she takes from her body,” Young writes, articulating this expected distance between women’s selves and their bodies (Young, *Throwing Like a Girl*, 44) (emphasis added). Young explains that “to the degree that she does live herself as mere body, she cannot be in unity with herself but must take a distance from and exist in discontinuity with her body. The objectifying regard that ‘keeps her in her place’ can also account for the spatial modality of being positioned and for why women frequently tend not to move openly, keeping their limbs closed around themselves. To open her body in free, active, open extension and bold outward-directedness is for a woman to invite objectification” (Young, *Throwing Like a Girl*, 44). This would perhaps explain why some women—myself and my mother included—find liberation in sports or movement typically deemed as “masculine.”

From childhood, I have understood viscerally if not completely logically, the expectation to be a lady—polite, charming, confident, rigidly graceful. The essence of the inscription on that book—Mattie, Be a lady!—has circulated in my head for the last decade, taking one form or another but always serving to remind me of what is expected of me. I have begun, in recent years, to question that sentiment and what it means in practice—how is ladyhood enacted? What effect does it have on my physical body and the bodies of the women who raised me? How are those expectations learned and how do we carry them throughout our lives? The following chapters attempt to answer those questions, or at least explore them, hoping to articulate the lived experience of these women by sharing how it has felt to live in their bodies.
PRELUDE

November 29, 2021:

Who am I, really, now?

My fingernails are longer than they have been in perhaps months, perhaps years. I don’t think I really need this flannel and yet, I’ll keep it on. My lower back hurts. I hope there is not a hole in my pants.

Admittedly:

I cannot pay attention in class anymore. I have not done the readings as I should. The lectures pass me by. My lower back hurts?

One week left of classes and then it’s finals. Our essays are being graded, some of them already have been. Is this how I write now?

Who am I now?
I feel strong on my bike. The warm expired sun in my car is my favorite smell. I used to climb better than I do now. I have a position of authority at work, at least in theory.

Remember when I used to buy caesar wraps from McAllisters to try to lose weight? Remember when I learned that they have as many calories as anything else? Remember that that was less than three years ago?

Remember when my grandmother told me that she was anxious each time she stepped on the scale at the OBGYN, pregnant belly covering the numbers between her feet, knowing she was only supposed to gain a certain amount of weight, knowing that she had tried her hardest to control her eating? Remember when she told me that she didn’t think it was fair for girls to wear tight clothes and prance around like that, knowing that they are causing trouble for boys, knowing that they are causing trouble for themselves? Remember when I tipped my coffee cup to my lips as she said it, turning up the end and staring hard into the bottom of the mug, mouth filling with cold milky coffee so that I didn’t have to look at her as she says it, so that I could pretend it was not her, a woman, reciting those phrases to me, her granddaughter, a woman, a girl.

The professor mentions Flannery O’Connor and her pet peacocks and I cannot help but look up and smile. I miss Flannery like a friend. I do not like having to think about women like this. I do not like knowing that it hurts. I do not like having it hurt me.
My fingers are cold and when I press them into my palms, my nails dig in, proof that I have not been climbing, proof that my body is still changing.

Remember when over a tape recorder and another cold cup of coffee, my mother told me about date rape, about eating disorders, about the deep distressing shame of her body? Remember when chatting on the phone in the campus sunshine, I heard that my grandmother’s sister told one of my grandmother’s friends who told our housekeeper who told my mother who is telling me that maybe my grandmother has eating disorders and maybe she has for decades, and she says it in a whisper, and I do not know if it’s true, but maybe it could be, and she says maybe that ties into your thesis, and I say yeah I guess maybe so? (woman, woman, woman, woman, woman)

Remember when my sister reminded me that our great great aunt twice removed, still too close, mentor and mother figure to my grandmother, starved herself at the end? Died from lack of nutrition, died because she would not eat? Remember that I did not remember that? Remember that I do not remember her name? Remember when I wouldn’t let myself think about what it means for a woman to starve herself to death, can’t think about what that looks like, what that feels like, won’t let myself think about why I have heard so little?

Remember when I thought this thesis was going to be about the way my grandmother glides across a room, almost weightless, body frail but somehow resolute, body both out of the way and center stage? Remember when I thought it might be about expensive clothes and heavy jewelry and How To Be a Lady books? Remember when I thought I would be writing about New Years Eve Black Tie optional parties and little girls in necklaces usually kept in the lock box?
Remember the way riding my bike around campus feels like freedom? Remember how it feels like floating, how it feels like singing, remember how it makes it hard to breathe? Remember sitting in the pulmonologist’s office in Northern Virginia and hearing that the cotton fields down the road back home left marks on my lungs? Remember the first time it felt like my body was mine? Remember realizing that my body could move? Mattie, do you remember your first pair of boy pants? Mattie, do you remember accidentally cutting your legs shaving every two weeks for years? Mattie, do you remember knowing you weren’t good at it? Mattie, do you remember the way it didn’t hurt but would not stop bleeding? Mattie, do you remember what it felt like to learn you were a woman? Mattie, do you remember what it felt like to learn you were of women? Mattie, do you remember what it felt like to learn that women hurt? Mattie, do you remember
ELIZABETH

My grandmother has always been an image of lightness. She moves through every room with her chin held high and her shoulders held back, almost weightless, almost floating. She is tiny—five feet tall and always thin, donned in heavy jewelry and no-slip shoes. She is loved by my hometown, eccentric but non-threatening, a playful and graceful figure.

I have long been in awe of the way that my grandmother makes life, makes moving through the world in a body, seem effortless. With the twist of a wrist, she has someone fetching her a glass of white wine or opening her car door. She does her yard work wearing white linen from head to toe; when you bring her a glass of ice water, you wouldn’t be able to tell she had been crawling around the kudzu.

In contrast, I am clumsy, often feeling jumbled and unbalanced in my body. I hit my head on car doors, door frames, and other people’s heads. I do not naturally hold my shoulders back the way I have been taught; my elbows gravitate to the dinner table no matter how many times I am reminded that forearms, at most, are the only body part allowed to touch the table. I remember understanding this schism even from childhood—why am I unable to float like that?
What must it feel like to live in a weightless body? What must it be like to be so universally admired?

The answers to those questions are complicated. It seems it takes a lot of work to be weightless.

My grandmother was born Elizabeth Walker Winfrey in Yum Yum, Tennessee in 1931. She is the third child of five. She describes herself as stubborn from the beginning, less beautiful and less pious than her sisters, but a girl, and therefore not expected to work on the farm or given the responsibilities required of her brothers. She was born into a middle-class farming family, sent in her adolescence to live at her family’s homeplace with her aunts.

From childhood, my grandmother has been conscious of her weight, something that seems to color all understandings of her body from that point onward. She claims that one of the most lasting experiences in which she felt her relationship with her body change over the course of her life was when she decided that sweets—gooey chocolate cake and sweet biscuits and molasses—were not the most important things in the world. She marks food as fundamentally important to her youngest years and frames it in a landscape of indulgence, saying that she never remembers any of the adults around her telling her that she shouldn’t eat a second sorghum and biscuit for breakfast, but so wishing that they had. She cites her father as a good influence in this regard, claiming that she would join him on his long walks, a taste of activity that stood in stark contrast to her mother’s stillness. When discussing exercise, she says, “Daddy exercised more in
his walking— I mean miles and miles and miles a day— than Mother did. But ladies just didn’t bother about that then. It just wasn’t something that Southern ladies did. Which is just about as foolish as you can get.” While my grandmother and her father were out walking, her mother would read, talk on the phone, or take a nap, in my grandmother’s memory.

As a child and adolescent girl, my grandmother had to wear a brand called “Chubbettes,” meant for the plus-sized girls of the time. This is a piece of family lore that lives on in regular conversation and memory, something to laugh about and marvel at the absurdity of. She remembers “going to this lady at Gerber’s and she would show us Chubbettes,” an experience she retells often with overemphasized pouting and resignation. In high school, she was sent to an all-girls boarding school, where she subsequently gained 20 or 30 pounds. This— both the weight gain and the lack of men— did not meet my grandmother’s fancy; she claims that all she did while there was think about how to get out. She remembers transferring to University of Tennessee and seeing “all those cute boys, I thought, ‘Now wait a minute, this isn’t smart,’” referencing her recent weight gain. She reflects once again that, “It’s helpful if you grow up in an environment that sort of pays attention to it.”

