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Fat as a Floating Signifier: Fat Liberation Standpoint and the History of Fatness from Race Science to Eugenics

Introduction

This exam is a challenge: to see fatness in a radically new way, completely divorced from any discussions of health or medicine. This exam asks you to set aside everything you've learned and heard about fatness – the obesity research, the fear-mongering media headlines, the moral judgments associated with body size – and instead ask what “fat” means and how it got that meaning. This exam asks you to consider why it's so hard to imagine a world without “fat” as a nature-given, objective category of bodily difference.

“Fat,” named this way or in any number of pseudonyms (corpulence, plumpness, *embonpoint*, stoutness, overweight, obesity, etc.), has been a topic of medical discussion since antiquity (Vigarello; Forth, *Fat*; Gilman). As a result, many of the histories about fatness, and how it has been conceived of, measured, and treated, depend on, revolve around, and engage discourses of health and illness (Jutel; Gard; Czerniawski), or, in more critical accounts, normality, abnormality, and pathology (Hacking, “Kinds of People: Moving Targets”). These histories, as “deviant historiographer” Jennifer Terry explains, “simultaneously constitute the dominant historiography and the history of dominance” (Terry 286–87). In other words, limiting the historical exploration of fatness to these particular discourses continues to naturalize its categorical status, even if the boundary or validity of that category is troubled. To be clear, there is no good way around this, no extra-discursive place from which to source data. There is, however, a different analytic through which to filter what has already been written, one that does

not imagine our present¹ at its endpoint, but instead engages a dream of fat liberation, wherein all body sizes are celebrated as part of the natural variation of bodies (Rothblum and Solovay; Cooper, *Fat Activism*; Freespirit and Aldebaran).

Viewing the history of fatness through a fat liberationist lens is necessarily partial, a point on which I will elaborate in my methodology section. For my purposes here, however, what I wish to emphasize is that decoupling fatness from illness and/or pathology reveals a wildly inconsistent history. Who counted as fat when and where – and what it meant to be fat – is neither steady nor historically persistent. While this is puzzling if one takes “fat” for granted a natural or medical category, a different perspective solves the puzzle: if “fat” hasn’t historically had one consistent meaning, perhaps its meaning does not depend on weight or body shape. Said differently, the history of “fat” is actually a history of a *floating signifier*, a label with no meaning of its own but instead assigned by and maintained as part of different regimes of knowledge.² As a floating signifier, it is flexible and easily embedded in various hierarchical knowledge systems meant to separate superior people from inferior people (Hall and Jhally; Strings, “Fat as a Floating Signifier”).³

From a fat liberationist standpoint, “fat” is a taxonomic tool, a meaning-laden label, a sign with no set definition other than “lesser,” a mechanism of othering (Varenne).⁴ In this exam,

¹ By “our present,” I mean the global public health effort to eradicate obesity, which has touched most, if not all, parts of the globe.

² The claim that “fat” doesn’t have one meaning was (as far as I know) originally made by longtime fat activist Marilyn Wann. In her introduction to the *Fat Studies Reader*, she states that “Fat functions as a floating signifier, attaching to individuals based on a power relationship, not a physical measurement (Wann xv).

³ Sabrina Strings uses this same phrase in her chapter “Fat as a Floating Signifier: Race, Weight, and Femininity in the National Imaginary.” However, my claim is much broader than hers, which focuses specifically on fat as a floating signifier of *race and national belonging*. Said differently, according to Strings, in late nineteenth century U.S. magazine and newspaper articles, “the meaning of fleshy female bodies varied by the race of the bearer” (Strings, “Fat as a Floating Signifier” 4). I argue that this is true, but the claim about fat not having a clear or consistent definition is much broader than just this context.

⁴ “Obesity” has also been called a technology similar to the claim of race as a technology (Chun). However, the “blackboxing” of obesity into a technology did not happen until the 1950s, so this claim does not fully work here (Boero; Rogers).

I use examples from two different historical “thought styles” to show how “fat” was embedded in categories of race and gender and in distinctions between rich and poor, deserving and undeserving, citizen and non-citizen, and human and subhuman (Fleck). In each of these eras, the meanings of fat were made and maintained via the co-production of knowledge, technologies, and other artifacts, with non-human actors stabilizing the relationships between, and classification of, humans (Jasanoff; Guthman; Latour). The examples I provide here are not exhaustive, nor do they address all of the meanings of fat during these times. What links them, however, is the development and use of “fat” as a way to produce difference, deviance, and inferiority.

