ABSTRACT
THE WEIGHT OF THE FAT BODY: ANTI-FAT RHETORIC

By
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This thesis concentrates upon the complex and competing ways that public discourse constructs the heavy body. By critically engaging with works central to disability studies, cultural studies, postmodern feminist theory, and political theory, I draw attention to the rhetoric of fatness in relation to the construction of citizenship—more specifically, the ways that citizenship is (dis)qualified for or revoked from people identified as ‘obese.’ Through examinations of popular culture in the form of newspaper articles, I explore conflations of cultural difference and classes of bodies—at the same time ethnic, gendered, dis/abled, socio-economically determined, and ‘sized’ bodies. The work of disability studies scholars Rosemarie Garland-Thomson and Lennard Davis, the cultural theories of Susan Bordo and Kathleen LeBesco, and the work of Michel Foucault all provide critical frameworks for thinking through the fat body towards a necessarily complex notion of (proud) fat embodiment.
THE WEIGHT OF THE FAT BODY: ANTI-FAT RHETORIC

A Thesis

Submitted to the Faculty of Miami University

in partial fulfillment of

the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts

Department of English

by

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2006

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to thank the chair of my committee, Dr. Kate Ronald, for her valuable feedback and rigorous reading of this project. I would also like to thank my committee members, Dr. Cindy Lewiecki-Wilson and Dr. Madelyn Detloff for their time and effort in reading and responding to my writing and for fielding all of my frantic emails along the way. I feel lucky to have had a committee I feel both professionally and personally close to and inspired by. Their willingness to take my work seriously is flattering and pushes me to keep challenging myself. I cannot thank them enough for this.

I would also like to thank Dr. Bill DeGenaro for teaching a fantastic course on The Rhetoric of Social Class. Bill’s passionate teaching, encouragement, and his incredible ability to create a generative classroom space brought me to this project in the first place.

A big thank you must go to Miami University graduate secretary Debbie Morner not only for being a model of organization and efficiency but also offering humor and advice even when her desk was piled high and her inbox was full.

As always, I feel love and gratitude towards my family and friends for their willingness to celebrate with me when things were going well and to reassure me when times were stressful. Your continual support keeps me sane (and having fun). I would especially like to thank Michelle Rudowicz for sticking with me through many late nights at the King Library, for being such an amazing friend, and for keeping me laughing even during the difficult times.

Lastly, I would like to thank my husband Jay for his optimism, his endless patience, and for entertaining my thoughts about work at all times of the day and night. Jay makes me believe that all things are possible.
DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to some of the most special women in my life: Sharon, Kate, Nita, Marilyn, Leah, Berkeley, and Shannon. These women have beautiful—and beautifully different—bodies and minds that they use with strength and confidence.

This work is also dedicated to the many Fat Studies scholars and activists who give me hope.
INTRODUCTION: YOU WEREN’T ALWAYS WHAT YOU EAT:  
FAT HISTORIES

Baroque painter Peter Paul Rubens portrayed the female body as sensual and beautiful. We now view his female subjects as corpulent. In non-Western cultures, and in other eras in Western culture, what we now call ‘fatness’ has been a sign of wealth and high status. For instance, in the mid 20th century, young girls in East Africa and Hong Kong were fattened to make them more desirable marriage partners and men who were too muscular were considered common laborers also less fit for marriage (Angier 5). To the ancient Greeks and Romans, female heaviness was a favorable sign of fertility and wellness. Goddesses were often artistically represented as vital, robust, full-figured women. As Dr. Peter Stearns, provost of George Mason University and author of the book Fat Bodies: Bodies and Beauty in the Modern West writes, “To be a good 20 to 40 pounds above what we would now consider desirable was seen as a sign of prosperity. Thin people were regarded with suspicion, as ugly. To say that [a Greek man] had a ‘lean and hungry look’ was not a compliment” (4). Clearly, non-Western cultures have not always denigrated the fat body—Western culture has not always denigrated the fat body either. In fact, ideas about weight have ballooned about, revealing much about the changeability of cultural attitudes about bodies, gender, sexuality, race and class in this flux.

In an article titled, “A Century of Change in America’s Eating Patterns,” USDA food historian and researcher Dennis Roth chronicles the changes in America’s methods of producing food and how this has shaped attitudes towards diet and nutrition. Roth begins his history in the eighteenth century when food was produced and consumed in local areas. He moves quickly into a discussion of how the industrial revolution affected food production. With increased means of transportation and expanding cities it was necessary to preserve food for longer periods of time and make products easier to transport. Roth provides the removal of heavy bran from bread as his example of one of the ways increased industrialism actually changed the content of food (33).
In the mid-nineteenth century a temperance minister named Sylvester Graham began publicly denouncing excessive eating. Graham drew upon the theories of the Frenchman Francois J.V. Broussois who believed that an excess of food in the stomach and intestines could lead to damage in other organs of the body (33). He felt passionate that there was a strong connection between the new, processed bread and the moral degradation of American society. Roth writes, “Graham knew nothing about vitamins, but in bolted bread he found a symptom of humanity’s falling away from divine and natural laws, which he believed were the same” (33).¹ This led, as you might guess, to the invention of the Graham cracker. Some of his famous followers, including Henry David Thoreau, revivalist preacher Charles Finney, and Mormon Church founder Joseph Smith, who also believed that there was a direct tie between (low) morality and (excessive) food consumption (33).

After Graham died in 1852, and the ending of the American Civil War in 1865, Grahamism was replaced by a much different post-war ideology. The upper middle classes now heavily indulged in food. With the presence of servants in many upper class households, what was formerly considered gluttonous in the earlier part of the nineteenth century was now a showy sign of wealth and prosperity. As Roth points out, “Corpulence in men was not frowned on but was considered a sign of success and well-being. Physicians wrote books for women instructing them on How to be Plump so that they could achieve a state of “florid plumpness”” (34). The prizing of plumpness did not last though. The middle classes began to have difficulty employing servants and affording the grand-scale upper class lifestyle. Middle class housewives began to learn about proteins, carbohydrates, and fat and they connected high-calorie foods to increased body weight. By 1920, Roth writes, plumpness was no longer an asset. The thinner “Gibson girl,” and then the very thin “Flapper” look replaced the plump woman as the ideal (35). Likewise, rotundity was no longer held up as a sign of prosperity for men. The succession of the 300 pound president William Howard Taft by the lean Woodrow Wilson was symbolic of the move towards more restricted, regimented American diets.

¹ Roth outlines how there was a resurgence of Grahamism in the 1960’s as “utopian socialist communities inspired the organic movement and provided the founding principles for the first health food stores (34).
World War I ushered in a period of nutritional reform called New Nutritionism. New Nutritionism posited that eating less food generally, and less protein in particular, led to increased health and longevity (35). Between World War I and World War II, “Newer Nutritionism” took hold and represented the pairing of prescriptions for food and vitamin intake. Fruits and vegetables were now considered important parts of the diet and vitamin-enriched breads and milk were encouraged (35). It seemed as though Graham’s earlier condemnation of processed foods was not entirely misplaced. As Roth explains, “Vitamin enrichment by food producers was, however, also a tacit admission that their food needed enriching because it had lost vitamins during processing, but by this time, many nutritionists and home economists worked either directly or indirectly for food companies and did not call attention to these facts” (35). This concern for vitamin content in the diet did not fade from prominence until the coming of World War II. Throughout wartime, the focus was much more upon food rationing than dietary prescriptions. It wasn’t until after the war that the development of food additives and processing techniques led to a resurgence in food chemistry research and the belief that America was “the best fed nation on earth” (35). The development of height-weight tables by the insurance industry, at this same stage in post-war America (a development I discuss at length later in this introduction), matched developing nutritional technologies with statistics to begin more strictly shaping a nation, ostensibly through food, but also through narrowing attitudes about which bodies were acceptable (and insurable).

The next wave in nutrition research occurred in the late 1950’s and early 1960’s and was linked to the discovery that polyunsaturated fats could lower serum cholesterol while heart disease was related to ‘bad’ cholesterol. This latest campaign was called “Selective Nutrition” (36). Instead of limiting intake as New Nutritionists advised, or eating foods enriched with vitamins, as Newer Nutritionists advocated, foods having “harmful effects” were to be avoided to nullify their dangerous effects on the body. Milk products, followed shortly by meats, were now considered potentially harmful foods due to their cholesterol content (36). As Roth highlights, the USDA’s 1992 development of

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2 The Canadian Heart and Stroke Foundation website describes LDL cholesterol as the “bad” type of cholesterol which can cause fatty deposits in the blood vessels. These deposits can wind up in the arteries of the heart eventually leading to their narrowing. High fat milk products and meats were thought to contain high levels of LDL cholesterol (Canadian Heart and Stroke Foundation).
the food pyramid came about to replace the idea of selecting foods equally from the “four food groups” (dairy products, meats, grains, fruits and vegetables) as it was determined that these foods should be eaten in differing ratios from one another. “Eventually, concern over fat, saturated fat, and cholesterol in the diet, “ Roth writes, also led to the food pyramid’s development (36). Other effects of the Selective Nutrition campaign included increased studies of potentially cancer-causing food additives by the Heart Association and the National Cancer Institute in the 1960’s and 1970’s (36).

In 1977, the Senate Nutrition Committee implemented its “Dietary Goals for the United States” and the Selective Nutrition policy was becoming a national policy. The Committee started issuing warnings to Americans now relating to their food consumption and to their body types. As Dennis Roth writes: “Calling obesity a ‘national evil,’ the Committee’s report urged Americans to cut back on cholesterol, saturated fat, salt, and sugar” (37). The 1980’s and 1990’s saw an increased partnership between independent agencies such as National Cancer Institute, the Department of Health and Human Services, and food companies. With the development of the Dietary Guidelines for Americans in 1980, there was now a government issued imperative to pay attention to fat, calories, and salt intake.

To round out his chronology of America’s dietary prescriptions, Roth writes about how this program of Selective Nutrition has been added to in recent years as it has been discovered that certain foods—red wine, tomatoes, foods with calcium—have especially beneficial effects in fighting cancer and heart disease (37). He concludes his article by pointing to the proliferation of research making connections between food, aging and longevity. As I will show, such statistics are easily manipulated, and the quantifiable, statistical links between fat and increased mortality, though tenuous at best, have become almost unquestionable. The final line of Roth’s piece is quite curious. He writes, “In the meantime, [before a scientific connection between food and the brain and body is fully fleshed out] we may continue to discover more foods that can possibly protect against specific diseases or slow the aging process and thereby allow Americans to eat more enjoyably and with less guilt and anxiety” (37).
What stands out most about Roth’s concluding statement and his chronicling of dietary prescriptions is the overlapping of purely ‘scientific’ discourses with moral ones. Beginning with Sylvester Graham in the early nineteenth century, each decade’s nutrition prescriptions contained ideas about how certain foods supposedly affected the body physically while intermingling with judgments about the way that weight coded the body morally and culturally at different historical points. For example, while carrying excess weight became “a national evil” according to dietary goals of the late 1970’s, post-Civil War ideology from the mid nineteenth century viewed corpulence as a sign of wealth and prosperity. Industrialization-era notions about productivity have forever changed our views of bodily economy, yet renaissance-era aesthetics offer a contradictory set of values. With increased scientific research, governmental and corporate involvement in the diets of Americans since 1980s, it is difficult to imagine that food consumption and body weight debates will ever become less fraught territory. Food is a force inflecting all others, big and old as the earth itself. Yet, as scientific as it might be made, as united as it is to economic forces, food is also social, it also fuels a particular pathos, it has an (embodied) affect. Also compelling in Roth’s concluding statement is the way that he rhetorically links eating enjoyably, with “less guilt and anxiety,” to discovering, once and for all, the connection between foods, longevity, and disease. While his article functions well as a historical overview as opposed to an in-depth examination of changing cultural attitudes, the history detailed above highlights how the conflation of scientific and moral discourses helped to bolster a culture which suggests that consumers should feel guilt and anxiety about their bodies. It is this bodily affect that I will explore in this thesis, as I suggest that contemporary cultural prescriptions intervene to sustain a message that fat people should feel guilt and anxiety about their food choices, and concurrently our culture uses fatness to revoke or qualify privileges and distribute resources on an uneven scale. I am, in fact, uninterested in focusing on the veracity of any chronology of attitudes. Likewise, I am uninterested in discovering the ‘best’ diet, or testing the

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3 I put the word scientific in single quotes to indicate the continual changing of what is considered legitimate scientific information. The four bodily humours (black bile, yellow bile, phlegm, and blood) once thought to be responsible for causing a range of ailments are no longer looked directly to to explain bodily phenomena. Elements of past scientific thought may still be in practice but scientific knowledge continually changes as new and different research methods and goals develop.
scientific truths about fat. Instead, in this short thesis, I have focused on exploring the shape of fat discrimination.

To take Roth’s cue at the end of his article and consider the current context for anti-fat rhetoric and fat phobia, it is possible to think of the ways that a history of American attitudes toward fat could be read parallel to a history of American “eating patterns” such as the one described above. Nutrition consultant Jo Anne Cassell unintentionally annotates Roth’s history in interesting ways which facilitate a slight shift in focus from thinking about nutrition prescriptions and eating patterns toward thinking about social attitudes toward obesity. As Cassell points out in an article in the Journal of American Dietetic Association entitled, “The Social History of Obesity,” current negative attitudes towards overweight people do not have a long history. Cassell writes: “Attitudes toward overweight people have varied in different times and places; in general, when food was plentiful, slender shapes were usually more fashionable. However, no moral judgments about body shape were made until the mid-19th century, when Sylvester Graham linked obesity with the sin of gluttony⁴. The idea that fat might be a genetic or hormonal problem was popular in the 1920s and 1930s; psychological theories of obesity became popular in the 1940s; the marketing of diet food products began in the 1950s; and the use of behavior therapy to treat obesity began in the 1970s” (424). Reading Roth’s focus upon dietary prescriptions alongside Cassell’s quick summary of attitudes toward fat draws attention to how thoroughly permeated both histories are with moral, psychological, and physical assumptions which shape cultural attitudes toward food and the body. It is only recently that the binary has been ‘set’—that fatness and health or beauty have been so distinctly opposed. My focus will be on the price, per pound, that such binary thinking exacts.

Just as the historical overview above is general and unquestionably could be further contextualized, the following three chapters, “Thinking Through the Fat Body,” “The Rhetoric of the Fat Tax,” and “Unequal Citizenship and the Rhetoric of Anti-Fat,” are not meant to provide a comprehensive picture of the way that fatness has historically functioned in Western culture. “Thinking Through the Fat Body” builds upon and

⁴ A New York Times article titled “Who Is Fat? It Depends on Culture” contextualizes Graham’s point of view as part of a larger line of thinking within Christianity. The article states that early Christians saw gluttony as one of the seven deadly sins. From Graham’s point of view, fat people were automatically guilty of gluttony (Angier 4).
specifies some of the history presented in this introduction to link the stigmatization of
the fat body with disability while “The Rhetoric of the Fat Tax” and “Unequal
Citizenship and the Rhetoric of Anti-Fat,” serve as snapshots which capture anti-fat
rhetoric at particular contemporary moments. As will be seen, guilt and anxiety over who
is fat and what people eat to become fat allows anti-fat rhetoric to thrive and proliferate in
present-day America and Canada.