Weight was understood to be the most tangible means of enhancing one’s beauty. She says that “everything else I figured I couldn’t change very much so just being very careful about my body’s size was the main sort of ego part of it.” And she has, indeed, been vigilant about it; she has weighed herself— completely naked— every Monday morning for, she says, fifty or sixty
years. She says she continues to do so now, even as she ages into her nineties. She says that she has weighed about the same as she does now for she is not sure how long—as long as she can remember. The logic of this relies on an awareness of the body—“it’s just so important to—maybe not that strenuously—but to be aware of how the size and shape of your body affects what you can do. If you’re fat, you can’t do all the things you could do if you were slimmer. If you’re skinny, golly bill, where’s my energy?” For her own body, however, she says she’s “never had the problem of being too skinny; it’s always been about the same.”

This is a moment in which things become complicated. This is the truth, I believe, as it lives in my grandmother’s head. It is not quite the truth as it lives in mine or, for that matter, most of the rest of my family’s. My grandmother has always been almost notoriously skinny; the adults around her have always been conscious of her weight. This, naturally, was not something I knew as a child. Much of it, in fact, I did not know until working on this project. I was surprised at the way weight seemed to live on, ever-present, in my grandmother’s head. Each question, it seemed, circled back to her size, to the beauty or worth she could associate with slimness. I told her, during an interview, that I was surprised to hear her talk so much about weight because, as I’ve known her over the last twenty-odd years, she’s always been small. She responded simply and starkly: “but it has taken effort.” This solidifies, once again, the work that comes with being weightless, the lives lived behind the facade of breezy womanhood.

In middle age, my grandmother smoked cigarettes, in part to fit in with her peers, in part as an appetite suppressant. She says, “smoking was just a thing that women were doing in those days, but I never could quite get the hang of it. But everyone else playing bridge was smoking, so I tried.” She would order packs of colored cigarettes. She would save the red and green ones
in the freezer to smoke during the Christmas season. For the rest of the year, she would smoke a cigarette that matched her outfit.

I came to realize the shadow of weight is one of the ways in which my grandmother understands all women– her mother, for example, “would have looked better with a little less weight, but it’s just something you never said much about.” Weight seems a thing to fear, something she says she’s “always had to be careful about.” This awareness of weight was perhaps most poignantly felt throughout her two pregnancies. She recounts being anxious when her doctor would weigh her for her pregnancy check-ups, knowing that she was only supposed to gain a certain amount of weight. She remembers her doctor– a General Practitioner around town– telling her, “I can do just about anything about this pregnancy, except control your weight, and you have to do that yourself.” This prompted a vigilance about staying small throughout pregnancy, as she recounts that “one thing about being pregnant was you just knew you had to be a little more thoughtful about what you ate,” to be sure that you didn’t gain too much weight. Otherwise, however, she remembers getting along really easily with both pregnancies, accounting this to her good health. She doesn’t much remember what pregnancy felt like physically, saying it “was just one of those things you went through. You were really excited when you found out you were pregnant, so you were going to have a baby, so you were going to have a child, have a family.” Primarily, the change was more mental than physical, as it meant “you were entering into a different lifestyle.”

In her time, women in labor would go into what was called “twilight,” in which they would be put under anesthesia for the birthing process and, hours later, wake up with a baby in their arms. For her first, she “remembers calling them when I started having what I thought were labor pains, which they were, so we go in and put on the robe and they put this thing on over my
nose that I can breathe, whatever it is that kind of knocks you out-- the only thing is that I was so excited and nervous that I was breathing out rather than in. So I felt a lot of pain because I didn’t know how to do it… But you know, no problems.”

I can imagine my grandmother, having just had her first child, dumbstruck, not quite knowing what to do with it. She, in many ways, did not fit into the perfect mother trope that so constrains so many Southern women. She notes that, while nowadays they discharge you from the hospital pretty immediately after birth, “I stayed so long, because I didn’t know what to do with a kid, the doctor finally came in and said ‘if you don’t go home today, you’re going to have to start getting up and making up your own bed.’ So I said, ‘okay, doctor.’” This, in her memory, was about a week or ten days; I’ve heard upwards of two weeks.

She, of course, relied on help, primarily in the form of a Black woman– Eva– hired to help raise her daughters, cook meals, wash clothes, and the like. When my mother was born, they were living in Nashville, two hours from my hometown. Someone– though my grandmother does not remember whom– drove Eva up to stay with them for a few weeks to help take care of her. Motherhood, it seems, was something simply expected and understood– not only did one know “you would have a lot of help taking care of [the baby] when you got home,” it was just something that followed the logical progression of life. She recounts that “Neither I nor any of my friends or acquaintances had any burning desire for a career, as such. We just sort of felt like our function was to do what we were doing, which was go to school-- finish high school, get a little bit of college-- get married, after a couple years have a kid then have another kid a few years later… it was just something you didn’t talk about much, that’s just what you did.” She goes as far as to say that “somehow it was just a part of what you were supposed to do as a Southern woman– sort of our status in the world then– you worked a little while, you got
married, you had children, you took care of them, and that was it. .... It’s just what women did then. It never occurred to me or any of my friends not to go this route. None of us had careers, so no one ever thought in terms of doing anything other than-- if you can conceive, you’re gonna have a baby and raise it.”

These notions of what is proper for Southern ladies has been ingrained into my grandmother since childhood. Her namesake aunt, Aunt Libba, explained to her “‘now the nice way for Southern ladies to do this is…,’” which my grandmother reflects upon saying “of course, you need a little of that-- you need a little bit of keeping you based in what you’re supposed to do.” For her own account, however, she believes that “God gave us [women] good bodies just like He gave men good bodies, and He didn’t necessarily mean for us to sit and hold our hands,” miming one of her favorite hand motions of a proper Southern lady– hands clasping and rubbing across each other, eyes pointed upward, pious– taking a jab at the institution that she both upholds and decries. Furthermore, she says she “never [has] much gotten that this or that because you’re a woman. I mean, why limit yourself that way?” She goes on to say that she thinks “that’s actually been sort of a tragedy for a lot of women, they have thought that’s what their image should be,” trapped by the rigid expectations of this particular type of womanhood.

And yet, there were specific customs and values to be upheld with daughters– “You wanted them to always look as nice as they could. You wanted them to have good posture, you wanted their weight to be within the attractive limit, back in those days, you didn’t want them to wear clothes that were very revealing.” Clothes, not just the brand but the style, the shape, indicated both class and virtue. She explains that, “Back then, nice girls just didn’t in any way reveal-- like pants that were too tight, tops that were too tight-- you just didn’t do it if you were of the right family.”
To break beyond these bounds was improper and, quite frankly, not allowed. For a girl to show too much skin was… my grandmother hesitates, searching. “The word sinful almost comes to mind,” she says. “It’s almost not fair to boys for girls to wear really tight things and, you know, walk in a certain way and not know perfectly good and well they’re causing trouble for the guy and probably will cause trouble for themselves. I mean if you’ve got bat brains, you’ll figure that one out early on.” She was not, however, culturally expected to talk to her daughters about sex either, reasoning that “it’s not polite. Anything pretty much related to your body either was or was not the thing you do,” a distinction that was understood without having to be told. Her raising was conducted much of the same way—she did not know that she should be expecting a period until it came. She remembers sitting on the toilet and “being so scared…” Because of course it had never been mentioned.” She seemed to assume that I would know it had never been mentioned, as if we were locked into some sort of pact of womanly silence. She reiterates, “[I] had no idea. It would never have occurred to my mother that that was something she needed to discuss with her daughter. You just don’t discuss anything about sex.”