In the late eighteenth-century and early to mid-nineteenth century, natural philosophers⁵ interested in classifying the world, including human variation, used colonial travel accounts and the spectacle of non-European peoples displayed in Europe to develop theories about the connection between human physical features and fundamental character. Part of these classification efforts included attempts to link fatness (corpulence) to certain races through theories that claimed fatness as something inherent to non-white peoples, metaphors of obesity as a physical *and mental* state, and through drawing connections between fat inside the body and grease outside. These efforts resulted in widely variant ideas of causality and a frustration with explaining fat Europeans but set the stage for the emergence of evolutionary and statistical thinking about fatness.

From the middle of the nineteenth century to the beginning of the twentieth, the meanings of fatness were transformed through multiple intellectual developments. In the mid-1800s, new

⁵ I am using the term “natural philosophers” rather than “scientists” here because the term “scientists” was not invented and put into use until 1833 by William Whewell (Snyder). However, the knowledge these men were producing would now be called scientific knowledge, so they are sometimes referred to as scientists.

efforts to measure bodies and populations at the state level produced quantitative data that scientists and mathematicians could manipulate using statistical theories borrowed from astronomy. From these data and theories, they invented normalcy and deviance, creating ideal and non-ideal weights from anthropometric data. Ideas of normal and abnormal combined with evolutionary theory later in the century, giving rise to explanations of fatness as something that came from the past and would eventually disappear through the civilization of (certain) white people. By the end of the century, scientists interested in speeding up the disappearance of fat and other “undesirable” traits invented eugenics, an attempt to improve humanity through the regulation of reproduction. While the definition of what counted as fat was nebulous and varied from group to group, combined with these new developments, fat became a way of controlling “proper” people (especially women) and banishing the “improper” to the edges of society. Despite these efforts, through all these developments, many people became and remained fat, causing confusion among white elites, frustration among temperance practitioners, and anger and resentment among eugenicists.

This historical investigation reveals several important points. First, that fat held many, many meanings before the one that is presented to us⁶ by the global medical-industrial complex or the rhetoric of the “obesity epidemic;” fat was myriad things before it was an illness, disease, or pathology.⁷ Second, that the current meanings and measurements of fatness cannot be separated from this inconsistent and messy history in which it was used as a tool of oppression. Combined, these points reveal a powerful method that fat studies scholars can use to profoundly denaturalize present understandings of fatness and demonstrate the multiple oppressions inherent

⁶ By “us,” I mean anyone who has encountered “obesity epidemic” propaganda.

⁷ I have identified the late 1800s and early 1900s as a third thought style during which fat became pathological. I touch on this in the conclusion, but unfortunately, discussion of this period is currently beyond the scope of this exam.

in it as a seemingly medical category. They also provide a way of imagining change for a future in which the category of “fat” is recognized as a hierarchizing tool and discarded so that we (people interested in bodily liberation) can begin to undo the damage this category has done.

Methodology

I am not working with primary historical sources (such as archival documents) in this exam, but rather other histories of fatness that have already been written, in other fields and from various perspectives. The traditional approach to such a body of work would be a literature review, a survey paper to summarize what has already been said and identify gaps in the field. However, I am taking a different approach to these texts - instead of providing an overview of their approaches and arguments, I am reading them closely and with the particular theoretical sensibility I have developed during my time as a fat studies scholar.⁸ In other words, I am performing a standpoint close reading, using my subject position in the world and political commitments as both the starting point and motivation for this analysis.

What does a fat liberation standpoint reading have to offer the history of fatness? Feminist standpoint theory claims that knowledge is always socially situated, so “to the extent that an oppressed group’s situation is different from that of the dominant group, its dominated situation enables the production of distinctive kinds of knowledge”(Harding 7). Thus, if one attends to one’s (achieved)⁹ subject position and its relation to other possible subject positions

⁸ See Timmermans and Tavory for a detailed discussion of what it means to cultivate a theoretical sensibility.

⁹ I say “achieved” here to acknowledge that merely being a member of an oppressed group does not, by itself, grant one a epistemic advantage. Instead, one must be able to define oneself in relation to the dominant group as well as the collective with which one identifies. As Caresse A. John explains in “Strategic Ambivalence: A Feminist Standpoint Theory Reading of Nella Larsen's Novels,” there are two steps to this process. First, “in order to understand one's location in relation to others' locations, logically, one must first be able to interrogate one's own location.” This involves defining oneself such that seeing one’s positions in relation to others is possible. Next, “as one moves toward achievement of a standpoint, one becomes conscious of one's privileges, the ways in which one is oppressed, and the power relations that produce and maintain those privileges and oppressions. When one achieves a standpoint one becomes conscious of one's place in relation to the collective - not only the groups from which one is excluded, but also the groups with which one shares certain types of oppression and certain types of power” (John

(both individual and collective), one can better see the flaws and power dynamics embedded in previous knowledge produced about one's group or position. Moreover, standpoint theory acknowledges the challenges of making knowledge about oneself or one's group when that group has most often been the *object* of knowledge, rather than the subject (Harding 4). A fat liberation standpoint, then, offers three key benefits as an approach to the history of fatness.