One of the most ubiquitous current images of fat can be found, repeatedly, in a
kind of newsreel readymade for any story about ‘the current obesity crisis’. This film
clip takes the form of a montage of overweight bodies, caught by a camera held at belly-
level, heads cut from the picture. The camera moves through this corpulent crowd, and
the soft lens allows the bodies to run into one another. I offer my ‘snapshots’ in
opposition to this clip, a montage which objectifies the weighty body, places the viewer
in a sea of the easily Othered. I hope to work against the scientific, pathological,
statistical attitudes that also remove subjectivity from (and disqualify citizenship for) the
‘abnormal’ body. I hope to show how the lens is also tinted—rendering ethnic and class
difference with the extra poundage that certain screens add on. Perhaps the most
subversive aspect of this project is the demand that we recognize attitudes about fatness
as being enacted now – not frozen in a history or on a graph.
CHAPTER 1: THINKING THROUGH THE FAT BODY
(A)RHETORICAL BODIES

‘Fat,’ it might be said, represents an intellectual contagion. To speak of ‘fat’ is to recognize irreversibly a corporeality that must be disciplined. Yet to truly ‘see’ fat, to give it intelligibility, we need to accept that the ‘fat body’ might not be successfully disciplined, even by the histories (like those rehearsed above) which chart changing attitudes about the fat body. I will suggest that the effort to freeze a history, or to freeze a demographics of weight, or even a bodily chemistry, is to miss the point that each of these efforts to norm the body is an effort to reduce its rhetorical complexity—is a failure to listen more generously to our bodies. Philosophy and rhetoric inculcate a tacit discourse of anti-fat via an ignorance of the body, and incorporate a more malevolent anti-fat ideology through the demand that we shape a body capable of more easily succumbing to the discipline of social norms, a body less threatening to the primacy of the mind, to the classing of bodies, and therefore a body less ‘excessive’ -- an arhetorical body.

I would argue that in contemporary Western culture strains of all three theories collide with current diet and fitness imperatives to produce the notion that the mind can master the body and that some bodies are better than others. As a prerequisite, diet and fitness culture demands that the body be viewed as a continual work in progress to be improved upon and fosters an environment of constant competition among men and women all vying to embody the cultural ‘ideal’. Both the rhetorics of health and fitness and anti-fat rhetoric construct the body as an amorphous lump of clay to be sculpted and re-formed in ways more desirable in a culture that prizes thinness and muscularity.

In a biography devoted to exploring her struggle with anorexia and bulimia, writer Marya Hornbacher makes the point that one of the feelings driving her compulsion for thinness was the idea that somewhere within her was a perfect, and perfectly thin, body.

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As theorists Susan Bordo’s Unbearable Weight and Elizabeth Grosz’s Volatile Bodies as both engage in a discussion about body building. Both point out that women must maintain a balance so as not to appear too muscular.
waiting to be revealed.⁶ Similarly, some medieval paintings depict sinners as fat and Christ’s disciplines as thin. Further, “…whether in Gothic art or its Victorian recrudescence, the attenuated, El Grecoesque morphology has often been associated with holiness, the sign of an ascetic life that eschews the carnal pleasures of the body in favor of the transcendent, fat-free pleasures of the soul” (Angier 4)⁷. These notions of the primacy of thinness and the monstrosity of corporeal excess seem to underlie the anti-fat discourses I identify in the following chapters. In “The Rhetoric of the Fat Tax” and “Unequal Citizenship and the Rhetoric of Anti-Fat,” I locate and then return to the key embedded assumption, in contemporary culture, that everyone starts out with or has a ‘healthy’ (thinness is entailed here) body. Such assumptions are tremendously effective, in a Foucauldian sense, as they lie perhaps in the subconscious, as they often function covertly as regulations of self and other. To have a heavy body, or even a weighty body, is then seen as a contradiction of a natural order. Some bodies are seen to contradict ‘nature.’ Therefore, when the body doesn’t conform, eligibility for ideal embodied subjectivity is revoked⁸. The only route to regaining agency, theoretically intelligible corporeality, and cultural belonging (not to mention unqualified access to citizenship, health care, class mobility) is through denunciation of bodily excess, and turning away from ‘fat’ personhood. You must become your own ‘after’ picture.

My larger project is not to determine the accuracy of weight-related statistics nor to disprove articles devoted to examining the sometimes deleterious effects of carrying too much weight. Undeniably, there is a solid base of research to support the idea that there is a correlation between diseases such as type 2 diabetes and heart disease. What I am arguing is that public discourse and media representations about fat reveal deeply embedded cultural assumptions about which bodies are and which bodies are not considered valuable and desirable in the current historical moment.

Chapter Two, “The Rhetoric of the Fat Tax,” features a discussion ostensibly about a tax proposal put forth by a struggling Liberal provincial government in Ontario, Canada. By harnessing the rhetoric of crisis and concern for the ‘health’ of the citizenry


⁷ The sixteenth century Greek painter was well known for his extremely elongated, distorted human figures.
the Liberal government initiated a wave of public discourse and media critique of the proposal. Public response focused upon the politics of food consumption and self discipline as a demonstration of responsible citizenship in a country with a publicly-funded healthcare system. Media responses involved much more close analysis of the logistics of the food tax and its practical implications for Ontarians having to pay more for their purchases. Both sets of analysis left unquestioned the rhetoric of crisis, the use of statistical data as an unbiased and reliable indicator of crisis, and the right of governments to develop monetary policies rhetorically justified by their own interpretation of the relationship between food consumption and overall ‘health.’ 9

Chapter Three, “Unequal Citizenship and the Rhetoric of Anti-Fat,” examines the way that a series of New York Times articles devoted to the ‘obesity crisis’ in America rhetorically ropes off who is responsible for the growing rates of obesity. This analysis focuses on bringing to the surface the ways in which the predominantly female, immigrant body is made to appear unequally responsible for the degraded state of national statistics on obesity. The pieces suggest that immigrants new to America and American cuisine are in need of remediation (in the form of cooking lessons, nutrition, and public health education) if they are to avoid becoming embarrassing signifiers of corporeal otherness.

Again, the uncomplicated, uninterrogated use of statistics peppers these articles and lends them a tone of authority and truthfulness. The appearance of such a set of articles in a newspaper that has also featured far more nuanced, more complex renderings of body issues seems misplaced but also indicative of the historically reoccurring tradition of disavowing immigrant bodies10. Disability studies theories provide very useful ways of putting this disavowal into context as part of an intersectional history of discrimination.

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9 The government may have a myriad of reasons for implementing and sustaining such a tax. However, the public can only respond to government press releases and speculate as to the additional reasons for such a proposal. Without access to inside information citizens cannot know government motivations for forming public policy.

10 For example, in an article featured in the introduction “You Weren’t Always What You Eat,” titled, “Who is Fat? It Depends on Culture,” New York Times reporter Natalie Angier provides a much more thoroughly considered, non-xenophobic, culturally sensitive look at notions of fatness in America. She also runs quickly through the different ways fatness has been viewed throughout history, including non-Western perspectives. Why then does an entire series of articles devoted to examining the ‘fatcrisis’ take such a simplistic look at fatness and culture?
THEORIZING FATNESS

While television talk shows such as Oprah, and the videos of diet and exercise guru Richard Simmons have popularized and made a cliché of the emotional confession of the overweight person, heavy bodies have remained largely undertheorized. In a July/August 2003 article in Stanford Magazine, fat pride activist, determined San Francisco public figure and former alumni Marilyn Wann presents many of the stereotypes common to heavy people. Among the stereotypes associated with fatness Wann lists: "stupid, lazy, smelly, undisciplined, gluttonous, sexually voracious, sexually ineligible, freakishly nonhuman" (Schuyler). I would argue, as have many others, that television talk show depictions of heavy people reinforce common stereotypes and put the fat body on display as a spectacle of excess and otherness. The popular media is devastatingly quick to blame weight on the weighty, while carefully and often brilliantly considered academic work has traditionally focused far more heavily on the psychology and cultural significance of the anorectic and extremely muscled body.

As ‘the crystallization of culture,’ as Susan Bordo would say, it is possible that eating disorders seem more intriguing (and body building seems more attractively exotic) than fatness as a subject of study. Moreover, anorexia and body-building are seen as the products of choice, even of hard work, and therefore reinforce fantasies about individuality and independence, personal agency, and (again) the mastery of the body. The tropes operative in the discourses of anti-obesity, and attributed to the ‘obese,’ are laziness, lack of self-control, and underdeveloped personality, also reinforcing fantasies about individuality and independence, personal agency and control of the body by creating a class of citizen against whom the thin, well-muscled subject might measure his or her personal worth.

In her discussion of discourses and discussions of the body, Susan Bordo writes: “Of course, to acknowledge that a deep and embodied understanding of what culture demands might be the source of the anorectic’s (or hysteric’s) suffering is to suppose that the patient might have as much to teach the ‘experts’ as the other way around (65).” I agree with Bordo’s suggestion that ‘the anorectic’ could teach ‘the experts’ a lot about embodied understanding of cultural phenomena and enthusiastically support her larger
project of examining culture’s complicated inscription of bodies. However, I would argue that the heavy body haunts the boundaries of her analysis. If Bordo’s landmark *Unbearable Weight* is seen as a text devoted to theorizing the relationship between cultural pressures, bodily practices, active resistance, and the ways that women (in particular) are bound up unequally, unfairly, and often unwillingly in aesthetics, it seems that any discussion of the heavy body is glaringly absent. Fat embodiment is excluded from the type of agency awarded to the extremely thin body. While Bordo’s project occurred at a historically specific moment, and she selected a focus for her writing and research as do all writers, both the heavy body and the heavy *mind* remain unilluminated by her text.

Some would also argue that by studying the societal pressures and psychological influences which help create eating disorders scholars like Sandra Bartky, Elizabeth Grosz, Susan Bordo and others tacitly interrogate the same pressures and influences which help create the heavy body. This point of view adheres to a logic that says that the heavy body acts as material resistance to cultural pressures in the same way that the anorectic body serves as an extreme capitulation to culture—the extremely thin body being on one end of a continuum of bodies and the extremely heavy body on the other. I would argue that this view, along with the conspicuous absence of scholarship theorizing fatness, combines with stereotypical representations of fatness in the popular media to preclude the possibility of a critical conscious of fat embodiment and reinforce the idea that to be heavy is to have an uncomplicated, uncompelling body, and constructs the heavy body as ideologically vacant. I hope to carefully examine the stereotypes and the complicated and compelling cultural intentions sometimes obscured by and sometimes betrayed by depictions of obesity. What I am advocating is a more complex, more comprehensive understanding of fat embodiment and its inherent value within a field of differing bodies.

**STATISTICAL “OBESITY”**

Anti-fat rhetoric represents a contemporary trend in a long and variable cultural history of marking non-normative bodies. Anti-fat rhetoric surfaces phenomena especially well-known to Disability Studies, Queer Theory, and Critical Race Theory
scholars among others. The stigmatization and medicalization of the heavy body proves to be yet another iteration of the cultural impulse to disavow those bodies deemed outside of what is considered conventionally attractive and productive in light of the abstract ideal white, male, heterosexual, ‘fit’ body. My examination isolates two specific instances of anti-fat rhetoric, and of resistance to this rhetoric, in order to freeze and frame current cultural attitudes about Other bodies, turning the light back on the norm to reveal the interestedness of the classing of bodies through the weight of discourse. I feel that it is particularly important to ground my project in Disability Studies theories as a means of recognizing the ableist discourses from which anti-fat rhetoric is drawn, the ways in which ‘fat’ is used as a symptom of rather viciously and harmfully implied cultural, economic, gender and ethnic excessiveness.

In Enforcing Normalcy: Disability, Deafness, and the Body, Disability Studies scholar Lennard Davis provides a brief history of the cultural invention of the ‘normal’ or ‘average’ body. Davis explains how the tendency to idealize specific bodies arose from seventeenth century artistic endeavors to create ‘perfect’ figures based upon the Greek gods or created by combining desirable body parts of actual models. However, just as there was a frame of reference for the exalted, perfect body, the common people became associated with the non-ideal “grotesque” or “norm” (25). The grotesque commoner did not morph into the concept of the disabled body though. As Davis explains, “The grotesque permeated culture and signified the humanity, whereas the disabled body, a later concept, was formulated as by definition excluded from culture, society, the norm” (25). What was established instead, in the process of cultural disablement, was a set of human standards which, in effect, tipped the scales: the grotesque came to be seen as abnormal, and the normal was identified with an ideal. What happened then, was that the cultural meaning of ‘grotesque’ shifted. It changed from signifying what was normal and desirable and began to signify what was out of the ordinary and not normal.

In the nineteenth century, the concept of the norm reached beyond art and became germane to various other aspects of society. The development of statistics, for example, was directly related to the concept of the norm. Davis writes that, “the word statistik was first used in 1749 by Gottfried Achenwall, in the context of compiling information about the state. The concept migrated somewhat from the state to the body when Bisset
Hawkins defined medical statistics in 1829 as ‘the application of numbers to illustrate the natural history of disease’” (Davis 26). Statistics became further applicable to the body with the work of French statistician Adolphe Quetelet. As Davis explains, Quetelet “noticed that the ‘law of error,’ used by astronomers to locate a star by plotting all the sightings and then averaging the errors, could be equally applied to the distribution of human features such as height and weight. Quetelet maintained that this abstract human was the average of all human attributes in a given country” (Davis 26). This abstract human was a physically and morally average male. When the concept of the average male met with nineteenth century industrialism the result was bourgeois “…justification for moderation and middle-class ideology. The average man, the body of the man in the middle, becomes the exemplar of the middle way of life” (Davis 27).

Now, the ‘middle way of life’ is posited not only as the norm, but also as the model way of looking, moving, and being. The norm becomes the way of living for which to strive. As Davis points out though, “the concept of a norm, unlike that of an ideal, implies that that majority of the population must or should somehow be part of that norm. The norm pins down that majority of the population that falls under the arch of the standard bell-shaped curve” (Davis 29).11 With the invention of a new ‘science’ of norming, it was possible to clearly delineate where members of society fell on the curve. Likewise, the non-standard, non-normative body could easily be identified for its degree of deviation from the curve of distribution. The ‘normal curve of distribution’ could be dissected for use in ranking bodies in terms of their level of adherence to the established norm (Davis 29). This curve was plastic in its application—it could variously be applied to produce results relating to height, weight, ‘intelligence’, or any other criteria deemed worthy of measuring.12

When considered in conjunction with Michel Foucault’s notion of the invention of the phenomena of ‘population,’ Davis’s history of norming takes on particular significance for the production of population-based statistics. In The History of Sexuality:

11 Davis provides further background for the development of the bell curve: “This curve, the graph of an exponential function, that was known variously as the astronomer’s ‘error law’, the ‘normal distribution,’ the ‘Gaussian density function,’ or simply ‘the bell curve,’ became its own way a symbol of the tyranny of the norm” (29).