At the same time, some notions of Southern womanhood proved obsolete for my grandmother. One of her life’s greatest joys has been traveling abroad, particularly in the realm of trips off the beaten path—riding a camel across the Sahara, climbing Mount Kilimanjaro, returning again and again to Nepal. With these memories, she talks about a satisfaction with and the impressiveness of her body, saying specifically that it was “so wonderfully satisfying realizing I could do it, I could get to the top of Kilimanjaro… I remember one guy on the trip saying, ‘you’re amazing, none of us at the beginning of the trip thought you’d be able to make it.’ … you know, little Southern lady…”
These trips were a means of pushing herself, of obtaining strength and some level of bodily autonomy. For Kilimanjaro, she spent months training—putting bricks in her backpack and walking up and down the steps of the bank—the only two-story building in town at the time—and at the football field. She recognizes this desire to travel as something outside of the expectations of women at that time, but nonetheless committed to it strongly. She says that gendered expectations have never been something that’s affected her much, that she “just never gave much thought to it. And yet I knew there were always those who thought that I should not be doing this or I’m not sure this is proper,” speaking specifically about traveling abroad without my grandfather and taking such active, such unorthodox trips. She says that most women she knows are “sort of afraid of exerting, of expanding. I’m sorry and I’m not meaning to be critical, but I’ve never felt like there was any woman who understood my desire to go to Timbuktu, to do anything that would exert yourself. That is such a loss. So what if you get halfway there and get sick to your stomach and have to go home. So what, that’s not as bad as not trying it.”

This is a valuable insight into my grandmother’s relationship with her body, one I’m not sure she divulged intentionally. She has, since childhood, been plagued by stomach issues—too many sweets, too spicy a flavor, too big a meal, too long out in the sun and she’s unwell for 48 hours. This is particularly scary for a woman as small as she, for a body without a lot to give. This fear of getting sick and having to go home has its roots in very tangible, very practical emotions and experiences. She returns to the same sentiment again, saying, “I know many people who thought I was an absolute fool, but why not? Why not take the chance? So what if you get so sick coming home from Nepal that the people on the plane have to give you some extra seats. So what? You’ve had that experience. You’ve been to the base camp of the highest mountain in the world. And no one can ever take that away from you.” And yet, she believes her favorite
characteristic of her body to be that “if you treat it right, it will work for you.” With this, she understands her body as a tool, one that can be pushed, worked, exerted and—perhaps—overexerted.

“I assume I overdo the pushing your body, but it’s worked out so far,” she says. She calls “determination, that I really can go farther than I thought” a favorite feature of her body. She speaks of it almost reverently, attaching it to God and moral responsibility, saying, “I guess there’s just something so wonderful about testing your body, seeing how far you could go, and knowing that… it’s just such a wonderful gift that God gave us. Come on. And He meant for us—He, She, whatever—meant for us to take care of it and use it. But the dumbest thing is to not use it, is to sit and hold your hands…” Again, she does not view herself as a woman per say, but as “just as a human being, that God has given a body and I’ve been tasked to take care of it.”

This propensity towards activity and movement was also, it seems, ingrained in her from childhood. “In a way, Daddy encouraged me without ever saying anything about it,” she reflects, “but he so pushed himself, walking walking walking, so I walked with him.” She says this in contrast to her mother who, while “one of the sweetest, kindest, best people I’ve ever known,” “she also had no courage, no desire to get out and do something different, to get out and take a chance.” Instead, she served her role: to satisfy her husband, something “she did to perfection.” My grandmother cites examples such as subservience—“I never once saw her cross him in any way”—that placed her mother in the category of “completely taken care of, protected, all that stuff.”

My grandmother claims she was not interested in being taken care of and protected, saying that she “wanted to do whatever I damn well please.” She sees this as one of the ways in which she differs from both her mother and the women of that generation, saying that her mother
“seemed so content with it.” Furthermore, she says that many of her mother’s contemporaries were having affairs or being abused, but they didn’t have the option to kick them out “usually because that’s how she made her living, was living with him… back then, women didn’t have jobs in which they could support themselves… they had to stay with the man, no matter what he did.”

In older age, she still pulls weeds in the yard and picks up sticks, saying that “it’s such wonderful exercise– God gave us a body, he meant for us to use it.” She says that, even still, she thinks “it’s such a mistake not to use, push, enjoy your body as much as you can.” She reflects that living the way she has, traveling and not finding particularly close female friends, has been a bit lonely, but that ultimately, it’s been worth it. She understands the health of her body, whatever that may mean, to be of highest importance.

She tells me all of this propped against a body pillow in her bed on a Saturday morning, having just recently been served breakfast in bed by my grandfather, a weekly routine. As the sunlight streams in the windows, I feel closer to her than I have before, beginning to understand the way her body is so truly like mine: complicated and hungering, asking to be known.
“A lady is mindful of her appearance at all times.”

– From *How to Be a Lady: A Contemporary Guide to Common Courtesy* by Candance Simpson-Giles, Chapter 2: A Lady Gets Dressed

The body says what words cannot.

– Martha Graham
MARTHA LYLE

My mother sits beside me on a perfect spring day. It is March and a long-awaited warm breeze tinkles the windchime hanging from the slowly decaying dogwood tree we sit beneath. It is bright and crisp outside and we are talking about bodies.

My mother is telling me a story of a friend whose husband who, while battling dementia and living in a care facility in Memphis, sees another woman on Facetime and mistakes her for his wife. He peers closer into the screen, taking account of what he sees, and finally exclaims, “Damn, honey, I don’t know what you’ve been eating but you’ve really let yourself go!” My mother throws her head back and laughs a minute before settling back into the conversation. She explains how, after she and her friend had laughed about that exchange, they had wondered at that phrase. “Don’t you just–” she smiled and searched for the words, the March breeze in her hair and a glint in her eye, “I mean, wouldn’t that be awesome? To just let yourself go?”

My mother grew up in a small town in the sixties and seventies in a household with trinkets from around the world and a walk-in closet filled with her mother’s clothes to gaze upon and play dress-up in. She was born Martha Lyle Reid in Brownsville, Tennessee, in 1963, the younger of two daughters. Dress-up is perhaps the best phrase to describe the world in which she grew up, as she and the women surrounding her each morning donned make-up and expensive clothes, put on their jewelry as both armor and costume.
Body and appearance expectations are written into the landscape of elite Southern womanhood for my mother. She recalls a particularly poignant recollection from childhood, saying

“As a young child, I remember being very self-conscious. I was a little chubby and I remember, even as a very young child, not liking my thighs. We’re talking probably six or seven years old, being aware that my thighs were chubby and, thinking about a photograph of my mother who was always very thin and went to great lengths and maybe even kind of unhealthy lengths to be incredibly thin-- it’s a photograph of my mom and my sister who was certainly not as chubby as I at the time and myself, and I was probably four or five and I had on this little two piece swimsuit and I remember being kind of ashamed…”

Indeed, weight, thinness, striving towards fewer and fewer pounds, is integral to womanhood for my mother. It seems to permeate each corner of her memory, each aspect of her daily life. She remembers her roommate in boarding school being “very very very thin– the kind of thin that every girl in that era wanted to be.” And her roommate in college. And her mother. And her girl cousins. She remembers standing in stark contrast to them, having gained weight at boarding school because of a deep and desperate unhappiness, later diagnosed as clinical depression. My mother seems to, like many women, have spent some portion of her life delineating worth and care for her body on a scale grounded in the number on the scale–recalling a time she stood in a dressing room and called herself “fat and disgusting” -- while also remembering times of thinness that made her feel powerful, strong:

“There were times in my early twenties when I had graduated from college and was living away from home and was definitely feeling more powerful, though definitely in a male dominated field and in a very male dominated office setting, but I was very thin, and fairly strong and I do remember having memories of actually feeling good about how I looked. I would still compare myself unfavorably to the women on the beach chairs next to me, who I always thought looked better than me, but I remember laying back and actually feeling my hip bones jutting out, which means probably that I was too thin, and thinking ‘yeah, this is great.’”
On further reflection, though, she realizes that the only points at which she was at the weight she desired, having reached that magic number, were times in which she was not well, living in the throes of depressive episodes. Those are the points in her life that she sees in pictures and considers a “good weight.” She reflects on being in the midst of depression and realizing that she didn’t want to eat, thinking to herself in wonder, “this never happens.” And yet, she tells me the converse of it is not true—“if being thin and depressed are connected, being happy and plump are not connected.”