First, I am writing with the awareness of the violence previous histories have done to fat people. Fat activist Charlotte Cooper has argued that “the problem of fatness is both proposed and to be solved by thin people” (Cooper, “Obesity Timebomb”). Fat people are rarely considered the experts on the topics which affect us most strongly. Thus there is an overabundance of scholarship that frames fatness as a problem to be solved and a dearth of scholarship about fatness *from* fat people (Pausé 9).¹⁰ As Cat Pausé explains in “Ray of Light: Standpoint Theory, Fat Studies, and a New Fat Ethics,” the people who are most often allowed to be “knowers” of fatness – doctors, public health officials, medical historians, etc. – produce knowledge that relies on the naturalized fatphobia in our current world and, even if unintentionally, perpetuates it (3). However, because fatphobia *is* naturalized, this knowledge appears impartial, disembodied, and objective.

In “Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective,” Donna Haraway argues that this supposed neutrality or disinterest is a “god-trick of seeing everything from nowhere,” a disingenuous “view from above, from nowhere, from

96). Thus, a feminist standpoint comes from careful analysis of power dynamics and a knowledge of one's place in the world and in various groups. Nancy Hartsock, in “The Feminist Standpoint: Developing the Ground for a Specifically Feminist Historical Materialism,” provides a similar explanation: “because the ruling group controls the means of mental as well as physical production, the production of ideals as well as goods, the standpoint of the oppressed represents an achievement both of science (analysis) and of political struggle on the basis of which this analysis can be conducted” (Hartsock 288).

¹⁰ (See, for example, Beller; G. A. Bray; George A. Bray, *The Battle of the Bulge; A History of Obesity Research*; Dawes; Eknayan, “A History of Obesity, or How What Was Good Became Ugly and Then Bad”; Weinstein).

simplicity” that hides its own position and (hegemonic) agenda (581, 589). The counter to this “god-trick,” Haraway continues, is ensuring that knowledge that makes “claims on people’s lives” always comes from “a body, always a complex, contradictory, structuring, and structured body” (589). In other words, claiming one’s position and agenda in knowledge production does not make it less “objective,” it is, instead, acknowledging that *all* knowledge comes from a position. In this exam, I am not claiming the power to see and not be seen as an author (581); instead, by using a fat liberation standpoint, I am writing from my perspective, a perspective informed both by living under the United States’ current fatphobic regime as someone labeled as “fat” and from years of fighting back as an activist and scholar against the ways this country pathologizes and demonizes fatness.¹¹ Moreover, I am arguing that this (cultivated) position gives me an epistemic advantage in producing political knowledge about fatness (Harding 8).¹²

As a result of this epistemic advantage, Haraway asserts that “we are also bound to seek perspective from those points of view...which promise something quite extraordinary, that is, knowledge potent for constructing worlds less organized by axes of domination” (585). I agree; this is both a practical and ethical goal in terms of producing new (and liberatory) knowledge. Part of this endeavor is recognizing the second benefit a fat liberation standpoint brings to studying the history of fatness: that standpoint perspectives can facilitate novel connections between existing works. In this exam, treating fat as a floating signifier, rather than a natural (or

¹¹ The approach most similar to mine is what Anna Mollow calls “setpoint epistemology,” which she defines as the idea that “personal knowledge that diets don’t work can inform politicized vantage points from which powerful challenges to hegemonic conceptions of fatness can be issued” (Mollow 200). However, I want to extend this claim further to include the knowledge that comes from achieving a fat liberation standpoint through years of work and theoretical cultivation in addition to personal experience.

¹² Hartsock explains this epistemological advantage as a result of standpoint epistemology positing “a duality of levels of reality, of which the deeper level or essence both includes and explains the ‘surface’ or appearance, and indicates the logic by means of which the appearance inverts and distorts the deeper reality” (Hartsock 285). A fat liberation standpoint is thus epistemologically privileged because it can both reveal fatphobia and the myths that structure well-intentioned attempts to rehabilitate fatness as well as provide a starting point for producing new knowledge.

even consistent scientific) category, has revealed links between stories that are most often told separately. This methodology has enabled me to draw together work on colonialism and race science from critical race studies, texts on the rise of statistics and eugenics from science and technology studies, and histories of fatness from within and outside of fat studies; moreover, I have drawn on historical-epistemological strategies from each of these fields, which is what has allowed me to chart fatness as a label rather than an embodiment.