12 Further references to the norm refer to the fictitious abstract body of the average man. Norming refers to the process of measuring others against this fictitious average body and calling for their compliance.
An Introduction, Foucault details the rise of the concept of population in the eighteenth century. Foucault highlights the various ways information about the population could be used to form political and economic data. He writes, “One of the greatest innovations in the techniques of power in the eighteenth century was the emergence of ‘population’ as an economic and political problem: population as wealth, population as manpower or labor capacity, population balanced between its own growth and the resources it commanded. Governments perceived that they were not dealing simply with subjects, or even with ‘a people,’ but with ‘a population,’ with its specific phenomena and its particular variables: birth and death rates, life expectancy, fertility, state of health, frequency of illnesses, patterns of diet and habitation” (Foucault 25). Foucault refers to the supervision, intervention, and regimentation of bodies as “a biopolitics of population” (139). For Foucault, the thrust of this analysis was to identify how a culture produces knowledge involving all those practices relating primarily, though not exclusively, to sex. Yet we can easily see how all rhetorics of bodily normalcy rely on thinking about a ‘people’ and its variables, in relation to a body in abstraction. In place of the particularized family unit, the new notion of a large population gives government license to derive dehumanized, decontextualized statistics and use these statistics to fuel public health campaigns, safety warnings, among a myriad of other initiatives which affect bodily-life.

The dehumanizing character of knowledge based upon the new unit of ‘population’ coalesces with Davis’s history of the invention of the field of statistics in important ways. Statistical studies already had in place the discourse of ‘population’—an amorphous, undifferentiated mass of passive bodies about which knowledge could be produced and put to service. People could be sorted and ranked for their degrees of adherence to or deviance from an ever-increasing set of norms. In order to operate effectively though, the biopolitics of population needed continual reiteration. As Foucault explains, “Such a power has to qualify, measure, appraise, and hierarchize, rather than display itself in its murderous splendor; it does not have to draw the line that separates the enemies of the sovereign from his obedient subjects; it effects distributions around the norm…the law operates more and more as a norm, and that the judicial institution is increasingly incorporated into a continuum of apparatuses (medical,
administrative, and so on) whose functions are for the most part regulatory" (144). Such regulation, and resistance to it, through the weight of discourse, will be the focus of my examination.

The types of statistics ubiquitous in articles devoted to discussing the ‘obesity crisis’ represent the coalescing of the power of scientific discourse to establish authority and credibility in the minds of readers, and discrimination against fat people based upon statistical norms. The most common types of statistics evoked in obesity-related pieces are figures such as the BMI (Body Mass Index), average body weight charts, individual fat percentage ratios, recommended daily food allowances and percentages of the population who are considered ‘obese.’ These statistics are deployed to bolster articles with ‘scientific fact’ and obscure the rhetorically constructed nature of the way the ‘crisis’ is rendered and bodies are represented. If the statistical data proves that a certain percentage of women between the ages of 50 and 60 have Body Mass Index numbers above the posited average, the sense that the article has been written by someone for a specific purpose is entirely obscured. Likewise, the particulars of the people surveyed (e.g. occupation, class, family history, race etc.) do not accompany the statistics. Thus, they are rendered universal standards instead of being revealed as decontextualized, biased, population-specific, rhetorically created figures. As Miami University of Ohio professor of Composition and Rhetoric Dr. Kate Ronald writes, statistics can be used to “authorize prejudice” (July 1st). If statistical data is presented as unexplained, arhetorical truth, then there is no sense of personal or collective accountability for discrimination against fat people.

Based upon data obtained by statistician Louis Dublin in 1942, the Metropolitan Life Insurance Company developed tables used for determining recommended body weights (Figures 1 and 2). Their sample group for the tables were the four million people insured by the company. Dublin grouped these people according to height, body frame (small, medium, large), and weight. He found that the group who lived the longest were the ones who maintained their body weight at the ideal figures for 25 year olds (“Metropolitan Life Tables”). Over time, the title of the tables changed. In 1942 they were called, ”Ideal Body Weights,” in 1959, “Desirable Body Weights,” and in 1983 their title was further revised to become simply “Height and Weight Charts” (1). What is
remarkable about the original title of the tables compared to the one developed in the 1980s is the lack of descriptors to qualify the contemporary figures. While it may be argued that the removal of ‘ideal’ and ‘desirable’ make the title less value-laden, the pared down 1983 version present the tables as disinterested and omit any indication that the charts were originally developed as *ideals*. Without this information, the chart’s original function is belied as the tables are made to appear as reflections of a survey of the population (who was surveyed, why and how they were selected is left unanswered) as opposed to hypothetical ideals based upon 25 year old bodies. The absence of more information to complicate the tables allows them to appear, and function practically as the norm for height and weight figures. Thus people who fall outside of these ‘normal’ height/weight parameters can be considered *justifiably* ‘abnormal’.

While the Metropolitan Life Insurance Company tables are still used by insurance companies evaluating who to insure for what price, they have come under scrutiny. Experts have criticized the tables for the following reasons: “Frame size was never consistently measured; the people who were included were predominantly white and middle-classed; some persons were actually weighed, some were not; some wore shoes and/or clothing, some did not [and] the tables do not consider percentage of body fat or distribution which are now known to be important factors in longevity” (1). Clearly, it seems odd that insurance companies would still use information determined to be misrepresentative and limited by factors of class and race along with other ridiculously overlooked factors (eg. the presence or absence of shoes and clothing at the time of weighing) which would have skewed results.

**Figure 1. Weight Charts for Women**

**Metropolitan Life Insurance Company, 1959 - Females**

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<td>4'10&quot;</td>
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<td>Height</td>
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<td>5'10&quot;</td>
<td>133-144</td>
<td>140-155</td>
<td>149-169</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Figure 2. Weight Charts for Men**

**Metropolitan Life Insurance Company, 1959 - Male**
Fat acceptance activist Marilyn Wann critically comments upon insurance companies discrimination against fat people. In an article titled, “Height/Weight Charts and You: How Insurers Discriminate Against Fat Folk,” on her FatSo? website, Wann writes about the difficulties faced by heavy people looking to buy insurance. She describes the case of one heavy woman who was turned down for disability insurance by eight companies on the grounds that she was supposedly going to develop a bad back and bad knees as a result of her weight. This is despite the fact that she met the three criteria for this type of insurance—she worked a low-risk job, had no previous health problems, and earned a good income. It would seem that she could not financially protect herself in the event that she ever became disabled because, in the eyes of insurance companies, her weight already disabled her. Alan Diskin, a financial planner who has worked in insurance for over 20 years, commented upon the woman’s case by challenging the presumption that she would develop back and knee problems. He questions, “Why should this woman be turned down on the presumption that she’ll develop a problem? You can presume that about everybody. I’m sure that there are plenty of skinny people with bad backs and bad knees…very few people are denied health insurance because their weight is below the height/weight charts” (1). Diskin does the necessary work of reversing the logic to imagine how different bodies are granted privileges the fat body is not.

When heavy people are able to get insurance, they often pay far higher monthly premiums. Wann writes, “There are no federal laws or regulations that govern how insurers determine a person’s eligibility [for insurance]. New York State passed a law prohibiting insurers from denying coverage for pre-existing conditions. Florida guarantees access to health insurance. But states make no guarantee that the premiums
for such coverage will be affordable” (2). One of the people detailed on the website found that weighting five pounds over the “allowable” limit meant that she was paying a $200/month for “high-risk individuals” as opposed to the $40/month regular rate (2). It is also clear within the article that attempts were made to contact insurance companies to question them about their policies. Wann writes, “When asked why fat people had to pay more, a Blue Cross of California customer service representative said, ‘We don’t publicly disclose our reasons for doing what we do.’ Most of the insurance company spokespeople contacted for this article claimed not to know about weight limits” (2). It does, however, seem to be common knowledge that the Metropolitan Height/Weight charts used by companies are inaccurate longevity predictors. Shedding even more light on the problematic nature of the tables than was listed above, C. Wayne Callaway, M.D. says, “Height/weight charts have been highly criticized over the years, because weight is not a very good predictor of death, except at the extremes…It’s not as useful as family history or blood pressure levels, for example” (2). To put her own use of statistics into dialogue with Dr. Callaway, Marilyn Wann writes, “The problem is that 60 percent of Americans weigh more than the height/weight tables allow. With so many people ‘in the extreme,’ it would be unfortunate if the tables were wrong” (2). Wann’s tongue-in-cheek suggestion that there could be ‘unfortunate’ ramifications if the tables were wrong, is set against the rest of the article which has detailed accounts of the financial and emotional effects of trying to obtain affordable insurance in a discriminatory system.

In keeping with her ability to turn anti-fat discourses inside out, Wann includes a subversive take on statistics by performance artist Sondra Solovay at the end of her exploration of insurance company discrimination (Figure 3). Solovay’s list uses the statistical discourse of the BMI but puts it to service for her own rhetorical purposes. While Solovay’s statistics may not be any more accurate than the insurance company’s, her piece draws attention to a cultural history which has had an elastic relationship towards weight and the body (comparing, for example, Twiggy’s weight and Marilyn Monroe’s dress size) but which currently remains unapologetically prejudiced against fat people. Her statistics also point ominously to the vested interest corporations could have in continuing to proliferate anti-fat discourse.
Figure 3. BMI (the Body Mass Index of fat culture)
Number of weight control services in the Oakland yellow pages: 55
Number of battered women’s shelters in the Oakland yellow pages: 1
Percentage of clothing stores in Oakland that carry size 14 or larger: 10
Percentage of American women who wear a size 14 or larger: 40
Marilyn Monroe’s dress size in 1960: 16
Twiggy’s weight in pounds when she appeared on the cover of Vogue in 1967: 91
Number of times Twiggy graced the cover of Vogue that year: 4
Average hip measurement, in inches, of female department store mannequins between 1920 and 1950: 34
In 1993: 31
Average hip measurement, in inches, of a young adult woman in 1993: 37
Number of people who enrolled in commercial weight loss programs in 1991: 7.9 million
Amount of revenue, in dollars, those programs generated that year: 2 billion
Percentage of weight loss program enrollees who are women: 95
Percentage increase in likelihood that a woman will live in poverty if she is fat: 10
Sales price, in dollars, of the 17-year-old Weight Watchers empire in 1978: 100 million
Number of dollars American businessmen sacrifice in salary for every pound they are overweight: 1 000
Average difference, in dollars, between a fat woman’s household income and that of a thin woman: 6 710
Percentage of dieters who will regain the weight they lose within three years: 95-98
Percentage of Americans who believe in miracles: 7013

The two chapters which follow this introduction, “The Rhetoric of the Fat Tax” and “Unequal Citizenship and the Rhetoric of Anti-Fat,” act as textual sites which highlight the interrelated nature of social norms, population-based statistics, and the policing of bodies. Though different in scope, both pieces reflect the operation of biopower. In “The Rhetoric of the Fat Tax,” I show how individual citizens react to the idea that some bodies draw unequally upon the nationally subsidized healthcare system in Canada. The logic employed by these citizens dictates that people who consume too much ‘junk food’ are necessarily the same heavy people taxing the healthcare system and creating a so-called ‘obesity crisis’ in Canada. Public reactions of the ‘population,’ whether supportive of the tax measure or not, reveal a desire to warn their fellow citizens

13 At the end of her piece, Solovay lists a variety of sources from which she drew her statistics.
to change their behavior. In effect, the rhetoric of some citizens pushes the message *I take care of my body, you need to take care of yours.* Further, citizens responding in support of the tax rhetorically position themselves as disciplined, ‘fit’, ‘healthy’ bodies qualified to police the bodies of others. The rhetoric surrounding the fat tax proposal evidences the always-operational power of the law, of disciplined citizens, and science *over* bodies.

In “Unequal Citizenship and the Rhetoric of Anti-Fat” I observe how bio-power surfaces in a series of *New York Times* articles which rhetorically fasten the ‘obesity crisis’ in America firmly to particular raced, gendered, bodies. In the name of saving the country from certain degradation, specific bodies are identified as responsible for a deterioration of norms, as dangerous, and in need of remediation. The appearance of these articles in a widely-read, nationally circulated newspaper positions the authors as omniscient, benevolent and uninterrogated subjects simply *reporting* on the state of a national epidemic. In effect, these articles suggest that, in particular, white, middle-class, men (and women to a lesser extent) need not worry about being fingered for America’s so-called weight problem. The population based statistics which are commonplace in nearly every article devoted to the obesity crisis work as an automatic form of ethos for those looking to substantiate the vastness of the epidemic. The *New York Times* articles, like almost all similar articles, provide sets of statistics in absence of information about how the figures were obtained, without recognizing the problems posed in obtaining such broad-based statistical data. The message these decontextualized statistics construe is *We are watching. We know who you are and what you are eating.*

**FATNESS AND DISABILITY**

As I show, in both chapters, fat is constructed as a disability. In *Extraordinary Bodies*, Rosemarie Garland Thomson writes that “disability is an overarching and in some ways artificial category that encompasses congenital and acquired physical differences, mental illness and retardation, chronic and acute illnesses, fatal and progressive diseases, temporary and permanent injuries, and a wide range of bodily characteristics considered disfiguring, such as scars, birthmarks, unusual proportions, or obesity” (13). The key rhetorical work her categorization does is to focus on the ‘overarching and in some ways artificial’ nature of disability. As I will show, fat must be
seen, at least in part as a construction. This happens in more than one way. Fat is medically constructed as an impairment—quantified and rendered statistically against an (abstract) norm, a norm which borrows authority from the medical-scientific paradigm in order to pose as something ‘natural,’ ‘healthy,’ unquestionable. Fat is thought to be measurable on a scale, observable by a doctor. And fat is also qualified by culture, as we are all asked to behave like doctors, or like ‘scales,’ observing and measuring others (and ourselves) at every glance. Obesity, like all disability, might be seen as a “disruption in the sensory field of the observer” (Davis is referencing Mulvey here). I will argue that seeing fat as a disability can lead us to productively question the pathology of any body, so long as we both recognize the wielding of biopower, and the power of resistance.