Depression offered her stark realizations about her life and her relationship to the world. She came to the understanding that her health, her sanity, were out of her control. “I do remember some of the more disturbing realizations I had during depression was I do not have control over my body. My body is out of control. My thoughts are out of control,” she recalls. “And living with that and then on another level accepting the truth of that, that truly your mental wellbeing is the result of chemicals you can’t control. My sanity, my ability to function in this world as the person that I believe myself to be is beyond my control. That is terrifying. I don’t know how that relates to what we’re talking about but it kind of feeds into like a... not antagonistic but body as enemy or other.”

I ask her if she could recall an experience in which she felt happy or content in her body, be it a defining experience or simply a pleasant memory. She replied simply, saying “no.” “That’s not been part of my life experience... no, I don’t really remember a period where I was just confident and content and happy in my body.” She corrects herself, saying maybe she had felt good in her body in her early teenage years, fourteen, fifteen, and sixteen, calling it “the only time I’ve really thought my body is beautiful.” She felt it most, a sense of pride in her body and its capability, when swimming at that age, feeling her strongest and most athletic. Now,
swimming is plagued by the act of putting on a swimsuit, an experience unsettling and
demoralizing, incompatible to the strength offered by the act of swimming.

This discomfort is ever-present, she notes. “Maybe only in this part of my life, meaning
my relationship to my physical body, the defining characteristic of the relationship is that it’s
never good enough– never thin enough, fit enough, pretty enough, strong enough.” She’s aware
of this “daily, hourly, moment by moment.”

As a child, my mother remembers wanting to feel strong in whatever way possible.
Sometimes that meant helping her father do yard chores; sometimes: riding fast on her bike. This
took tangible forms, as she remembers a love for Snoopy— still evidenced today in Snoopy
blankets, thermoses, calendars filling our home— that validated her feelings:

“...I had a little book that was just filled with peanuts cartoons. And there was one where
Snoopy was flexing his little paw and he had a little exaggerated bicep drawn in the cartoon.

And the whole book, the theme was
‘Happiness is…’ For Linus happiness is a
warm blanket, you know… well the one
with Snoopy and the bulging bicep was
‘Happiness is a strong muscle.’ And I tore
that one out and kept it. And that was just
like, yes, I want strong muscles.”

What does it mean for a young woman to have, as her pillar and example of strength, a
cartoon dog? For my mother, it indicates an underlying frustration with her social positioning in
the world, felt poignantly in childhood. She remembers always wanting to help her father with
yard chores, to which he always responded “no, no no no no, let me do it.” She remembers this making her mad, feeling “like that was just one more way that my strength and my capabilities were being diminished.”

She remembers always wanting to be strong, feeling good about herself when she was strong. She seems to have been at a loss for an avenue to nurture or express that desire for strength, however, expressing that she “was a little girl who loved to play outside, was happiest riding my bike-- I just loved playing. I was really envious of my boy cousins because they played organized sports. This was before Title Nine-- once we got to middle school, there was a girls basketball team, but I didn’t play basketball. So anyway, there were no organized sports for girls. This is in hindsight but I realize now that what I loved about riding my bike was that I felt strong and fast. I could do that as well as my boy cousins.”

Sports, however, were not by and large considered acceptable recreation for young girls. She did cheerleading in middle school but didn’t consider it a particularly athletic sport at the time. The closest she got, perhaps, was summer tennis camp, an experience that dipped her toes into the way it felt to hit the ball really hard and feel strong, to have such a tangible moment of strength. Despite that, she never really stepped into that version of herself and didn't believe other people saw her that way; in her words, “I always defaulted to how other people saw me.”

Furthermore, her grandmother “didn’t really think it was appropriate for girls to play tennis.”

As a result, she never much identified as an athlete, only now recognizing that she thinks she could have been a strong athlete. Much like her relationships with her boy cousins, she describes an instance in which she is gifted a glimpse into the feelings of strength and body autonomy through a male peer, this time her boyfriend:

“My high school and part of college boyfriend, he was an athlete, and I remember so well- - he bought me a baseball glove, so that we could pitch, and that didn't seem odd to him.
And it just thrilled me to death. And when I started playing soccer, I ended up with my younger male cousin’s cast-off cleats, they were a little too big for me but I absolutely loved them, and I just felt empowered by them. I probably still have them. Part of it, I think, was this is a really male thing that I’m wearing and possessing, but also it was just--this is athletic gear.”

Since sports were not really an option, shopping filled its place. Most Saturdays, she, her mother, her girl cousins, and her aunt would go to Memphis to the department stores to try on clothes, shoes, makeup, complete with a lunch out. “That was largely how women spent their free time, their recreation time, together,” she reflects. “So those relationships were not built exclusively on that because we interacted in other places too but it was fundamental to female relationships during my formative years.” So, too, would be shopping as recreation during her time at boarding school. After class, a bus would take any girls who wanted to go to the malls a ride, returning them back to campus fifteen minutes before dinner. Again, shopping—adorning, critiquing, perfecting the body—serves as feminine recreation in this practice.

And yet, my mother says “I’ve never liked shopping… I just can’t tell you how many times I stood in a changing room and just felt the deepest sadness and disappointment and guilt and said the meanest things to myself because I didn’t look like what I thought I was supposed to look like.” Once again, what does it mean for models of recreation and expression—particularly in formative years— to be centered around the presentation of and dissatisfaction with one’s
body? What lasting impacts does a social life centered around the continued discomfort of one’s body have on growing women?

Perhaps unsurprising to most, the stories of the women in this project indicate that their respective mothers’ influences hold deep and persevering sway onto their relationships with their bodies. My mother describes my grandmother in nuanced light, saying:

“I was fortunate to have been raised by a mother who-- though she definitely conformed to the appearance standards of the time-- she was very unorthodox, progressive, nonconformist may be the best word, in terms of a woman’s independence and having your own thoughts and-- I wouldn’t say she was a feminist, but she was a-- she appreciated her own worth and intellect and encouraged and instilled that. But the physical body was basically to be adorned, and to look good, and to look nice, and to be fashionable, and to be groomed.”

Indeed, underlying all the desires to be strong, helpful, and equal to male peers, my mother describes a distinct emphasis on presentation throughout her childhood, a “wash your face, comb your hair, look pretty, look nice” mentality. This mentality served to mask notions of playfulness or freedom, in large part, contributing to at least relative harm during particularly difficult periods of life.

“When I was in boarding school, calling home talking to Mama and just being very sad-- I know now I was no doubt clinically depressed-- and the way I would soothe myself would be eating, very unhealthy eating, I realize now there was no doubt I had eating disorders in the midst of all of that-- and I remember my mother saying okay, I think if you comb your hair wash your face put on a cute outfit, you’re going to feel better. So again it was addressing the outer appearance. So since my mother said that and my dad held the same ideal, when I did that and it didn’t make me feel better, I assumed there was something really wrong with me. Because, those people who I believed really knew what they were talking about, that I was depending on to help me through those painful times, what they told me to do didn’t work so I assumed it was something with me.”

This time in life was characterized by a mental unraveling, actualizing at least in part through a gain in weight and a discomfort in her body. She developed what she thinks were eating disorders during this time, behaviors and thought processes that continue to this day. This
constant weight-watching developed around this time, saying that she remembers “as clearly as anything being in high school and saying, okay, I’m going to lose X amount of weight in 6 weeks. And I would chart out how I was going to do it. I mean I have been doing this since I was seventeen.”

This attitude both bolstered and was bolstered by the social expectations of their class and positioning. It took on particular poignance in religious settings, wherein the act of taking communion felt less like a sacred rite and more like a fashion show, a presentation. She calls her childhood church a Country Club Methodist church, populated by the town’s upper class whites, and remembers “being so nauseous when we, my family, our pew, when it was our time to go up, to walk in front of everybody, to take communion, because all I could think about was all the women,” she corrects herself, “all the people, men, boys, everybody– could envision them judging me, or saying ooooh gosh, Martha Lyle’s really gained weight.” The association between Christianity and judgment takes on particular difficulty for my mother, as faith and the Church have remained important throughout her life, now culminating in her work at a seminary and her pursuit of a doctorate of ministry. Particularly because of this, remembering communion, a ritual, in her words, “where the purpose… is to celebrate the inclusive, non-judgmental love of Jesus and of the faith, and that that moment was so fraught for me with judgment and shame and guilt and all of the things that true Christian faith is not-- it’s just a very poignant and painful memory.”