One of the most popular arguments against reading fatness as disability claims that to see the heavy people as disabled is to discriminate against them. Implicit in this argument is the idea that to be disabled is to be inherently inferior. People with disabilities have been so culturally stigmatized that any alignment with this group is often seen as regressive, counter-intuitive, and offensive to those fighting for fat acceptance and appreciation. However, this argument reflects deeply rooted ableist anxieties and a lack of critical awareness of weight discrimination’s situatedness as a more recent iteration of a very long tradition of marking bodies deemed inferior. Acknowledging weight-based discrimination as one with cultural similarities to various other types of discrimination allows for broad alliances between members of diverse communities and new possibilities for resistance to hegemonic norms. A disability studies perspective provides a similar comprehensive analytical framework as those theories devoted to race, ethnicity, sexuality, class and gender and must be viewed and employed as a valuable tool for examining the rhetorical construction of subjects. In fact, any and all explorations of theories devoted to race, class, ethnicity, sexuality and gender should include discussions of disability as an ideologically formed, culturally created identity category which, in parallel and related movements, informs and inflects ideological constructs of various other identity categories. This is not to say that there is one, singularly admissible reading of fatness. Disability studies theory informs my own understanding of anti fat rhetoric and fat phobia as I believe that it offers productive possibilities for coalitions and provides a framework for engaging in the necessary work
of revaluing bodies and minds. Many of those within fat pride movements, those who do not recognize the connection between fat discrimination and disability are still working to challenge the dominant narrative of bodily ideals even if they leave the larger structures of discrimination intact. In *Embodied Rhetorics*, James Wilson and Cynthia Lewiecki-Wilson cite: “Recognizing that disability is a strategic naming therefore, we are for both the broadest possible definition of disability and for the right of the disability community to debate, contest, and change their preferred definitions of disability” (10). Because fatness is relatively more fluid and subject to a greater degree of change than other types of embodiment it does function differently than disability in society. However, Wilson and Lewiecki-Wilson make the valuable point that definitions need to be broad in order to allow for both the political action needed to protect individuals and leave room for rearticulations of what disability is. In the case of anti-fat bias I would argue that definitions of fat acceptance need to remain broad in order to be able to encompass the work of people employing different methodologies yet arguing for similar overarching goals.14

**BODY AND DISCOURSE**

In *Bodies That Matter*, Judith Butler examines the complex relationship between materiality, discourse, body, and construction. Throughout this examination she repeatedly returns to the question: “Are bodies purely discursive?” and I would like this question to reverberate through my work as well (67). Butler’s theorizing allows me to write through the tenuous ground between the material body and constructive culture. She argues that “language and materiality are fully embedded in each other, chiasmic in their interdependency, but never fully collapsed into one another, i.e., reduced to one another, and yet neither fully ever exceeds the other. Always already implicated in each other, always already exceeding one another, language and materiality are never fully identical nor fully different” (67-69). As a rhetorician, I am interested in pushing beyond the essentialization of the body—and particularly the essentialization of disability or of

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14 In *Extraordinary Bodies*, Rosemary Garland-Thomson writes that, “Strategic constructionism destigmatizes the disabled body, makes difference relative, denaturalizes so-called normalcy, and challenges appearance hierarchies. Strategic essentialism, by contrast, validates individual experience and consciousness, imagines community, authorizes history, and facilitates self-naming” (23). I advocate a fat identity which is at once strategically constructed and strategically essentialized.
obesity—by focusing precisely on the interaction between discourse and materiality. And I focus on public discourses of fat because I see them to be particularly fertile ground for such trouble. Butler works through, and I believe this thesis works through, the notion that bodies aren’t just material and that discourse isn’t just immaterial. Bodies and discourse are always engaged in the process of co-creation.

Sharon Crowley, in “The Material of Rhetoric,” writes that “rhetoric’s traditional association with public discourse is still one of its defining characteristics…from my point of view, one of the most important contributions [of] rhetorical studies…is that they point up the interestedness of boundary-drawing and distinction-making. Distinctions and boundaries are never disinterested…” (363). So, I am interested, in this thesis, in recognizing the distinctions and boundaries erected between classes of bodies, as the issue of fat is rendered in the public sphere. But I am also interested in re-writing fatness, as it has been made-material only through harmful cultural stereotypes, as theory has overlooked it. I believe that writing across these harmful distinctions might bring us to new territory, and new understanding of the body, new critical thinking about health and fitness, people and persons, and the ways that certain non-white, ‘foreign,’ and economically disadvantaged bodies are weighted. This might also lead us to reclaim fatness.
CHAPTER 2: THE RHETORIC OF THE ‘FAT TAX’:
THE REGULATION OF BODIES/BODILY REGULATION

In the late 1980’s small articles began appearing in major Canadian newspapers decrying the apparently declining ‘health’ and ‘fitness’ of Canadian citizens. Figures on the number of people deemed ‘obese’ and the exercise habits of the population peppered these articles to serve as alarming signals that the country could be on its way to a ‘national health crisis’. Over the next fifteen years, the issue of the health and physical condition of the citizens continued to reappear in newspapers. The issue was frequently paired with appeals to pathos as arguments were put forth centering around the rising number of obese children suffering from early onset diabetes and the ‘burden’ of expense placed upon all citizens in subsidizing the allegedly copious health care needs of overweight individuals. Regardless of the motivations behind such constructions, the rhetorical conjuring of the ailing ‘body’ of the citizenry makes overarching claims about the ‘health’ of the population and obscures the possibility that there is anything but a direct link between body mass and poor physical condition. Then, in 2004, a so-called ‘fat tax’ was introduced in the Ontario legislature.\(^{15}\)

The ways in which the ‘fat tax’ issue was written about by news media brought to the surface the oddities, inconsistencies, and absurdities of the proposed bill and raised questions of class discrimination and social responsibility.\(^{16}\) Likewise, civic discourse in the form of letters to newspaper editors and internet websites set discursive terms for the issue which foregrounded class-based conversations implicit in the government’s presentation of the proposal. One of the most remarkable things about the way in which the ‘fat tax’ proposal appeared in the media was it’s ability to unite a range of groups: lobbyists for the hotel and restaurant industry, individual Canadians, and organizations

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\(^{15}\) Due to the fact that the bill was only a proposal, it did not get formally written up in the Ontario legislature and thus could not be included in this piece. Transcripts from the Ontario parliamentary proceedings indicate the times and dates when the issue was brought up for discussion but do not list the specifics of the proposal.

\(^{16}\) As listed on a website titled “Wordspy.com,” the “Fat Tax” is, “A subset of the sin tax (1901), a ‘fat tax’ has been proposed and implemented in many jurisdictions over the past twenty years. It has appeared in the United States, the UK, and Australia under the names: fat food tax (1995), The Cheeseburger Bill (1996), Junk Food Tax (1981), FatTax (1993), and the Twinkie Tax (1989).
devoted to helping economically disadvantaged citizens. These allied groups variously but consistently championed the poor and vilified the government, avoiding the issue of the relative ‘health’ of the foods or the individuals taxed. On the other hand, the government and its defenders took aim at the so-called obese: this was a bill designed to make Ontarians eat more healthily, without regard for the economy of ‘health’. So, while those who opposed the tax situated the poor and the working class as its victims, the government aimed solely at the bodies and habits of the supposedly unhealthy, in essence taxing them in the belief that their health was already a tax on the system. In effect, one group ducks the issue of ‘health’; the other group dodges the complications of class. In observing the ways this issue has been constructed in several different rhetorical spaces, I hope to investigate this double avoidance and comment upon the rhetorical significance of class and the body, of classed bodies and of classes of bodies as they appear in public and civic discourses.

TAXATION AND VEXATION

In the spring of 2004 in pre-budget discussions in Parliament, Dalton McGuinty, the leader of the Liberal provincial government of Ontario, proposed a bill which would terminate the tax-exempt status of all prepared foods under four dollars sold in grocery and convenience stores, cafeterias, and commercial establishments. Prior to McGuinty’s proposal, the tax structure dictated that all prepared foods above the cost of four dollars would be subject to a seven percent Goods and Services tax in addition to an eight percent provincial retail sales tax. The provincial sales tax was introduced in 1963 at three percent and carried a $1.50 limit. As Jan Wong, a Globe and Mail columnist explains, the limit has not changed in relation to rising rates of inflation. Given the twenty-two years since the legislation was introduced, the Bank of Canada inflation-index calculator would set the tax-free limit at $11.64 (24 April 2004). In other words, the tax-free limit has not had a direct relationship to inflation rates and is subject to fluctuations based upon the will of the government in power. The politicians who instituted the tax also included some exemptions. As one Toronto Star reporter explains, “The food that ended up on the family dinner table should not be taxed, the reasoning went, since it is essentially the stuff of life. The definition of ‘basic foods’ is what led to
the decision that a chocolate bar sold as ‘fondue chocolate’ destined for the dinner table is not taxable, unlike those tempting chocolate bars at the front of the store, which are considered “junk food” (18 May 2004). In a similar example, nuts when sold plain are considered a grocery item and are tax-free. When salted and honey roasted, however, they become a ‘prepared’ or ‘processed’ food subject to both retail sales and goods and services taxes. Caviar, considered a grocery item instead of a ‘luxury’ item is also tax-free. Logically, one is forced to call into question the nature of foods taxed. Caviar needs no further preparation to be eaten though it would not be considered standard ‘family’ fare by most. Likewise, the specific exemption of an item such as ‘fondue chocolate’ presupposes a particular style of cooking and eating food which may be unfamiliar to many (if not most) families. ‘Fondue chocolate’ is assigned a class valence as the message sent to consumers is that a particular way of preparing and eating certain foods in fact changes their ‘status’ as healthy or unhealthy foods. Lastly, even the category of foods destined for the ‘family’ dinner table signals a privileging of those who are participants in a normative social structure.

As the Toronto Star reporter points out, other daily ‘essentials’ such as the electricity, gas, and water needed to run a household are also tax-free (18 May 2004). Yet while the government’s assessment of what constitutes electricity, gas, and water has remained relatively static, the passing of time and the proliferation of prepared foods led successive governments to revise the law based upon an increasingly expansive definition of taxable items. Amidst all of the articles devoted to discussing the amendment to the tax, nowhere was there reference to an easily-accessible index to taxable food items. For citizens subject to the taxes there is no way to distinguish which items are considered ‘processed’ or ‘prepared’ until one reaches the check-out counter and is forced to account financially for their selection.

17 It was suggested to me by one astute reader that the influence of French Canadian cuisine from Quebec could have factored into this stipulation in the tax. However, the very separate nature of the provincial governments, and of the Ontario and Quebec provincial governments in particular, leads me to believe that this was not the reason for this exemption.

18 One can speculate that in 1963, when the tax was introduced, the prescription for what was considered a ‘family’ in the eyes of the law was narrowly defined and quite possibly limited to the traditional, nuclear family model. Evoking the image of this family around a dinner table, eating a ‘sanctioned’ meal then has important rhetorical effects—calling to mind ‘family values’ ‘tradition’, as well as hetero-normativity, consumptive and procreative norms and so on.
FROM SOUP TO SHOES

The idiosyncratic nature of the tax exemption was further reflected when reporters writing about the bill attempted to trace out a ‘history’ of the legislation. The titles of articles written by reporters confirmed this confusion. Take, for example, the title of Caroline Mallan’s article: “From soup to nuts: Ontario’s retail sales tax is riddled with exemptions, loopholes and apparent contradictions. It’s hard to understand why some items are taxed and others are not” (8 May 2004). While certainly registering a degree of exasperation with the bill’s seeming lack of consistency, Mallan does not speculate as to the reasons for the multitude of incongruities nor does she question how the current, confusing framework of taxable items may relate to the rhetoric of the initial bill. Though perhaps employing a ‘slippery slope’ mentality in considering government actions, the response from many citizens played upon the idea that the tax held very nebulous distinctions and perhaps picks up where many newspaper reporters left off in their tongue-in-cheek criticisms of government maneuvering. As Tom Empley writes in a letter to the editor of the Toronto Star, “Another PST exemption is footwear under $30. I can hardly wait for Premiere Dalton McGuinty and Finance Minister Greg Sorbara to justify the end of that gem. The spin might be, ‘Cheap footwear can only lead to low self-esteem and must be discouraged’” (19 April 2004). In referring to the footwear exemption as ‘that gem’ Empley’s response implies the thrill associated with the idea that consumers are ‘getting away with’ not paying retail sales tax on this particular item. Further, his parodic reference to the effects of purchasing inexpensive footwear plays heavily upon the positioning of the fat tax as a measure derived from the McGuinty government’s concern for the well-being of Ontarians. His recognition of “the spin” the government could put on their reason for taxing the shoes humorously emphasizes the way in which government initiatives are often re-framed and re-phrased to reflect only concern for the citizens.

On a website acting as a public forum for discussing taxation, an article entitled “Next Up: a ‘Breath Tax’?” uses the ‘fat tax’ proposal as a hypothetical starting point for the future implementation of user fees for sidewalks, the number of windows in homes, and the amount of air breathed by citizens (Breath Tax?). The humorous approach of
both responses points to the arbitrary nature of the ‘fat tax’ guidelines in a similar fashion to Empey’s letter to the editor, but also hints at the more ominous possibility of unrestrained measures of taxation and regulation. Later in this paper, in exploring Foucault’s concept of biopower, I will return to this sense of governmental control over bodies—something which I suggest citizens are aware of, and consistently engage with and against.

CORPORATE STAKE-HOLDERS, CIVIC ACTION

The tax exemption of prepared foods under four dollars did not only have ramifications for domestic meals. Fast food chains, school and hospital cafeterias, snack bars and other, smaller inexpensive food vendors were able to slide under the limit and offer meal deals at $3.99. When the bill was proposed, food service corporations such as McDonalds and the extraordinarily popular national coffee and donut chain Tim Hortons reacted immediately to mobilize their patrons to protest the bill. The donut and coffee chain organized a campaign in cooperation with the Ontario Restaurant Hotel and Motel Association and the Canadian Foodservices Association whereby ‘store owner kits’ were sent out to all of its franchises. Kits included petitions and posters opposing the proposed bill (16 April 2004). *Globe and Mail* reporter Gloria Galloway quotes Nick Javor, vice president of corporate affairs for the donut chain, saying, “The consumers’ response in the first day has been overwhelming” (16 April 2004). In describing the jammed fax machines at the receiving end of store petitions Javor is quoted explaining, “We’ve had to bring in extra hardware because some stores, in the first day alone, were getting in the range of seventy five to ninety two pages of petitions containing twenty signatures each” (16 April 2004). A website devoted to the issue received over one million hits in a period of five days.19

Likewise, McDonalds initiated their own province-wide public resistance to the proposal with posters emphasizing that even milk and soup in hospital and school cafeterias would cost more under the new tax structure (16 April 2004). The posters

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19 Many articles also featured interviews with individual Tim Hortons patrons. In “Fat tax fatheaded, restaurant group says,” consumer Sam Stellato is quoted while he carries his coffee away from the counter: “It’s ridiculous”...“If they [the government] want to raise money, they should cut their own pension plans, their own wages” (16 April 2004). Soliciting individual citizens for comments on the tax cements that this is an issue hitting ‘the little guy’ the hardest.
caution Canadians that, “the tax will take more than $200 million out of the pockets of Ontario consumers. And it will hit students, seniors, health-care workers and low-income earners the hardest” (16 April 2004). This sudden display of public concern may seem jarring as McDonalds might not come immediately to mind as corporation with a history of advocating for the rights of citizens. It is also somewhat ironic that McDonald’s came to the defense of cafeterias which, in other contexts, would be considered competition. Toronto Star reporter Caroline Mallan points out that both Tim Hortons and the McDonalds corporation had, “a healthy dose of self interest” in the issue (8 May 2004).

As a restaurant named after a well-known Canadian hockey veteran, Tim Hortons has been marketed as a uniquely Canadian franchise—there are nearly 2500 outlets in Canada earning revenues of nearly $800 million per year (Gelski). The chain has been marketed as one of the country’s few distinguishing commercial establishments and has featured advertising campaigns aligning national pride with Tim Hortons patronage. To the contrary, McDonalds is internationally associated with the United States. While one restaurant might be attempting to push national pride-through-consumerism more than the other, the “self interest” referred to by Mallan is quite likely the potential loss in revenue faced by both corporations as their menus feature items predominantly priced under four dollars. What comes to the surface here, through media reports and public petitions, centers perhaps more around the political influence and popularity of such corporations and less around their ‘concern’ generally for the welfare of low-cost food providers.20 At the same time, it is difficult to discount their ability to mobilize citizens, and it is dangerous to rob these citizens of the (personal, varying, ‘authentic’) significance of their actions. The issue perhaps points up an individual’s ability to maintain a boundary between self and state—to resist biopower, to borrow Foucault’s term—a term I will return to below. Yet this also points up the fact that corporations may be the new ‘enforcers’ of biopower—mobilizing customers to resist the government, but

20 In an article provided to newspapers by the Canadian Press entitled, “Ontario Finance Minister Won’t Confirm ‘Fat Tax,’” the Ontario Restaurant Hotel and Motel Association and the Canadian Restaurant and Foodservice Association mobilized to fight the tax amendment. Ontario Finance Minster Greg Sorbara is quoted as saying: “They [the associations] were making arguments about how it would impact negatively on their members, the Mom and Pop restaurants that relies on trade that’s under $4” (13 April 2004). Due to their relative size and high-profile, the lobbying of McDonalds and Tim Hortons received the most media attention, however, the interests of smaller, individual restaurants were also articulated by umbrella associations.
doing so in defense of the corporation’s vested interest in their bodies. Certainly, this issue highlights the complex forces at play in the modern body.

THE RHETORIC OF CRISIS

When news of the bill proposal reached the press, Liberal government representatives repeatedly emphasized that the motivations behind the proposal were “... encourag[ing] healthy eating habits among Ontarians,” and “... tackling obesity in children” (15 April 2004). By the time the issue surfaced in the spring of 2004, the government could call upon Statistics Canada and a consistent set of news articles proclaiming a Canadian health ‘crisis’. An article from the Vancouver Sun article published August 6th of 2002 titled “War on fat smacks of social engineering” initially appeared to present a critical discussion of government efforts to launch a crusade against obesity. However, the article quickly shifted to present a dim picture of the weight ‘crisis’ in Canada. The columnist references British Columbia government representative Anne McLellan’s calls for extensive changes to the diets and exercise habits of Canadians. McLellan draws upon the ethos of Statistics Canada as an ‘officially sanctioned’ information source to back up her claim that: “… 80 per cent of Canadians don’t exercise enough to be healthy” (6 August 2002). Further, McLellan claims that over forty percent of Canadians are overweight and, “… 15 per cent of Canadians are considered to be obese, while 23 per cent smoke regularly and 11 per cent drink heavily” (6 August 2002). To round out this picture for readers the article states that, “The combination of fatty foods and inactivity is said to add billions to the health care tab annually and kill an estimated 21 000 Canadians prematurely each year” (6 April 2002) This alarming set of statistics, in tandem with the government’s statement that in overlooking the four dollar tax exemption they were ‘permitting’ a $200 million ‘loophole’, formed the central set of premises upon which the government’s argument was based (21 April 2004). Pairing these statements together implies the immediacy for the government to take action in the face of an ever-expanding ‘health crisis’ and the justification for discontinuing the tax-free purchasing of low-cost food. By describing the tax exemption as a ‘loophole’ permitted by the government, policy makers can rhetorically position themselves as a sole arbiter acting with benevolence to ‘save’ the citizens from their ailing physical
conditions. The attention drawn to the billions of dollars spent on health care to meet the needs of obese individuals and the millions of dollars in lost tax revenue suggest that the population needing expensive medical care and those permitted to consume tax-free food are the same. This conflation has particular ramifications for public perception of certain bodies, and certain perceived ‘lifestyles. In the popular imagination, an automatic connection is made between overweight bodies and the habitual consumption of ‘junk food’. This becomes an especially contentious issue in a country with a publicly-funded healthcare system. Thus, as the rhetoric tangles with assumptions about ‘lifestyle choices’, as it weighs taxation and the distribution of resources, the complications of class lie at the root of this discourse.

CLASSING ONE ANOTHER

Though the bulk of public responses to the fat tax were overwhelmingly opposed to the idea, there was a considerable portion of public responses which argued that the tax needed to be considered as a means of fostering better ‘health’ among Canadians. In guest-opinion article written by Clive Myers of the Canadian Heart and Stroke Foundation, entitled, “Chew on This: Obesity is a Taxing Burden,” the fat tax proposal is given consideration as a possible means to “…stem the tide of obesity and inactivity” (4 May 2004). In an article where he will continue to provide plausible ‘solutions’ to the ‘obesity problem,’ it is curious that Meyers employs the metaphor of obesity/inactivity as ocean tide. It would seem that the tide of the ocean conjures images of that which is inevitable and uncontrollable. To the contrary, Meyers clearly views fat as a problem which imperatively can and must be ended. In citing a Heart and Stroke Foundation document entitled “Fat Is the New Tobacco,” he posits that the “obesity problem” can be compared to the historic development of smoking as a predominant heath-risk. He also hypothesizes that fat could be controlled through taxation of “soft drinks” and “candy” and by eliminating taxes on fitness and sporting equipment (Meyers). Though he does express some level of uncertainty that the taxation as a measure will drastically affect the health of Canadians in the long-term, he makes clear his stance on the imposition of fat on “our” collective finances: “While the overall health impact of these measures is not yet fully known, waiting for all the evidence to be in is not a reasonable response to the
growing health burden we all face from obesity” (Meyers). It is interesting to note that throughout the article Meyers attempts to disembowel obesity—though he is certainly speaking of obese people he reifies fat as a thing independent of the body to be combated by all citizens. Though he may have wanted to avoid signaling certain subjects, he does not attempt to escape subjecthood when describing those burdened by the strain on the healthcare system. Rhetorically this strategy has the effect of implying that those reading the article should act in solidarity to combat this thing of obesity.

Similar to the argument of social responsibility put forth by Meyers, in an article entitled, “For the sake of the health-care system, and ourselves, Nova Scotians need to stop pigging out,” Rick Howe further uses the Ontario fat tax debate to argue for a similar tax in the province of Nova Scotia and a ban on the use of trans-fats in creating foods. He picks up on notions of a health care crisis (as discussed earlier) and the imperative need to act (much the same way as Meyers does) to pose the ultimate question of personal responsibility: “Should we not as well, expect those who bring health-care problems on themselves, the smokers and overeaters for example, to bear more of the cost of the medical treatments they seek?” (11 Feb 2004) He then creates a dire picture of the ‘lifestyles’ of Nova Scotians:

Glaring numbers jump out at you as you look at one particular drain on the health care in Nova Scotia: our poor lifestyle choices. Many Nova Scotians completely disregard healthy lifestyle options, personal choices for which we taxpayers are paying dearly. It is time for some payback, and as harsh as a fat tax may sound, such a levy must now be given serious consideration and debate, for we no longer have the option of ignoring the cost to the healthcare system (11 Feb 2004).

In referring to the cost of accounting for obesity-related illnesses, Howe continues to cite the money taxpayers put out to compensate for lost wages due to a lack of productivity.

From a theoretical standpoint, Meyers, Howe, and the many others who responded to the proposed fat tax with arguments involving lifestyle choices draw upon the idea that specific classes of bodies are a tax on the system. Notice his use of ‘you’ in this article—the use of the second-person allows him to situate all of his readers as the arbiters of health—‘you’ look for the drain. Part of this argument can be traced to the notion of the regimentation and disciplining of bodies as developed by Michel Foucault.
in *Discipline and Punish*. Foucault articulates the mission of biopower. In *Understanding Foucault* Geoff Danaher, Tony Schirato, and Jen Webb present Foucault’s notion of “governmentality” as explicitly tied to “body politics.” They explain: “For Foucault, governmentality is at least as much a matter of ‘body politics’—the ways of conducting ourselves, the relationship we have with our own bodies and the other bodies that constitute a society—as it is a matter of conventional politics” (83). In articulating the types of theories of governmentality developed by Foucault, Danaher, Schirato, and Webb expand upon the “social contract” model of governmentality whereby “. . . states and systems of government came into existence when individuals ‘agreed’ to give up certain freedoms in order to benefit from banding together. In other words, people ‘contracted in’ to statehood and being governed…” (83). ‘Contracting in’ is an automatic extension of the condition of being governed; it is not determined by consent. However, this ‘opting-in’ seems, for Foucault, to have ceded to an ever increasing control exercised by the government—this power ensured that the populations would continue to ‘opt-in’, through the creation of “docile bodies” while concurrently, the government exercised greater control over bio-politics—an increasing state concern with the biological well-being of the population (Foucault 170). This is actually control, couched as ‘concern’, and it manifests itself as what Foucault calls bio-power—the sorting of the population into scientific categories, classes of which the population itself then polices the boundaries.

This then could be seen as the ‘discipline’ of society through a self-perpetuating process of bodily control. This discipline could be seen firstly as self-mastery—“briefly characterized by the fact that one must ‘take care of oneself.’ It is this principle of the care of the self that establishes its necessity, presides over its development, and organizes its practice” (Foucault 43). Simply, care of the self, a culturally valued ethic that is socially present, performed and perpetuated, asks individuals to police their own bodies according to the norm. Secondly, discipline as a manifestation of bio-power asks individuals to police others. The fat tax can be easily seen to accomplish both of these operative aspects of biopower—we discipline our own bodies, and we create and enforce laws that police the bodies of others, paying close attention to the borders that separate bodies into hierarchies (‘you’ look for the drain). In this case, the hierarchies are both
scientific’—obese versus healthy bodies, in their abject or valorized array—and they are classed by capital—the means to control one’s own body, and the bodies of others, is given, or withheld, according to social (more specifically) economic class. In Canada particularly, the idea of “contracting in” is used by, and against, the stakeholders in this debate. Part of being ‘contracted in’ by the Canadian government is participation in publicly-subsidized healthcare. Necessarily entailed in being ‘contracted in’ this system, as reflected by Meyers, Howe and others, is the idea that individuals will discipline or ‘take care of’ themselves so as not to be a tax on the system. In calling for the policing, or controlling of obese bodies via taxation, Meyers, Howe, and all of those posing similar arguments rhetorically position themselves as those citizens who are in control of their bodies and are, therefore, able to participate in calling for the reigning in of the bodies of others.

**NATIONAL PRIDE, SHAMEFUL BODIES**

In *Achieving Our Country*, Richard Rorty opens his discussion with the concept of “national pride”. Rorty writes that “National pride is to countries what self-respect is to individuals: a necessary condition for self-improvement”… “Emotional involvement with one’s country—feelings of intense shame or of glowing pride aroused by various parts of history, and by various present-day national policies—is necessary if political deliberation is to be imaginative or productive” (3). The relationship posited between national pride and self-respect, in conjunction with Rorty’s statement that, “Those who hope to persuade a nation to exert itself need to remind their country of what it can take pride in as well as what it should be ashamed of,” provides an interesting framework for thinking about both the proposed bill and the various public reactions to the proposal. He reminds us that in putting the rhetoric of ‘health’ and ‘crisis’ in service to constructing the “obesity problem,” what the government is signaling to citizens is the type of behavior they should be ashamed of. The sense of national pride the government hoped to inspire with the fat tax rested comfortably (though temporarily) upon the premise that, in this case, the “self-respect” and “self-improvement” of the citizens relied upon eroding the embarrassing obesity statistics used to frame the issue. In presenting the issue as a shameful bodily-epidemic for which citizens should be made to compensate, the role that
class plays in ‘healthy’ living is obscured altogether—be it by the government, through media representations, or in public discourse about the topic. The coming together of these rhetorics creates a picture whereby a ‘healthy lifestyle’ is simply a matter of choosing the ‘right’ foods to eat and combining this with a full dose of the self discipline needed to exercise regularly and abstain from the ‘sins’ of drinking, smoking, and gambling.21 As we have seen, the ‘right’ foods to eat are those unprocessed foods deemed acceptable for the ‘family’ dinner table. The ‘right’ foods are therefore either foods which are taxed because their price exceeds the four dollar exemption, or items which are part of the ‘basic family foods’ list—the unpredictable mélange of ‘acceptable’ foods in the less-than-four-dollar price range.

CHAMPIONING THE POOR

Rorty’s discussion of the competition for political control which occurs among parties is also helpful in adding to an understanding of how the fat tax issued fractured along ideological lines. He writes that, “Competition for political leadership is in part a competition between differing stories about a nation’s self-identity, and between differing symbols of its greatness” (4). The fat tax issue became a conduit for differing political parties—namely the Liberals, Conservatives, and more leftist New Democratic Party—to ‘tell stories’ about Canadian self-identity. Liberal rhetoric called for corporeal and fiscal responsibility. NDP rhetoric rallied around vilifying the Liberals and advocating for ‘the poor’. In an April 13, 2004 Canadian Press article, the reporter cites “low-income families,” “welfare mothers and their children” and “seniors on fixed incomes” as those who would be most detrimentally effected by the tax (13 April 2004). He quotes NDP critic Michael Prue in saying, “It’s nothing but a $200-million cash grab by the Liberal government...It has nothing to do with helping people eat better.” He continues: “Let’s be very blunt about it...It’s not about trying to help the poor eat more healthy meals, because they’re even going to be charged for apples and celery” (13 April

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21 The fat tax was frequently discussed in relation to the levy of similar ‘sin taxes.’ In a letter to the editor dated April 19th, 2004 Tom Empey typifies such statements: “Governments love to tax ‘sinners,’ be they drinkers, smokers, or consumers of trans fats” (A12 Globe and Mail). Similarly, in an article titled “Restaurants mount campaign against provincial ‘fat tax’ plan,” Robert Benzie and Richard Brennen refer to the closing of the tax exemption loophole as a revenue-generator similar to the increase in taxes on cigarettes and alcohol” (May 8, 2004).
In the same article Conservative critic Garfield Dunlop adds, “There’s a lot people who don’t ever have a meal more than $4, and to add 32 cents on top of that would certainly prohibit people from spending that amount of money” (13 April 2004). In bringing in his own family to ‘personalize’ his stake in the debate, NDP Leader Howard Hampton warned Dalton McGuinty that his nine-year-old daughter was an opponent of the tax change: “You go after my kid’s hot dog and you pay the price” (14 April 2004). Regardless of whether the political parties are using the fat tax issue to vie for position in the minds of voters, the tax clearly became a way for representatives to articulate their own ‘story’ of suitable governance. Without ever having to address the larger questions of access to quality grocery stores and the complex matrix of reasons people at differing socioeconomic levels choose to consume more or less of certain foods, the political parties are able to position themselves as the party with the interests of the people at heart. The body becomes a tangible site for negotiations between groups competing for ultimate power over the symbolic body politic. Notice, however, that the people characterized are safely ‘healthy’ and never abjectly ‘poor’—choosing the side of one’s own daughter is the safest way to side with the economically disadvantaged underdog.