This relationship has not deterred her from continuing her relationship with and, further, work in the church. She is currently pursuing a Doctorate of Ministry with the Methodist Church and works and teaches at a seminary, having in recent years decided to take on career work within the church. She reflects, recognizing the disconnect between this part of herself and her
relationship with the divine. “My field of study and belief system is that I am God’s beloved— I don’t think God judges me, I don’t think God cares what I look like in that dress,” she says. “I recognize that it is social, cultural, psychological, personal, all of that. I see it for what it is. But I haven’t worked through it. And I've always thought the way to feel better about it is to weigh X amount. That’s the solution to this internal and external dilemma.” This binary extends to the rest of her life, too, as she works to balance feeling capable in other aspects of her life and insufficient in this one. She refers to it as a Dr. Jeckell, Mr. Hyde binary, saying that when she’s been working on her dissertation and preparing proposals, she feels on top of things, smart. With her relationship to her weight, though, that is not true.

It has been a long process. She has slowly reworked her understanding of the expectations of Southern women. She recalls a time in which she cared rigidly about all aspects of her appearance— the jewelry, makeup, and clothes written into the code of womanhood– the armor. “I have been proud of myself for caring less about appearance, having just the right hair, just the right makeup, just the right accessories,” she says. “I cared about that a lot for a long time, but I’ve let go of caring about that kind of appearance, but not caring about size… of all the stereotypes I broke, this is one I haven’t been able to break.”

It is not all grim. She, throughout her life’s course, has gone through several eras of reimagining and reinventing her relationship with her body. The one she returned to most often was through a Wilderness Skills course her senior year at Vanderbilt, an experience she calls “a point of real change, very freeing.” She describes being around women, perhaps for the first time, that “the first thing they said to me was not, ‘oh you look so cute!’ or ‘oh my god, you’re so pretty!’” Further, this was her first experience with tangible outdoors skills– rappelling, climbing, caving, hiking, kayaking. She describes this as a time where she was “worried much
less about being fashionable—finally felt like I was not with women who were caught up in the ‘you have to be thin and glossy to be pretty and to feel good about yourself.’” It became a kind of identity marker, manifested most through a hiking backpack gifted as a Christmas present that year that still hangs on our back porch. She remembers going on those hiking trips and loving it, remembers both the thrill and the lack of confidence of rappelling. It seems mostly she remembers the sensation of acceptance and normalcy of the people around her, those for whom it wasn’t at all weird that she wanted to do these things and that she felt great about her ability to do so.

At the same time, my grandmother was turning her traveling eye towards Kilimanjaro and the Sahara, looking to push her body more by traveling and trekking in ways unusual for someone of her positioning and physicality. This proved useful for the mother-daughter pairing, neither feeling condemned by their choice to exist—even a little bit—outside of the lines of strict Southern womanhood that they had so long adhered to. She says my grandmother, while still “always accessorizing and dressing very fashionably and being very thin,” was expanding her understanding of her body; while she “certainly wasn’t bulking up, but she was using her body, enjoying her body in the out of doors in a way that certainly none of her peers were.”

When asked, now, her favorite characteristics of her body, she says she loves that she is strong, that she has always been strong, and that she has always valued that. She articulates the vast difference between her childhood and this generation’s in terms of body images and expectations, pointedly remembers standing at the bookstore and crying at the title of Lindsey Vonn’s memoir “Strong is the New Beautiful.”

She is brought to tears as the interview ends, reflecting on my father’s acceptance of her without makeup, without perfume, without performance. She says that “he thought I was
absolutely beautiful, probably the first time I actually sort of believed it,” the moment “when it really changed, when I began to think– I can be all these parts of me.” As she comes to tears, she apologizes and, reflecting, says, “I don’t want to cry because I don’t look pretty when I cry. This mindset is just so deeply rooted.” This is indicative, once again, of the ways one’s relationship to body is both ever-developing and perpetually informed by the past.

She made an intentional decision, in motherhood, to do her best not to put the rigid expectations of womanhood and a body defined by beauty and thinness onto myself and my sister. She reflects that she has been able to break a lot of stereotypes for herself, but hasn’t yet been able to break beyond this one. She says, however, that “when we think of parenting, we think of this sense of responsibility and all that but, more than that, it’s a gift. I remember thinking not ‘this is something I should do for the girls,’ but that I’m going to give them this gift, this gift of freedom.”

Moving forward, she has realistic expectations for herself. She recognizes that she sees women through the lens of thinness and beauty, comparing those women to herself. She reflects, though, that “it is so ingrained in me, I don’t think I could change it, I think it’ll be something I always see. So that’s not part of me that I’m trying to change. What I want to get to is contentment. Self-acceptance, self-love.” She realizes that “the most important and least healthy relationship that I have is my relationship with my physical body.”
INTERLUDE

On days I hate my body, I remember redwoods

Give me more time on earth and I’d take
any body. A body ripe or ruined. Monstrous
or errant. Make me a redwood tree.

Body becoming branch becoming sky
becoming breath. Make me a slug upon
her neck. Or the moth wilting at her roots.

I don’t want a heavenly body, but a body
of dung and dirt. A bruise-able body.

Any form the shape of yearn. Give me fur
and snout. Hunger and burn. Bone, fin,
or wing. All I need is a heart for breaking.

Just a mouth to open

and taste the rain.

– J. Sullivan
A lady does not brag.

A lady does not whine.

A lady does not nag.

A lady does not raise her voice when angry. It is only proper to shout at someone when he or she is in danger or about to score a touchdown.

– From *How to Be a Lady: A Contemporary Guide to Common Courtesy* by Candance Simpson-Giles, Chapter 4: A Lady Says the Right Thing
October 26 20:

with a deep breath in standing shirtless in front of the mirror, my ribs stretch out bigger and fuller than I have ever noticed before. my chest itself feels wider, heavier, more present and aware than before, more intentional, more useful. as I reach for the towel it is my hands that surprise me the most. they do not look like hands that intertwine with others in world class museums or that try to touch the skin of another gently in the quiet corners of a cheap apartment. they do not look like hands that have ever fiddled with the clasp of a too-expensive bra or tediously curled one section of hair at a time. they are hands that feel like they belong somewhere, hands that build.

some days I am not sure I will ever want to use these hands to touch anyone ever again. most days I know that is not true but some days I look in the mirror and cannot ever imagine this body being held again, cannot imagine my legs without hair or my face with makeup or my hair a comb. most days I cannot imagine shrinking in the ways I did not know I was shrinking, cannot imagine waiting and wishing someone would tell me things my gut already knew.

my gut is the part of myself that I love the most, sunk deep inside me like a peach pit. I have watched my body change and have talked about it perhaps more than I should; I have pinpointed and analyzed and tracked. I have not felt my gut change, that peach pit anchoring me to the
ground that is my home, even as the vessel around it has. I am grateful for my gut, this tired entry says in the same tired refrain, grateful for a body that will change and for the occasional tangibility of strength. I am grateful for the confidence and gentleness and foolhardiness and passion that accompanies strength, that comes with a body that I trust, a body that trusts me. I am grateful even for feet stained orange with routes not finished, for a weight in my chest that is liable to tip me over, for the view above a pull up bar that I still have not seen. I am grateful for strength and all the complicated and wonderful and painful ways it manifests, inside and out, slowly and spitefully, yesterday and tomorrow

I have come to the conclusion that there is no good place to start in writing about the body. There is no beginning and no end here, it seems, no point at which I understood my body to exist and began to ask questions about it. There are a few things I know, but they seem only to account for so much. I know that my first tangible memory was of doing hand and feet painting in preschool, spreading the cold blue paint over my hands and leaning over to smear them across a long white sheet. I almost remember wondering at the coolness on my skin, the color vibrant on the white expanse. I know that as a kid I was shy, bookish. I know that I played softball in elementary school but didn’t like it very much and always had deep, lead-heavy butterflies when it was my turn to bat. I know I did Upwards Cheerleading in the Brownsville Baptist Church’s gymnasium for the boys playing basketball but didn’t like that very much either, since I didn’t like to yell and the games always felt too early on Saturday mornings and went well into the afternoon. I know that I played soccer in high school, a space in which I began to feel strong, and started rock climbing in college, a space that fundamentally changed the world of my body. In the midst of all of that, I know that I moved through the world as a woman in a body. I know that
I have fought against my body and wondered about it and pushed it and hated it and loved it and both wanted it to be more and do more and be much less and do much less.