Despite this distortion, the argument that the fat tax would hit ‘the poor’ the hardest was the one most commonly cited in the public outcry against the measure. As Ontario resident Sam Stellato responded when questioned about the tax, “Are you going to buy a coffee or are you going to refuse to buy a cup because you can’t afford it?” (16 April 2004). Implicit in Stellato’s statement is the idea that there is a certain degree of shame involved in having to ‘refuse’ something as ‘affordable’ as a cup of coffee. With just this brief rhetorical question he raises the point that what may be considered ‘inexpensive’ to some may not be so for others, particularly when it’s purchased on a daily basis.

Similarly, in an article entitled, “Politically Incorrect: Medicare and the “Fat Tax,”” which appeared on Canadafreepress.com, author Arthur Weinreb makes the interesting connection that the tax would effect the economic security of young people in

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22 In “The Body as Text,” Richard C. Poulsen sets out a taxonomy of bodies. He writes about how science (and I would argue, ‘quasi-science’ as with the case of the obesity-health debate) “…politicizes the body.” In a more diffuse manner he references the various symbolic ‘parts’ of the body-as-state” (12).
dual ways: “Young people will be hit twice; once by paying more for their meals and twice by the reduction of entry level and part time jobs in fast food restaurants whose business will suffer because of the higher cost of the food” (Politically Incorrect). Weinreb expands the dimensions of the issue to include its effects on the nature of employment in the food industry—in doing so he further complicates the idea that the tax would only affect citizens on an individual basis. Here, the ramifications of the tax are presented as more systemically oppressive (though, again, the group that he sympathizes with are young low-wage-earners, not middle-age low-wage-earners, or heads of households, though they too work minimum wage jobs). The ability to earn the capital needed to compensate for price increases is undercut. Thus Weinreb points to the way in which the tax becomes variously incorporated into the lived experiences of the citizens.

**CAPITAL AND CHOICE**

Though perhaps somewhat predictable given the nature of the website—Marxist.com—author Camilo Cahis thoroughly discusses the McGuinty government’s perpetual “assault on workers.” Cahis outlines the possible effects of the tax on the working class and working poor in a manner even more specific than Weinreb. He links a series of very practical premises to present an interpretation of how the tax might translate in the lived experience of the working class and the working poor:

The supposed rationale behind this [the fat tax] was to convince people to eat healthier by making fast food more expensive. However, the working poor correctly saw this as another attempt to attack the living standards of the working class. When someone is forced to work two part-time jobs to make ends meet, they don’t always have time (or the money) to prepare a home-cooked meal and often have to resort to cheap fast food. By taxing these meals, working people would have even less take-home pay and a further decrease in their standards of living (June 2004).

In this scenario Cahis teases out the idea that it was the living ‘standards’ of the working class under attack and that the government failed to make any connection between perceived reasons for fast food consumption and daily routines often characterized by a
lack of time and the material capital needed to be able to prepare ‘home-cooked’, or as
the government might say, ‘family’, meals.

In her essay, “Reading the Slender Body,” Susan Bordo theorizes the link
between cultural capital, material capital, and thin bodies. We can look to Bordo to help
contextualize how the lived or ‘embodied’ experience of many people with cultural and
material capital enables them to be in a position to resist the consumption of food, and
especially ‘junk’ foods. In describing how notions of corpulence shifted in the nineteenth
century, Bordo details how cultural capital became less about material accumulation and
more about “. . . the ability to control the labour and resources of others” (294). She
explains that:

At the same time, excess body weight came to be seen as reflecting
moral or personal inadequacy, or lack of will. These associations are only
possible in a culture of overabundance—that is, in a society in which those
who control the production of ‘culture’ have more than enough to eat. The
moral requirement to diet depends upon the material preconditions that
make the choice to diet an option and the possibility of personal “excess”
a reality (294).

Bordo calls attention to scarcity and excess in much the same way as do Cahis, Weinreb,
and many others who were offended by the fat tax proposal. The ability or ‘requirement’
to diet depends upon having the option of choosing to partake in the excessive
consumption of food available to those with the means of providing such overabundance.
Bordo’s highlighting of the perceived tie between a lack of ‘willpower’ and moral
character echoes the interpellation of people into the model of ‘good’ (read: controlled,
disciplined) citizenship developed by Foucault. The ability of those in power, in this
case, the provincial government, to set cultural norms of acceptance for body size and
shape works to obscure the socioeconomic inequalities brought to the surface through
public discourse about the fat tax.23

23 In Regina’s Leader Post, an article titled: “The Stigma of Size: Series: A Matter of Balance: Weight, Diet
& Lifestyle,” Colleen Silverthorn interviews an overweight shopper named Beth Travis. Travis explains:
AN INAUSPICIOUS ENDING

This essay itself should read like an editorial page or an online message board. In this way, I hope it more realistically captures the diversity of opinion in response to this issue, while explaining and enacting some of the rhetorical positions claimed and created by the public. The issue of the fat tax in Ontario evaporated, and with it important discussions about and around class and the body. Unfortunately, one effect of this vanishing is that much of this discourse, and many of the spaces from which the public might re-examine it, also fade away. My belief, however, is that this contested, highly rhetorical space lies, always, just below the surface. As I suggested in my introduction, there are cultural and intellectual demands for the excessive body to disappear—so as to allow an ignorance of the body altogether. When the bill ‘died’, so did the critical discourse about bodies.

Just two weeks after announcing the proposed tax, Dalton McGuinty issued statements assuring the public that the Liberal government would not be proceeding with the measure. A rash of articles with titles such as “McGuinty government fries fat tax,” and “Too Much to Swallow,” proudly featured McGuinty’s statement that “What [he’d] decided was that the instrument was crude and would not serve its intended purpose, which would be to encourage healthy eating habits among Ontarians” (21 April 2004). In a seeming attempt to both admit his error and make a final, benevolent claim about his ‘concern’ for citizens, McGuinty was also quoted as saying that the connection between taxing low-cost meals and encouraging better nutrition was “tenuous.” He insisted though that, “. . . the restaurant industry has committed to help the government in putting together a plan to bring healthier food choices to all Ontarians” (21 April 2004). Though he is clearly attempting to show interest in the issue even as it will unequivocally not be yielding increased government revenues, the ‘plan’ developed with restaurants seems now to be merely a scramble to retain dignity. It also highlights the ways that, through

“Instead of shopping at Cotton Ginny, I’d have to go to Cotton Ginny Plus and the prices are different and shopping is definitely more difficult” (20 March 2003). She specifically connects how heavier consumers are made to ‘pay for’ their size and shape.
this issue (and in so many other unseen ways). Governmental power over bodies tangled with corporate power over bodies.

The combination of critical commentary and public discourse—the way these two conversed with each other, parodied government rhetoric, and worked to question the larger issues at hand in the fat tax issue—effectively quashed the proposal. The mobilization on the part of major and minor restaurant associations also acted to remind the government that control over bodies, more specifically, over the consumption habits of these bodies, is rigorously contested—and that stakeholders and their intentions are difficult to recognize. Undoubtedly, however, citizens asserted control over biopower in ways Foucault wouldn’t have imagined possible—not just in the form of internalized self-discipline and the policing of others, but in resistance and cunning rhetorical subversion. What emerges is a role for public discourse which, as James Arnt Aune would support, allows citizens to advocate for their own interests. The rhetoric of critique was still employed in this case. However, what cannot be overlooked is the real, material consequence of the government’s decision to back down from a potentially threatening proposal. The issue may have acted as a boilerplate for the public to express deeply-held, at times deeply-troubling notions of health, class, and citizenship, but it undoubtedly served as a cultural moment where the civic harnessing of rhetorical practice pushed material change.
CHAPTER 3: UNEQUAL CITIZENSHIP AND THE RHETORIC OF ANTI-FAT

“They ate pan dulce, a version of doughnuts, every single day…. The program [a weightloss center for Mexican American families] was part of a nation-wide response to an increasing alarm over the growing girth of American children.”


By critically engaging with theories of race, class, and disability, this chapter examines the rhetoric of fat in relation to the construction of citizenship—more specifically, the ways that citizenship is revoked from or qualified for people identified as ‘obese,’ much as the last chapter highlighted the ways certain bodies were seen as a tax on society. But, in this chapter, I more closely interrogate the overlap, not just of assumptions about class and body size, but about fatness, class and ethnicity. Again, my intention is not necessarily to ‘correct’ statistical calculations about the prevalence of fat within and across ethnic groups, though such statistics are ubiquitous, and often used to attribute blame for the ‘epidemic’ to certain ethnic groups. Nor is it my intention to diagnose the health or unhealth of certain diets or lifestyles. Instead, I want to show how the interestedness of such judgments and attributions reveals intersections of discrimination, and structures subjectivity both for those in positions of power, and those whose rights might be most easily revoked.

In this chapter, I draw upon various recent New York Times articles to locate a collision of discriminatory discourses which fuse identities marked by class, race, and ethnicity with an embodiment associated with disease and detriment to the constructed American nation. These bodies are figured both symbolically and materially as a tax upon the system—they are comprehensively stigmatized as both financial burdens for taxpayers and employers and embarrassments as physical signifiers of the nation. The people profiled, sometimes obscured behind the construction of stereotypical bodies, are disavowed as full citizens and are rhetorically exiled from that symbolic territory considered (proudly) ‘American’.
As a preliminary move, I would like to use John Carlos Rowe’s methodology outlined in his essay “Literary Culture and U.S. Imperialism” to reinforce my reasons for looking at constructions of the ‘nation’ in the public imagination and to articulate the relationship between this construction and discourse production. In his examination of “literary culture” and its ties to imperialism Rowe looks to the work of Charles Brockden Brown. He points to the way that Brown’s gothic novels *Wieland* and *Edgar Huntly* “represent literature’s contribution to the invention of a national consciousness by defining the ‘alien’ in the 1790’s. Like the Alien and Sedition Acts, Brown’s romances demonize the Irish, European Free Masons, the French and the Lenni-Lenape people as threats to national stability”(9). While Rowe evokes Brown to discuss an imperialist cultural history rooted in a much different historical moment, what is notable in both Brown’s literary texts and the non-literary texts forming the basis of this examination are the ways that “…discursive forces …contribute to larger social, political, economic and psychological narratives” (9). To this he adds: “Having done that, we must evaluate the consequences of those literary contributions or challenges to this cultural narrative”(9). Thus Rowe highlights the ways in which larger cultural narratives are constructed through various discursive channels, and calls for vigilant interrogations of these narratives and their effects. The rhetoric of the ‘national obesity crisis’ is evidence of a contemporary mechanism of segregation, hierarchization and control of American citizens, and a positing of exactly *which* bodies can and *should* be granted access to citizenship. The rubric of ‘fatness’ as a criteria to define and delimit the ‘nation’ is constantly deployed. I want to show how narratives of fat obscure other ableist, racist, classist and sexist consequences. To be ‘fat’ is to be excessive and thus supplemental to American identity, is to invite abjection. Yet the discourse of ‘fatness’ also veils (as it codes) other forms of discrimination. So my analysis of the rhetoric of fat should function both to identify fat bias, and to uncover other forms of cultural discrimination within this narrative.

**CRITICAL FRAMEWORKS**

I want to situate this inquiry within the framework of disability studies—disability studies asking us to “see disability as a representational system [and thus] engage several
premises of current critical theory: that representation structures reality, that the margins constitute the center, that human identity is multiple and unstable, and that all analysis and evaluation has political implications” (“The New Disability Studies” 19).

Particularly important is the concept of ‘normalcy’. In his essay “The Rule of Normalcy: Politics and Disability in the U.S.A,” Lennard Davis harnesses the Foucaultian concept of biopower and the Derridian notion of differential linguistics to explain his use of the term “normalcy” or the norming of bodies as an extension of institutional control.²⁴ Davis writes, “I would call ‘normality’ the alleged physical state of being normal, but ‘normalcy’ the political-juridical-institutional state that relies on the control and normalization of bodies, or what Foucault calls ‘biopower.’ Thus, like democracy, normalcy is a descriptor of a certain form of governmental rule, the former by the people, the latter over bodies”(107). Biopower is evidenced within and works through the rhetoric of fat exemplified by the The New York Times articles to follow, and more generally within the popular news media commentary on ‘the war on fat’. The articles suggest that some citizens, particularly non-white, non-middle class citizens, have failed to learn, or have refused to observe how to discipline their bodies through ‘proper diet’ and fitness routines and must be policed or controlled by more ‘responsible’ citizens. The ‘failure’ of these people is posited as collective priority in order to contain and reign in the excessive bodies which threaten the stability—the corporeal restraint and regimentation—of the nation.

In, Narrative Prosthesis: Disability and the Dependence of Discourse, David Mitchell and Sharon Snyder extend the notion of the cultural construction of normalcy set out by Davis. Mitchell and Snyder write, “The production of disability as human oddity or exceptional limitation in science, as in art, would be founded upon the norm’s ability to disguise itself as transparently average. In this way the corporeal norm poses as universally desirable—the barometer against which all biologies are assessed and compared” (29). To establish ethos and buttress their arguments with supposed empiricism, some citizens can easily call up the argument that heavy bodies deviate from the ‘average’ abstract body and are thus in need of reform. Averages for heights,

²⁴ Davis begins this section by explaining his use of the term “normalcy” as opposed to “normality” which he defines as “the alleged physical state of being normal” (107).
weights, sizes, and shapes serve as ubiquitous, accessible reminders of what citizens should look like.

In the discourses of ‘health’ and science the terms “overweight” and “obese” as medical terms and markers have been used to connote disability through the medical model, or to socially construct disability relying upon reference to this medical model, but also upon reference to other discourses, particularly the stigma around lack of self-control, physical excess and self-determination, linked to racism and classism and re-inscribing a broad ableism that unites these prejudices. For instance, a National Institute of Health statement from 1998 provides guidelines for what is considered “obese” and how illusive the causes of this “chronic disease” are (using BMI figures which were re-calculated from Louis Dublin’s base, and which have since been re-calculated again). In the following definition, the overweight and obese bodies are set against the “clinical” guidelines or norms. By pinning this ‘disease’ to “minority groups, as well as those with lower incomes and less education,” the National Institute of Health suggests that fat is by definition a raced, classed disease. Further, to make the link between classed, raced bodies in a publication whose mandate is to serve as a barometer of the state of ‘national health’, is to make the classed, raced, fat body the substance of empirical ‘truth.’ The ethos grounding the NIH as a source of scientific knowledge is the same ethos which works to entrench these cultural assumptions.

The statement reads:

“Clinical guidelines on the identification, evaluation, and treatment of overweight and fat in adults: Overweight is here defined as a body mass index (BMI) of 25 to 29.9 kg/m2 and fat as a BMI of ≥ 30 kg/m2. However, overweight and fat are not mutually exclusive, since obese persons are also overweight. A BMI of 30 is about 30 lb overweight and equivalent to 221 lb in a 6’0” person and to 186 lb in one 5’6”. The number of overweight and obese men and women has risen since 1960; in the last decade the percentage of people in these categories has increased to 54.9 percent of adults age 20 years or older. Overweight and fat are especially evident in some minority groups, as well as in those with lower incomes and less education. Fat is a complex multifactorial chronic disease that
develops from an interaction of genotype and the environment. Our understanding of how and why fat develops is incomplete, but involves the integration of social, behavioral, cultural, physiological, metabolic and genetic factors” (NIH).

Using similar points of reference, the World Health Organization provides a definition that expands the definition of fat to figure it as a global burden. The portion of the WHO website titled “Fat and Overweight” begins its discussion with the statements: “Fat has reached epidemic proportions globally, with more than 1 billion adults overweight—at least three hundred million of them clinically obese—and is a major contributor to the global burden of disease and disability. Often co-existing in developing countries with under-nutrition, fat is a complex condition, with serious social and psychological dimensions, affecting virtually all ages and socioeconomic groups” (WHO). While the WHO’s discussion of fat is global in its scope, it relies upon the commonplace statistical tool of the Body Mass Index, yet differentiates the norms for different regions of the world. For example, the site states that, “Adult mean BMI levels of 22-23 kg/m² are found in Africa and Asia, while levels of 25-27 kg/m² are prevalent across North America, Europe and in some Latin American, North African, and Pacific Island countries (WHO). Echoing domestic discussions of the fat ‘epidemic,’ the WHO’s rhetoric points very self-consciously to the paradoxical way that fat exists in “developing countries” while editing out any mention of how it exists in industrialized countries. Whether in a domestic or global space, there is an immediate rhetorical move to attribute greater responsibility to one particular group of citizens for this ‘crisis.’ In the transnational discourse of obesity, local taxonomies of fit and unfit bodies are re-mapped to apply globally—both discourses rely upon a rhetoric of disavowal. Further, the WHO’s figures suggest that fat means one thing in an industrialized nation and something else in a developing nation. Statistics which seem ‘factual’ on the surface must be considered for their rhetorical nature. Even, and maybe especially on a global scale, fatness is a constructed concept.

The cultural theories of Michel Foucault can be used to understand this domestic and global medicalization of fatness. In an interview with Robert Bono titled, “Social
Security,” Foucault points to the expansive impulse to categorize phenomena as ‘medical’ issues and to treat them accordingly. He says, “Innumerable things, in fact, have been ‘medicalized,’ not to say ‘over-medicalized,’ which really belong to something other than medicine. It so happens that, when faced with certain problems, we believed that the medical solution was the most effective and the most economic” (175). In a later reference to the debate over what national health care in France should cover, Foucault comments, “I am simply stressing that the fact of ‘health’ is a cultural fact in the broadest sense of the term, which is to say at once political, economic, and social. Which is to say that it’s bound up with a certain state of individual and collective consciousness. Each period has its own notion of ‘normality.’ (175) This engages both the idea that the concept of ‘health’ needs to be viewed through multiple lenses, but also points towards transient notions of ‘normality’ as Davis takes up in his larger discussions on disability as a sorting mechanism. The National Institute of Health and the World Health Organization do reflect an awareness of the “cultural facts” of health; however, these cultural facts are in competition with the more prominent narratives of the medical model of obesity.

In a simplified sense, this ‘sorting’ relies on the idea that disability is a human deficit—should be minimized, eradicated, overcome, compensated for. Such ideas might be labeled ableist—ableism being defined as "any social relations, practices, and ideas that presume that all people are able-bodied" (Chouinard and Grant). Ableism results in discrimination against people who are marked as disabled or who claim disabled identity. The logic of ableism assumes we would all want to be ‘able’, ‘fit’. And ableism constructs a certain range of bodies in the shadow of the supposed norm. This logic interacts with the logics of whiteness and heteronormativity, and with the idea of homogeneous citizenship.

Douglas Baynton’s, “The Uses of Disability in Citizenship Debates” examines the multi-faceted ways in which disability has been used historically to disenfranchise citizens. His analysis points to the flexible ways disability was used to render women, immigrants, and African Americans mentally and physically unfit for full citizenship. In his initial discussion of slavery, Baynton writes, “Disability arguments were prominent in justifications for slavery in the nineteenth century, after the demise of slavery, were used
to justify other forms of unequal relations between white and black Americans. One of the most common arguments for slavery was simply that the intelligence of African Americans was impaired to such an extent that they were unable to live in freedom on an equal basis with white Americans” (562). He goes on to cite the New Orleans Medical and Surgical Journal which explained that, “…it is the defective hematosis, or atmospherization of the blood, conjoined with a deficiency of cerebral matter in the cranium, and an excess of nervous matter distributed to the organs of sensation and assimilation, that is the true cause of that debasement of mind, which has rendered the people of Africa unable to take care of themselves” (562). He then outlines the second major line of disability argument that, “…African Americans, because of their inherent physical and mental weaknesses, were prone to become disabled under conditions of freedom and equality…Physicians were still claiming at the turn of the century that African Americans were disabled by freedom and therefore in need of greater oversight” (563). Thus, the opinion that African Americans were pathologically unfit, incapable, infantile citizens was reinforced by the rhetoric of science and medical discourse about the body and mind in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The New York Times articles to follow contain strains of the racist idea that people of non-white races remain ignorant of how to take care of themselves and are indeed especially drawn to the ills of sedentary, detrimental lifestyles marked by excessive television watching and poor diets.

At this point I would like to turn from medical models of disability to a discussion of the impact of cultural assumptions upon those deemed obese. Kathleen LeBesco’s Revolting Bodies: The Struggle to Redefine Fat Identities synthesizes perspectives on “overweight” as disability in order to interrogate the various ways heavy bodies are culturally constructed and stigmatized. In her chapter, “Citizen Profane: Consumerism, Class, Race, and Body,” she looks at the concept of citizenship for those deemed overweight in a capitalistic society which prizes individual freedom and ‘personal responsibility’. She writes, “The fat person makes the ultimate bad citizen in that she or he reveals the American Dream for what it is: a fabrication. If we put stock in a philosophy of limitless individual achievement through hard work and intelligence, then what is a fat person but a sign that we can’t always get what we want?” (56) LeBesco
also suggests that overweight body acts as a public specter and ‘reminder’ of the downward mobility associated with an embodiment precluding one from any aspirations of achieving the mythical American Dream. She draws attention to the complex of associations ascribed to the overweight body, one of which is the assumption that people with heavy bodies do not and cannot perform the “hard work” necessary to contribute to the economy. She explains, “Critics flag fatness as a plague on the house of American citizenship. Questions of fit[ness] in our capitalist economy emerge, suggesting that to be fat is to fail to do one’s duty as a productive worker: ‘Already the U.S. economy loses $100 billion from weight-related sickness…what chance has America in the long run, if [fat acceptance prevails], that it can ever compete with those wiry Filipinos and Koreans? ‘ This xenophobic daydream posits an unproven causal relationship between somatotype and productivity among workers” (55). The prosperity, and very survival of the nation hinges upon the mobilization of, not only an able-bodied, but a superiorly able-bodied population of workers. The presence of overweight bodies signals that the very nation itself could be under erasure with the threat the other—of the well-disciplined workforce—waiting to dominate the global economy in America’s demise.25 Ableism and racism come together here as to have a heavy, non-white embodiment signals danger and degradation in the public imagination.

The result, then, is that fatness becomes an ‘ultimate’ societal other. The obese body is monstrous. In Embodying the Monster, Margrit Shildrick echoes the idea of the grotesque body by examining the cultural phenomena of the myth of the human monster. She opens her chapter, “Monsters, Marvels and Meanings,” with a description of the rise of the concept. She writes, “Whether in the popular cultural legacy of ancient Greek myth, in travelers’ tales of early imperialist and colonialist encounters, in the so-called freak shows, and the enduring tradition of horror stories and films, European Enlightenment, or contemporary high-tech biomedical science, the category of the monster is of enduring fascination” (9). In pointing to the need to delimit that which is

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25 I would like to add to this analysis LeBesco’s depiction of the disruption of the visual field via the heavy body and its connection to deeply embedded racism. She writes, “If fat people are understood as antithetical to the efficiency and productivity required to succeed in our capitalist economy, then their presence haunts as the specter of downward mobility. Big, profusely round bodies also provoke racist anxieties in the white modern West because of their imagined resemblance to those maligned ethnic and racial Others; fatness haunts as the specter of disintegrating physical privilege in this case” (56).
other, Shildrick writes: “The status of the subject and of human personhood may often remain unspoken in the projection of the monstrous as a wholly external phenomenon, but even in the most objectified of accounts, the discomforting question of boundaries may be discerned. Indeed, the very insistence on a series of binaries that define the otherness of the monster should alert us to the instability of the categories that ground the normative human subject. The varying and sometimes contradictory explanatory accounts…take in both the notion of monstrous races and individual monsters, and serve to justify, among other things, a range of sexist, racist and colonialist attitudes” (9).

In her larger work, Shildrick’s rendering of the monsters of society concentrates primarily upon those born with physical differences and the complex relationship of repulsion and fascination with these monstrous others. I would argue that the raced, classed, heavy bodies depicted in The New York Times articles below are rhetorically figured as America’s ultimate others—the ‘monsters’ of the ‘national fat epidemic.’ The articles inherently suggest a deep disidentification the people profiled in the articles which is rooted in classist, racist, and ableist ideologies. To have a minoritized, working class or working poor, heavy body is to embody the most ultimately deplorable subject position in relation to ‘war on fat’ and, ostensibly, to unevenly contribute to the degradation of the American body politic.

In summary, the rhetoric of fatness or fat works upon bodies through medical and mythical discourses, and these narratives overlap with and reinforce ideals of citizenship, particularly in differential relation to class and ethnicity. This allows me to situate uses of the obese body in the following articles as medicalized, mythologized, raced and classed—and these constructions must be seen as connected to national stability and citizenship.

THE “OBESITYCRISIS” IN THE NEW YORK TIMES

First of all, I want to suggest that discourses about fat begin by recognizing the unfairness of much discrimination. In a March 22, 2000 article titled, “Mind Set: Only the Svelte Need Apply,” reporter Mickey Meece follows recently-unemployed Lynda Collins through the process of applying for new jobs and attending interviews. After detailing the unsubstantial excuses provided for Ms. Collins’ firing, Meece cites
Hawthorne College of Business management professor, Mark V. Roehling, who states that “costs” are only partially the reason for discrimination against overweight job applicants. In paraphrasing Mr. Roehling, Meece writes, “Employers are more likely to discriminate against people because of their weight than because of their sex or race, Mr. Roehling says, and they do so at every step, from hiring to setting compensation to firing. Moreover…although state and federal laws forbid discrimination against women, ethnic minority groups, old people, and the handicapped, they provide little protection against weight discrimination” (“Svelte”).

Signaling the capitalist insistence upon productive bodies as LeBesco outlined, the nature of these ‘costs’ Dr. Roehling speaks of is not expanded upon and reflects a presupposition that heavy employees represent increased healthcare expenditures for employers. I would argue that while those considered overweight may be prone to illness such as diabetes, the automatic assumption that heavy bodies are sick bodies reflects the effects of the medical construction of obese bodies in the economy. This New York Times article clearly recognizes the baselessness of such discrimination. However, further analysis of articles shows the manner in which fat rhetoric conceals other, and perhaps more nefarious forms of discrimination.

In an October 19, 2000 article titled, “While Children Grow Fatter, Experts Search for Solutions,” Gina Kolata begins by attributing otherness or ‘monstrosity’ to certain cultural others via obesity. Further, the monstrous obese cultural outsider is figured as a contagion and as a tax on the system.

She opens her article by describing one woman’s children’s plea for help controlling their weight and the family’s subsequent attendance at a university-operated weight loss program. She writes, “Maria Sanchez’s own children told her they needed help with their weight. But until the family began attending an experimental weightloss program for Mexican-American families, run by a Stanford University pediatrician, they had no idea how or where to cut back” (“Fatter”). She follows this with specific reference to what the family had formerly been eating for breakfast: “They ate pan dulce,

26 As part of the article, Walt Winstrom, a lawyer who runs the FatLaw and Advocacy Center in San Diego corroborates Meece’s statements about weight-based discrimination: “Overweight workers are ‘those left behind’ in the longest economic expansion in United States history, says Walt Winstrom, a lawyer who runs the FatLaw and Advocacy Center in San Diego” (“Svelte”).
a version of doughnuts, every single day.” Also, in outlining the current state of ‘health’ of American children, Kolata writes that, “The program (weightloss center for Mexican American families) was part of a nation-wide response to an increasing alarm over the growing girth of American children. In recent years, public health officials have been warning that in all age ranges and in all income groups, children are getting fatter. And no one is sure what to do about it. In the Stanford program, one idea is to make families aware of where calories lurk” (“Fatter”). Though the article does cite that the increase in the weight of children is not exclusive to one socioeconomic group, it makes very clear who the nation needs to target first to counteract the aggressiveness of the epidemic. The article’s opening paragraphs contain the marked signifiers of Spanish names and reference to the exotic “pan dulce,” which is only explained in relation to a doughnut—a well-known beacon of ‘American’ junk food. Kolata is also quick to write that the mother of the obese children in question didn’t even know what to feed them. By presenting the children’s plea to their mother to help them lose weight, and drawing attention to the family’s deplorable daily breakfast, Kolata’s depicts the Mexican American mother as ignorant to the point of neglect27.

On the heels of this description, under the sub-heading “The Fat Epidemic: Learning to Eat” is a description of another Mexican American family’s dietary habits. Kolata captures the shock of Esther Castro Rodriguez after learning that peanut butter is in the prohibited “red light” category of foods, according to the doctors at the Stanford-based weightloss center. Rodriguez explains, “I thought that because it was vegetable oil it was good” (“Fatter”). Kolata makes no attempt to support Rodriguez’s logic that vegetable oil is an unsaturated fat, and therefore good for one’s health in combination with peanuts, which are high in coronary disease-preventing, ‘good’ HDL cholesterol (Sabate). Only nine days prior to this article, another New York Times article titled, “Syndrome X and Its Dubious Distinction” listed an increased consumption of mono and polyunsaturated fats in the form of nuts and vegetable oils a positive measure to counteract the obesity-related insulin resistance” yet Rodriguez’s dietary beliefs are made

27 The inclusion of the daily “pan dulce” consumption in the opening paragraph plays upon the common trope of describing the diets of people labeled overweight as excessive to the point of grotesqueness. I would argue that this also fits into Shildrick’s notion of the other-as-monster. In this example, a breakfast of doughnuts is supposed to conjure what is ‘monstrous’ about this family.
to seem ludicrous (Brody). Though advertising campaigns for consumer products are well known for their manipulative approaches to selling goods, one cannot help but call to mind the long-running “Choosy moms choose Jiff” slogan for the popular peanut butter brand. While these commercials lean heavily upon the adage of ‘mother knows best,’ in the context of this article, ‘white middle class mothers know best’ seems to be the inherent suggestion28. Additionally, there exists the implication that these Mexican-American adult women need to be educated (in this case it’s via the ivy-league institution of Stanford) on the tenants of proper nutrition, much the same way that elementary school pupils learn about the food pyramid. While “no one knows what to do” about the ‘obesity epidemic,’ the development of a university-based weightloss center for Mexican-Americans, particularly targeting Mexican-American mothers, seems incongruously specific in its focus.