There are facts from my body that feel more elusive, ones requiring I rely on journal entries and memories to unravel. Body anxiety has been part of my world for perhaps as long as I can remember, a feeling of discomfort about living in my body ever-present.

March 4 2018:

I've been dieting some and working out lots to work on my figure. I have a very boxy stomach, I'd like a couple more curves. The other night I had a dream I went into the tanning salon but they put me in a room with 15 other people, made me vomit up everything in my stomach (everyone did, right in the middle of the floor), then start tanning but it was awful and hot and sticky and uncomfortable...

Proven again, slipped in between entries about freshman classes and dorm crushes:

September 5 2018:

My face is broken out, my legs are short and I feel chubby-- I do not feel confident or beautiful. I do not feel comfortable.

Discomfort had always (or, at least, often) been the overwhelming feeling of living in my body, but it was shrouded in more tangible means of betterment– my skin should be clearer, my waist smaller, my hair blonder, my smile straighter. This is paired, however, with fleeting glimpses of recognition and embodiment, a more grounded sense of self.

September 27 2018:

.... My face is becoming familiar. That seems like an odd thing to say, but when I look in the mirror the face I see looking back feels distinctly, independently me. A friend, a constant, something in it for the long haul
I became, my body became, a “me.” More than just a “me,” I began to understand myself as a woman and began to try to decipher what that means. I found identity in womanhood, in mess, slowly if not surely, in the bathrooms and hallways and makeshift dorm closet of freshman year.

October 17 2018:

*tonight was the first time I ever saw myself in the mirror and thought “woman.”*

*Not, oh no my eyeliner is smudged, not, oh yikes angsty teen trying to be an adult, not oh if only-- “woman”*

*Woman brushing her teeth in her own (singular) space, her own (singular) space that feels almost exactly like her, her own (singular) space that she made her own (singular) almost completely on her own (mostly singular)*

*Woman in her books--*

*Woman in her acne--*

*Woman in her dirty feet--*

*Woman in her unwashed sheets--*

*Woman, nonetheless*

*The word connotated a power that took me aback, a power I never realized I overlooked in myself*

*Woman, with clothes strewn across the desk--*

*Woman, with an overflowing laundry bin and insufficient funds for the machine--*
Woman, with a to-do list a mile long and days just a couple minutes too short--

Woman, with a familiar, albeit imperfect, face

Breasts too small
Arms not toned enough
A stomach unflatteringly shaped
Ankles much too thick

Woman, strong and brave and proud in her imperfections--

Woman with shoulders back and head high, in docs or in long skirts or in crop tops or in button downs--

Woman, nonetheless

I remember sitting in my dorm bed and watching my freshman roommate write a paper, having a mundane and ordinary weekday night, and writing this entry, trying to maneuver feelings of jealousy, of discontent, of competition. I remember wanting to be “better than” worrying about beauty or appeal or lovability. I remember not being able to.

October 30 2018:

again: I’ve been thinking a lot about femininity lately-- what does it mean to be a woman? Are all the differences make believe?....

Julie sits at her desk working on a paper, makeup off, surrounded by her pi phi memorabilia, undoubtedly texting her beautiful boyfriend, and is effortlessly *something*

But what is it? And how do I get it?

I want to be beautiful and I want to be sexy. I want to not care about either of those things.
I am a soul inhabiting a body

This existed alongside a newer understanding of myself, one grounded in moving and doing. There is a shift here, similar to my mother’s experience in Wilderness Skills, that opens my eyes to a new way of understanding my body and how it moves through the world.

January 21 2019:

I am excited for this semester. I want to feel more confident. I want to have a fun new hobby.

Rock climbing maybe?

I want to feel free and strong. Beautiful but not only. Individual with a troop of support. Fun and wild and a bit reckless. Young-- whatever the hell that means.

Pretty soon, I found ways to root into Oxford and the University. I got a job with the outdoor program on campus. I took the class that teaches me to be a trip leader. I started making friends and dating some.

April 2 2019:

my hands are all scratched up from the Ole Miss Outdoors Field Experience Training this weekend. My nails are cut short so the dirt would fall away, I lost both of my rings in the last two weeks. It’s almost as though the hands running down his back and through his messy hair weren’t my own.

But they were. This is me now. This version of me is my own choosing and looks more like me than anything I’ve ever seen. And that’s really fucking cool.

This kickstarted a period of intense love for, infatuation with, curiosity about my body—a period of self-discovery. Perhaps it happens for most women, most people in general. For me, it came with rock climbing. I have always loved the concept of rock climbing but, until college, had never lived in a place or known the people that would allow for it. When I got a job with Ole
Miss Outdoors, however, knowing about climbing became not just a potential interest but a responsibility, a part of my job description. And so, dutifully, I began to climb, to hang out at the wall and make friends with the community, to start pushing my body in the direction of strength. At first, it was climbing occasionally, which turned into running, training pull-ups, climbing at the wall in my friend’s garage, watching climbing documentaries, climbing outdoors. It gave me a lens to view my body with that I had never had before.

I began to transition away from seeing my body as something to be adorned or looked at or presented or consumed, something to please the rest of the world, into something that could function for me, could achieve tasks that I had never even considered that I could achieve. That’s the nebulous version; the explicit version is that I started rock climbing and found friends who were more interested in the things I wanted to be doing who taught me myriad skills that I didn’t know I could have. This started an unraveling of my complicated relationship to my body and sparked a new understanding of the self for me. I came to see that I had never felt strong before. I didn’t realize that I didn’t consider my body a tool until I realized–Oh shit–I can move, I can climb, I can lift things.

June 16 2020:
we saw a shooting star tonight, watching a silly zombie movie after a long day climbing. I am proud of asking my body to work for me today. I am hopeful that we can communicate better in the future.

Life began to move very quickly, as the feeling of capability began to take over my life–I would take online classes from the pavilion at my favorite climbing spot, would clock in to class two minutes late in a wetsuit and muddy feet. I remember coming to see my body as a tool, as an
entity that could work for me. I remember feeling as though I had to distance myself from my brain— all the cerebral parts of myself— to center into my body.

September 04 2020:

*I feel so strong. I should write more but my body is preoccupied. I am running and climbing and biking and paddling. I am so happy for myself, so proud to have my body as my world, as my own expanse to be in charge of. I am behind on schoolwork. I am often overwhelmed. and yet tonight i feel so good. Daniel and I ran really far tonight in the rain, all the way to the end of the main trail. today has been busy. everyday has been busy. what a gift!!!!!! how could anyone possibly be so lucky!!!!!! to be so loved, to find it so easy to love my body, to have autonomy so close.*

It was the first time I had ever felt any tangible sense of strength, any recognition that my body was capable of moving and doing. Before this change in identity and worldview, I wasn’t really thinking about my body but in retrospect, the main things that guided my movements or my understanding of my body was how attractive I could be to men and whether or not I was adhering to the social code of politeness and Southern ladyhood. Those sentiments were never explicitly expressed, never actualized into a critique saying “don’t do that because you’ll be ugly,” but it constantly ran through as an undercurrent. Once I started climbing and I was engaging in a different form of strength and movement, I became physically stronger. This spurred several changes in me: my body began to look different and my lifestyle began to change. I was climbing every night after school so it became not worth it to wear a pair of jeans, I wanted to wear clothes I could climb in. Pretty quickly I had donned this new identity and was left trying to put together the pieces and trying to reconcile how I was different than I used to be and different from other women in my family.
September 10 2020:

it is september ninth. how has this happened. how could everything be so full and so long and yet so painfully short. my body feels tired each night, either from the heavy lifting of my brain or of my bones, and I like it that way. I want it that way forever, tired, new, full, familiar. my body feels like a true friend, one that i know well, for the first time maybe ever. I know that I am close to a pull up. I know that my hands will hold me above the callous but not below it. I know that I can trust my feet on skates as long as I'm thinking about it. I know that I am built similarly to my father. I feel deeply embedded into my world: the wall and to a lesser extent school.... I am so grateful. I am so surrounded by love and life. I am so glad to be here. content. moving fast but not breakneck. I, in this house, in this body, maybe even in this town, am close to home.