Here I’ll push my first thesis—that fat is used do draw boundaries around the American body—by suggesting that the twin attribution of corporeal and cultural excessiveness, as outlined above, also references economic deficits.

A December 26, 2000 article titled, “Rampant Obesity, A Debilitating Reality for the Urban Poor,” centers around Clara Halloway and her two teenaged boys who live on Chicago’s south side. Reporter David Barboza opens his article with a particularly poignant picture of the boys’ lifestyle. After noting that both boys have dropped out of high school due to their “health problems,” Barboza writes, “So on a typical Monday morning, Jeffrey, 15, can be found in the living room slumped in a big easy chair watching the Cartoon Network while Robert, 17, is sprawled across his bed, drifting in an out of sleep” (“Poor”). To buttress his central claim, that fat is “spreading all over the country” and is distinctly attributable to “the blacks and Hispanics” of urban poor

28 In the latter half of the article Kolata draws upon data provided by Dr. Katherine Flegal, a statistician at the National Center of Health Statistics. After citing statistics on the rise in fatrates among Mexican American children in the 1990’s, Dr. Flegal is quoted saying, “There really is no strong relationship between fatand social class in children, as there tends to be in adults”("Fatter"). Kolata paraphrases the remainder of her statement by explaining, “In adult women in particular, those who are poor or who have less education tend to be fatter than those who are richer and better educated.” I would like to draw attention to Kolata and Flegas’s emphasis on the role of women in the ‘fatepidemic.’ The discussion of women and children suggests that the family as an institution is at stake when mothers are overweight—if the mother lacks bodily discipline she will produce unfit children and who will be unfit citizens and so forth.
neighborhoods, he quotes a man named Dr. Basiotis, an economist and nutrition official for the Federal Department of Agriculture. Basiotis says, “There’s no question that study after study shows that minorities have poorer diets from a nutritional point of view,” and adds, “[many] are less physically active” which, according to Barboza, “creates more problems” (“Poor”).

After creating this dire picture he returns to the premise that fat is a general problem in America. However, to qualify his generalization, he is quick to include a barrage of statistics detailing exactly how the numbers break down. He writes, “…[A]ccording to the centers for Disease Control and Prevention, about 27 percent of blacks and about 21 percent of Hispanics are obese or about 30 percent overweight, compared with just [my emphasis] 17 percent of whites…and lower income minorities are at an even greater risk” (“Poor”). Shortly, thereafter, he makes further direct comparisons citing statistics supporting an idea that black and Mexican-American children are less active than their Caucasian counterparts. He writes, “…[O]n average, black children watched much more television than white children. While 26 percent of children ages 8 to 16 in his study watched four or more hours of television daily, the figure was 42 percent among black children,” and [drawing upon research by Johns Hopkins University professor Ross E. Anderson] “Our study of blacks and Mexican-Americans showed there was a clear link between the number of hours of TV watched and body fat” (“Poor”). The remainder of the article is loaded with statistics comparing various facets of the lifestyles of “whites” and “minorities” and their unequal relationship to ‘the obesity epidemic’. The comparison of the television-watching habits of white versus black and Mexican children hints at the type of marriage between intellectual and physical shortcomings Baynton described as a popular concept in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

While the rhetoric is much more tempered than the blatantly racist medical discourse Baynton references, leisure pursuits, even for children, are value-laden in a society with deeply-held notions of ‘high’ and ‘low’ culture and the role of parents in regulating the activities of children.
Hopefully, having shown the ways that fat rhetoric is used to shore up class and ethnic divisions, I can now move on to, as Rowe writes, also evaluate “challenges to [the] cultural narratives” that discriminate (9).

In a January 2000 *New York Times* article titled, “Manhattan, When We Were Skinny,” reporter John Tierney describes New Yorkers clamoring to get fit again after the holiday season. In his tongue-in-cheek description of the city’s inhabitants in relation to those residing in other regions of the country, Tierney writes, “It is not technically illegal to be overweight in Manhattan, but you wouldn’t know that from the sweating hordes crowding into gyms this week to lose holiday fat. The ones just back from the heartland are still trying to overcome their shock at the site of so many non-thin people in non-black clothes” (“Skinny”). He follows this introduction by switching abruptly to a survey sponsored by the Center for Disease Control and Prevention which posits that fat in New York State was ten percent below the national average (“Skinny”). In his attempts to provide hypotheses for this difference in statistics, Tierney points to a very limited and *specific* discussion of demographics. He writes, “The city attracts the young, well-educated and the affluent, all of whom tend to be thinner than average. There are many Asian-Americans, whose rate of obesity is especially low, and many recent immigrants, who haven’t eaten American food long enough to bulk up” (“Skinny”).

The brevity of Tierney’s piece belies the loaded nature of its contents. He has drawn very clear boundaries around Manhattan as an exclusive ‘safe zone’ in the war on obesity. While, according to Tierney, Mahattaners enjoy the benefits of class privilege, fitness, and youth, the “heartland” is home to less affluent people with less rigorously controlled bodies. It is interesting to note the shift in Tierney’s tone after this point. He begins the article poking fun at the notion of a ‘Manhattan aesthetic’ of thin bodies clothed entirely in black; however, he abruptly moves into a serious discussion of obesity-related statistics and ends with a set of frank generalizations identifying select groups who bolster the city’s reputation for thinness.

Reinforcing the capitalist xenophobia of a superior Asian workforce described by LeBesco, once incorporated into the nation, slim Asian-Americans and “recent immigrants” possess bodies which are especially desirable in a city mythologized in popular history for its connections to economic prosperity and productivity. This
acceptance is tenuous though. Tierney points to the population of “new immigrants” before they have consumed, or have been consumed by, the ‘American’ diet. Even in a city with a consumer market which reflects its immensely diverse population, it is assumed that immigrants will enculturate themselves via consumption of ‘American’ food—presumably this gestures towards the pop, hamburgers, and hot dogs often considered part of the contemporary American diet.

This example casts Manhattan as a temporary stopover for immigrants traveling from the skinny of the city to the bulk of the heartland. In this way, we see how fat rhetoric is used to discriminate multifariously—this rhetoric is again tied to race and class, but the obese and ostensibly ‘white’ or ‘unmarked’ body is warned—one can lose one’s citizenship and privilege. The division between ethnicities is reinforced, but there is a certain reversal.

**REDUCTIONIST RHETORIC**

If indeed fat is related to an aggregate of “social, behavioral, cultural, physiological, metabolic and genetic factors” as the National Institute of Health would suggest, then how do reporters, columnists and others abnegate their responsibility to provide complex, compelling pieces which complicate simple collapsing of racist, classist, ableist discourses upon the rhetoric of anti-obesity? While the articles I have analyzed here are just a small sample of larger, braided discourses about this ‘epidemic’, they do represent a diverse cross-section of cultural attitudes. In conclusion, I want to suggest that what is at work in each of these articles is a unique form of discrimination. Robyn Wiegman, suspect of attempts to make ‘like race’ arguments—those moves which would “disarticulate racism from institutionalized practices of discrimination based on a group’s designated racial status and [create] a position structurally comparable to that of a racial minority” (293)—warns against the suggestion that certain societal others can be compared to racial minorities. In the same way, fat is not coherently ‘like disability’, nor is weight discrimination ‘like’ class discrimination. Instead, I hope to have shown the ways that popular discourses rely on constructions of excessive bodies to articulate boundaries around the idea of citizenship. The fat body works for racism, classism and xenophobia, just as fat can only be understood via an understanding of connected
abjections. The consequences of allying discriminations, like the consequences of allying critiques of them, are fraught and unpredictable.
CONCLUSION: A FIELD OF DIFFERENCES: RESIGNIFYING FAT EMBODIMENT

It is important to recognize the various voices speaking back to anti-fat rhetoric. Just as I showed that public responses parodied government rhetoric in “The Rhetoric of the Fat Tax,” people are challenging dominant discourses and common misperceptions about fatness and fitness. In a June 11, 2006 press conference on ESPN, basketball superstar Shaquille O’Neal responds to on-going criticism about his weight as a professional athlete. O’Neal’s comedic response deflects the criticism while cleverly using the opportunity to question the assumptions of those who believe his weight on the scale makes him fat. His funny insistence that he is from another planet effectively sets him apart as someone able to critique the assumption that he needs to capitulate to demands for him to lose weight and instead insist that big is beautiful and sexy. Not incidentally, Shaquille O’Neal is over seven feet tall. Speaking to a large group of reporters O’Neal says: “I’m a freak of nature. You’ve never seen anyone this big, this sexy move this way. My number [referring to his weight] is sometimes gonna be a high number. And you earthlings, when you hear a high number, because of your level of thinking, you automatically think it’s fat. You know when you’ve got a big, sexy, beautiful man [flexes arms] that’s up in the 340s, 350s, the way you were taught on this planet, you automatically think it’s fat” (O’Neal). O’Neal’s fame as an NBA basketball star affords him tremendous cultural capital. He is in a privileged position to be able to send a widely-circulated message that big is beautiful. He is also extremely visible as a heavy person who not only challenges assumptions about what is considered ‘fit’ but is indeed employed for his athleticism in a lucrative industry. His criticism of peoples’ reaction upon hearing his weight speaks to the idea that measuring all bodies against an abstract ideal is a useless and unrealistic system of evaluation.

In a different but related context, a 2003 issue of Stanford Magazine featured a story on alumni and fat activist Marilyn Wann. Stanford Magazine writer Nina Schuyler outlines Wann’s ability to mobilize fat activists and raise awareness of fat discrimination by describing one of the public events for which Wann is most well-known. Schuyler writes: “A 24 Hour Fitness billboard advertisement featuring a space alien hovered
above the tall buildings in downtown San Francisco: ‘When they come, they’ll eat the fat ones first.’ Angry about the ad, Wann sent out e-mails to rally the fat community. To the song ‘The Way You Make Me Feel,’ about two dozen women paraded in front of the fitness club on Van Ness, waving signs that read, ‘Eat Me!’ Press coverage of the 1999 event caught the attention of the San Francisco board of supervisors, which called for hearings by the city’s human rights commission. In May 2000, the supervisors adopted a height/weight antidiscrimination ordinance, joining three other jurisdictions: Michigan; Santa Cruz, California and Washington”(www.stanfordalumni.org/news/magazine/2003). The article also describes Wann’s work traveling to high schools to speak to students about weight diversity and the positive responses she has received from students. What is remarkable about Marilyn Wann’s role as an activist and scholar is her ability to move through different spaces—urban, institutional, online—using her body/mind to challenge norms. She works in the polyvalent ways which facilitate both larger judicial and institutional change and forge new understandings about what is considered a valuable, attractive, powerful body.

In a 1995 article appearing unusually in the *Journal of the American Dietetic Association*, nutritionist Jo Anne Cassell imagines the possibilities for a progressive role for the medical establishment in breaking down unnecessarily discriminatory baggage carried by the fat body. She writes, “Dieticians could be the first to break the equation linking body weight to moral or psychological status, to judge clients and neighbors for who they are and not for what they weigh, to examine their own attitudes toward people who are overweight, and to work to overcome negative stereotypes…The medical prognosis for persons who are overweight might be improved if nonjudgmental dieticians helped clients adopt a sensible eating pattern, pursue a regular program of exercise, and then accept whatever weight follows” (427). With a perspective seldom publicized by medical discourse, Cassell gestures towards a partnership whereby fat bodies can also be healthy bodies and practitioners can be allies in deconstructing the fat-body-as-sick-body stereotype.

While Shaquille O’Neal, Marilyn Wann and a dietician are perhaps very different people to put together, their public expressions and embodiments do similar work in asserting the need for alternate cultural awarenesses of heavy bodies. When considering
the existence of a movement towards fat celebration and acceptance, what is important about the contribution of disability studies, of people like O’Neal and Wann, of open-minded people within the medical establishment, and of all others challenging weight-based norms, is the different texture of each contribution. Just as queer or feminist politics involves agents with differing agendas and beliefs, a fat acceptance movement need not demand homogeneity in order to be successful. In *Bodies That Matter*, Judith Butler points to the possibilities for performance to intervene in the relentless, always partial process of signification which forms subjects. She writes, “[T]he failure of such signifiers—“women” is the one that comes to mind—fully to describe the constituency they name is precisely what constitutes these signifiers as sites of phantasmatic investment and discursive rearticulation. It is what opens the signifier to new meanings and new possibilities for political resignification. It is this open-ended and performative function of the signifier that seems to me to be crucial to a radical democratic notion of futurity” (190). The fat body cannot be fixed any more than the language of “fatness” itself. It is this flux—of body and of discourse—which opens up exciting possibilities for resignification as Butler points out. The fat body cannot ever be fully described. Working over time and in a variety of social spaces, multiple performances of fat identity can help to interrupt the dominant discourse, push for resignification, and remap cultural assumptions.

In the introductory chapter of *Volatile Bodies* titled “Refiguring Bodies,” Elizabeth Grosz writes: “Where one body (in the West, the white, youthful, able, male body) takes on the function of model or ideal, the human body, for all other types of body, its domination may be undermined through a defiant affirmation of a multiplicity, a field of differences, of other kinds of bodies and subjectivities. A number of ideal types of body must be posited to ensure the production, projection, and striving for ideal images and when the relation between mind and body is adequately retheorized can we understand the contributions of the body to the production of knowledge systems, regimes of representation, cultural production, and socioeconomic exchange” (19). Grosz effectively pinpoints what is at stake for all bodies in a culture which exalts an abstract, white, able, youthful, male ideal. Pervasive anti-fat bias is most certainly a political issue tied to class, race, and gender. It is an issue of access to cultural and

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economic capital and one which is often about food consumption in only the most
arbitrary of ways. 29 Yet, as Grosz articulates, it is also about knowledge production and
about theorizing the heavy body into a more fully formed, necessarily complex
intelligibility.

29 I say ‘arbitrary’ as I believe that the consumption habits of people considered obese are subject to
scrutiny far more frequently than is the case with slim people. Slim people are tacitly assumed to be
‘healthy’ and therefore are not criticized as often for their behaviors or asked to account for their
consumption habits. A heavy person and a slim person could make very similar food choices but occupy
very different places in the cultural hierarchy of privileged bodies.


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