Climbing was, in fact, perhaps not the first time I had ever felt any tangible sense of strength. I played soccer freshman and sophomore year of high school in West Tennessee, before moving to Northern Virginia my junior year. I played mostly for the social capital– my upperclassman sister and all her cool friends played and the coach let me be the manager for the boys’ team sophomore year, which meant I could go to all the practices and revel in the attention that came with being the only girl at boys’ practice. What started as a primarily a casual social space quickly became an everyday ritual for me, whether or not there was school-sponsored practice, and quickly began to take over any free time I had. Beginning to play soccer kickstarted a love of movement and, more than anything, fleeting visceral relief. I remember, distinctly, being sixteen and being in love with that space and the acceptance and love it gave me. I remember, specifically, scrimmaging at a practice with the boys and having a defender pushing on me but giving me more room than he should have; I remember pulling the ball back into my control and tapping it out one big step beyond my range. I remember letting it settle for a second
before placing my left foot down heavily, the way I had a hundred times before, and extending my right leg back as far as I could. I remember knowing in my bones at that moment that there was no way I could miss that shot. I remember feeling a deep but fleeting trust and connection with my body, an understanding of it that seemed to transcend language. I released and watched the ball respond, hurtling to the top left corner of the net, past the goalie’s fingers. This sensation, this knowing, was not consistent but it was memorable, long-lasting. After release, the fact that I was playing with boys came back to the forefront, and once again, I was on display.

The complicated freedom that soccer gave me did not last, but rather has fluctuated in and out of my life in the years since. When describing my body now, the adjectives I come to initially are strong and capable. Capable of what?, though, seems to be the question at hand, a question without a concrete answer, one rooted in uncomfortable binaries. It feels as though men’s bodies are expected to be able to approach a task and do it, that they are somehow fundamentally capable of the confidence or foolhardiness that it takes to complete a task, to have the world in their grips. This is not something I felt as though the women in my life–those on the TV or those sitting beside me–were expected to achieve, not how they moved through the world.

Much of the last few years, years of growing and complicating my understanding of myself, has been recognizing that I, too, can approach and just do a thing–moving a piece of furniture, building a table, climbing a route–that all these things that feel out of reach of mine, a woman’s body, don’t think have to be.

The adjectives strong and capable seem to contradict the notions of gentleness, of polite and ladylike sentiments, that have so defined my life and my raising up to now. There have to be gentler adjectives that describe my body, but for the life of me I cannot find the right one. As a person, as an intangible entity, I want to be gentle, soft, loving, kind. But as a body in the world,
I want to be capable, I want to be strong, I want to be respected. Reconciling these binaries, those of sense of self and sense of body, internal and external realms, becomes difficult.

There was a time when the self-selected adjective that described my body was “warm,” indicative both of the regular sweat of climbing, running, and farming that made my life make sense, and also of a deeper sense of closeness and understanding with my body, one I had not, before that time, been familiar with.

May 18 2021:

places on and in my body that I think might be warm:

the insides of my toes, the tendons that let them wiggle in my too-tight shoes
the soft place where my forearm meets my bicep as it bends closed, light pink and sticky as my feet push me forward, a kiss from skin to skin that does not want to end
the hair follicles on the back of my neck that spit sweat as I run, baby hairs curling and twisting, damp in a temporary embrace
the piece of muscle that sits on the outsides of my chest, cozied up against my armpits, the last bit of meat at the end of my flat chest

There are days where this is what my body feels like, warm and pieced together, something more than a vessel. Some days it seems that my thumbs are the only part of me that think this way. Who cares which way it is today! the whole world feels right at the edge of my fingertips if I could only concentrate hard enough. Maybe the trick is to stop trying!

My understanding of my body for much of my life came, in large part, from my grandmother’s both implicit and explicit teachings. These lessons took a lot of forms— there were How to be a Lady books and what to wear to church, how to sit at a dinner table and what was appropriate to wear in what season. I remember, distinctly, the way my sister and I would
bookend the days we spent at our grandparents’ house, watching my grandmother put on and take off her face, as she called it, her daily regimen of makeup, creams, spritzes, perfume, potions—almost—that served as her armor for taking on the day. I remember sitting in the tall, wooden, high-backed chair in their bathroom and gazing up at her in the yellow-tinted light, her clad in a silk bathrobe, my sister and I having stolen two of her fuzzy robes, her face pressed close to the mirror so that every detail appeared massive. Her tinctures were all lined up on a shelf beneath her mirror, potions for her to cycle through each day to keep her body right. After her face was put on, she would glide over to her jewelry chest, pulling down the wooden door and peering inside, deciding which necklace she would wear today. I remember the sense of effortlessness surrounding it, despite watching the effort that went into it with my own eyes. She knew exactly which creams in what order. She knew exactly what color was in season. She knew exactly which piece of jewelry to wear.

We spent a fair amount of time with my grandparents growing up, having moved back to my hometown in large part to have them as active parts of our lives. We would do Saturday lunches with them most weeks, would always share the pew with them at church on Sunday morning before going to Sunday lunch as a family. I was able, with this, to almost constantly watch my grandmother’s movements through the world, to see the proper regimens of womanhood. They became deeply instated in my life, in one way or another, monopolizing my thoughts with notions of appearance, poise, beauty, acceptability.

In high school, I would wear make-up every day, wake up early to curl my hair, and meticulously, habitually, pick at my split ends. I was constantly aware of, consumed with, how I must look, the way I was holding my face, the way I was carrying my body. Each moment was
informed by an undercurrent of appearance and presentation. My body was constantly on display.

June 2 2021:

Collar:

bones jutting but how much is too much? what is strong and what is pretty-- at what point could he reach over and snap them in two, fragments into my bloodstream and the whole structure of my body collapsed, past the point of pretty, immobilized and undone

Before we moved to the city, the school system I went to would send you home if you were not wearing a pre-approved polo shirt, white or navy, collar turned down, properly buttoned. In the mornings as I waited for Eliza to finish waking up, after curling my hair and putting baby powder on my eyelashes to make them look longer, I would linger in front of the mirror and gaze at my collarbones. If I hunched my shoulders in, turning me inside out from the top down, they jutted out more, enough to get your fingers around. I thought I looked beautiful like that, concave and rigid, my chin high in the mirror until it was time to go to school.

In college, when I stopped shaving my legs, when I started wearing boy pants, when my reflection in the mirror began to surprise me, it felt both like rebellion and betrayal, to myself and the women who had taught me womanhood alike. I did not believe myself to be beautiful like that and, at the time, did not want to be beautiful. I wanted to stop being consumed; I wanted to stop having to be presentable. This process was difficult and painful, felt like someone had hold of my head and someone had hold of my feet, felt they were stretching me longer and taller even though I did not want them to.

October 8 2020:
when I was a kid my shins would hurt so bad I wanted to scream. heating pads ibuprofen leg rubs, none of it helped. growing pains, my mom would tell me. I used to imagine I was getting taller, my legs long and lean and glistening. it helped sometimes.

my shoulders have been hurting lately, tight and sore and slowly drooping more and more. growing pains, I tell myself, forces at hand stretching me bit by bit longer and taller and sturdier. my legs are squat and hairy now, my shoulders still not strong enough for a pull up. it is a body that gets the job done though, one that I trust, one that grows even when I tell it not to.

I was so desperate to feel strong, to feel like something more than just a body to be consumed. I was so eager to shed any notion of body as feminine, body as aesthetic, body that defines my place in the world. I was so desperate to be strong.

Even now, reconciling the current version of myself with the version of myself from several years ago is difficult– I feel as though the old version of myself would not have very much liked this version of me, would not have understood her. The past version of myself was deeply concerned with being pretty, with being valuable. Those are things I try to care about less now, but it is only the years in between that make sense of this difference.

I am not sure why any of this is significant or noteworthy. There is perhaps nothing revolutionary about coming to love your body, or at least to know it better, or at least to start intentionally thinking about it. It was groundbreaking for me, though, to feel fully alive in my own body. It was profound to find an identity in a part of myself I had never considered mine. It was earth-shattering each day I woke up and found glimpses of myself in my body, each time I passed a mirror and saw in it reflected back someone strong, someone tough, someone mobile and dynamic.

March 10 2021:
... I sent my first v5 today!!!! my first true advanced boulder send! eek! I feel strong today, mostly because I asked my body for that simple and fundamental gift. I can't believe I get to move.

These things are always nonlinear, I feel sure. For now I feel too preoccupied in my body, in the process of analyzing it and putting it on the page, to truly make sense of it. In digging deep into the archives of how I used to feel, in learning how my mother and grandmother feel in their bodies, it has been hard to keep up with how I feel in it now. This has partnered with a sense of dissatisfaction, disengagement, a distance from my body as it receives less day-to-day attention. Coming off the mountain, it was hard to know how to order my body in my list of priorities, how to stay in conversation with it while also maintaining other responsibilities, how to find my body in the rest of my real life.

November 17 2021:

To the body, he says. Keep writing about the body.

My body feels good on my bike. Tall. Smooth. Sliding and graceful in the wind. My hips hinge, legs straight, back straight, body a mobile triangle. Rigid?

I do this every semester, I say. I get so caught up in the existential and get stressed that I don’t have time for it. A procrastination method.

My body feels neutral sitting at the table. My arms get a chill and I put on a flannel; I dive into thoughts and my hands stroke my leg aimlessly, no longer noticing the hair. My body is not a part of me here. Separated but longing? Marital dispute.
My body feels


Processing.

It won’t talk to me anymore. I feed it cheetos at 12:20, first meal of the day, shoveled in while the
professor is talking and the mask dips slightly.

I want to eat vegetables. I don’t want to go to class. I want to live in Montana and know who I’ll
be living with. I want to know that I’m playing and tell the world to respect it. I want the girls in
freshman English to stop coughing.

Back to the body. Right now, my head pulses a little. Probably the cheetos. My fingers feel a bit
dry, my shoulders a bit tight. My stomach tells me it is here too-- perhaps my gut coming back to
life?-- and my head is growing heavy. I think my right foot is falling asleep. The scabs on my
knuckles itch.

Moving forward, I want to be able to more easily balance gentleness and strength,
softness and capability. I want to be able to more easily balance my understanding of my body’s
strength and capability so that, in periods of stress, I can feel centered in my body and strong in
my body. I want to define strong as beyond my ability to do a pull-up that day and instead as a defining feature, one that doesn’t have to be proven.

For now, I would characterize my relationship with my body as beckoning, hopeful, capricious. Most days, I am frustrated that it does not look the way I want it to, easily do the things I ask it to, or glide through the world the way the bodies of women around me seem to so freely. And yet, some days it gives me such unnamable gifts: to move, to climb, to touch the features of the people I love, to connect me—truly, to root me— to the world. Some days, my body is what I am most grateful for. Some days, it does not feel like me at all.

November 17 2021:

*Recenter. Back to the body. Write about the body.*

*I wonder what it would feel like to be yellow. Yellow like the maple in front of Barnard, yellow like the world going out of bloom, yellow like wheat fields yellow like pineapples yellow like the leaves collecting around my feet. I do not mean what would it feel like to feel dense joy or to have people stop and look and wonder or be so right at the end of your life that you decide to make it scream although of course of course of course that is what I fucking mean, I just mean that I also mean I wonder what it would be like to be look down and see yourself so bright, to float like a leaf to have a weightless body, a body in the breeze, a body hanging on hanging on hanging on until it does not, fluttering for a moment, twirling and screaming and seeing who can make it the furthest, and then falling. Yellow, back to the earth. Yellow, a blanket to walk on.*
Is that trite? Am I too deep in Ann’s ecopoets? Is it silly or girly or unimaginative to want my body to be bright and fleeting? Is it immature and stuck up to be able to only imagine it as that? Bright, fleeting, fall arriving and so abandoning the mothership, a mind of its own, desperately trying to twirl.

How do I let go? When the chill comes and something senses that the yellow is fleeting, that it’s time to reground and let the wind take over, how do I act on listening?


How can you tell me that place is not priority I want to say when my body is the place I have been trying to love and it too is going out of season. How can I cope with a body that feels neutral and a head that feels dulled; what do I do when I know how far I can push and it is only ever that far-- one pull-up every other Tuesday, v4 but maybe we’re grading soft. Body as tool? Body as self? Body as rebellious and unresponsive? Body as something else altogether?
INTERLUDE

“Being a woman does not automatically make one a lady. The term lady has evolved to mean many new and different things over the past 100 years. Manners, attitudes, appropriate dress, and social mores have changed so dramatically that our grandmother’s definition of being a lady hardly resembles today’s expectations… Her courtesies, the high esteem in which she holds herself and others, and her sincere words of praise and thoughtfulness will reflect her strong values and place her ahead in the hearts and minds of those who know her. Being thought of as a ‘lady’ may be one of the highest compliments a woman can receive in life.”


… forget not that the earth delights to feel your bare feet and the winds long to play with your hair.

– Kahil Gibran
CONCLUSION

As the previous chapters have shown, the relationships between these three generations of women in my family and our respective bodies are complicated and profound, spanning lifetimes of experiences and confinements. We have each been informed by the world around us—by our peers and partners, by our hobbies, by our passions. We have each been informed by our shared home, by the place that raised us and the culture that taught us what is expected of us. What can we learn from the experiences of the three of us?

My grandmother, my mother, and I have each been informed by each other, as our histories inextricably intertwine and our understandings of our place in the world, of the expectations of our bodies are colored by the women who taught us movement. The memory of my grandmother’s nightly routine, for example, returns to me each time I lean in close to the mirror and apply a layer of foundation to my face. My mother tells me that our conversations about this thesis have changed the way she views her body, has spurred her to work towards seeing her body as a part of herself and not as much as a problem to fix. My grandmother has expressed that watching her children and grandchildren run, explore, and do has made it easier to reckon with the fact that her body moves differently than it used to.

Simultaneously, the same forces exerted on each of us have affected us differently. My grandmother’s understanding of God, for example, demands activity and health, requires movement from the body He has gifted us. My mother’s experience with God, on the other hand, is characterized by an intentional rewriting of past harms for herself and others, trying to reconcile the shame and judgment felt in sacred spaces and return to a sense of acceptance and grace. On a similar note, I have, in large part,
revoked my adherence to the system of rules set in place for me by the *How to Be a Lady* books integral to my upbringing. These rules, however, have been massively important to my grandmother’s movement through the world throughout her whole life—furthermore, she has found ways to seek empowerment, gratification, and a sense of identity within this framework. Clearly, there are innumerable ways to express womanhood and, further, to be in relationship with your body. Southern womanhood has traditionally been understood to encompass a specific, rigid understanding of identity, ones confined to constraining expressions of the self. This research posits, however, that this way of thinking is outdated, that we as Southern scholars should instead opt for an understanding of the intersections of culture, identity, and the body that are dynamic and fluid.

If this thesis has analyzed or expressed nothing else, my hope is that it articulates an understanding that the body is the ultimate place to study and celebrate, the grounds in which one experiences and knows the world. To study the body, then, is inherently to study place, culture, and geography, as the four are inextricably tied to one another. Further, the universality of the body— that it is one of the primary lenses through which we understand the world— demands that our relationship to it be considered closely. To do so, as we have seen, renders more questions than answers, but ultimately—in this case—brings us closer to an understanding of the way womanhood can function in the world, the intricacies and dualism in the lived experience of the body, and the strength, power, and fullness to be found in the visceral.
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