A fat liberation standpoint, which puts a knowledge of the historical and contemporary marginalization of fatness and fat people at the forefront of scholarship, can also help avoid reading present conceptions of fatness – as obesity, as disease, or as risk factor – backwards into previous eras. As Arnold Davidson explains in his account of how sexuality emerged as a category, blurring our own categories with the categories of the past “leads to epistemological and conceptual lack of differentiation, and results in the historiographical infection that the great French historian of science Georges Canguilhem calls the ‘virus of the precursor’” (Davidson 53). This infection, which leads us to “perpetually look for precursors to our own categories...in essentially different domains,” produces “anachronisms at best and unintelligibility at worst.”¹³ By resisting the merging of fatness with “obesity” (as an umbrella term for the current pathologization of fatness) here, I am not trying to deny that fatness has been treated as a disease state prior to our current era. Rather, I want to specify that prior understandings even of fat as a disease are not interchangeable with the ones that have emerged from recent decades, and that reading recent understandings backwards erases the complexities that tie fatness to race science, colonialism, and eugenics.

¹³ For example, in his book *Adolphe Quetelet, Social Physics and the Average Men of Science, 1796-1874*, Kevin Donnelly makes the anachronistic claim that Quetelet, a nineteenth-century astronomer who developed an index renamed to the BMI in 1972, “would have been happy to see the BMI in public health initiatives today” (Donnelly 130).

Attending to the “virus of the precursor” yields the third benefit of a fat liberation standpoint, which is the ability to account for many of the myths that structure present academic work on the history of fatness, both the explicitly fatphobic and the well-intentioned attempts to show that fat has not always been “bad.” Consequently, this standpoint helps me avoid replicating these myths and their anachronistic effects in my own work. By myth, I mean Roland Barthes’ second-order signifying system, the “material which has *already* been worked on so as to make it suitable for communication...[materials] that one can reason about while discounting their substance” (Barthes 219). In other words, myths are shared cultural stories that are so familiar and appealing to a society (and align so neatly with the interests of those who benefit from maintaining them) that their meaning becomes commonsensical and taken for granted, thus allowing them to shape additional discourses. There are two major myths that structure most of the histories of fatness that have been written thus far.¹⁴

One such myth is that fatness “used to be valued [in some past era] because food was scarce” (see, for example, Eknoyan’s “A History of Obesity, or How What Was Good Became Ugly and Then Bad” or Farrell’s chapter “Fat, Modernity, and the Problem of Excess”). This (often vague) story is a well-intentioned attempt to aesthetically and morally rehabilitate fatness by showing that contemporary beauty standards and pejorative narratives of personal blame for body size were not always the case. This myth is often supported by claims that fatness previously functioned as a signifier for wealth, which was also supposedly valued (again, in some unspecified past) and piecemeal evidence from art history (most notably the paintings of

¹⁴ Abigail Saguy’s *What’s Wrong with Fat?* makes a similar argument about current discourses surrounding fatness. According to her research, several “frames,” such as the “problem frames” (fat as immoral, fat as a medical problem, fat as a public health crisis) and “blame frames” (fat as a result of genetics, individual choices, or sociocultural factors) structure the vast majority of thinking and conversations around fat (Saguy 26).

Peter Paul Rubens).¹⁵ While ostensibly doing a service to fat people by providing a contrast to today's fat-antagonistic views, this myth contains many assumptions that preclude an historical investigation. First, it homogenizes, treating the boundary between fat and thin as stable and self-evident. Second, it ignores the role of race, gender, and class in determining who counted as fat, why, and when. And third, it erases the possibility of exploring fat as an historically oppressive category.

The second myth that shapes much of the contemporary scholarship on fat history is the evolutionary explanation of the “obesity epidemic,” the idea that “fatness is more common now because “we” are eating more and moving less and humans are evolutionarily predisposed to gaining weight.”^{16,17} This myth again is meant to reduce prejudice against fat people by placing the blame for increasing rates of fatness on structural forces, rather than individual choices.

However, its explanatory power depends on a thermodynamic model of weight gain – calories in

¹⁵ Although Rubenesque has become one way of describing fat bodies, Rubens was not considered a good artist during his lifetime. In *Fat: A Cultural History of the Stuff of Life*, Christopher Forth explains that eighteenth century critics denounced the lack of grace and motion in Rubens' paintings: “described as ‘the greatest and most general Misleader of our Judgments’, [sic] Rubens had foolishly depicted women as they actually appeared in the Netherlands rather than according to loftier aesthetic standards. ‘His very *Graces* are all fat,’ it was said, and thus not really graceful at all” (Forth, *Fat* 194). Thus, just because historical paintings of fat women exist does not mean that fat women were historically valued.

¹⁶ See, for example, Eric Oliver's book *Fat Politics*, wherein he spends the first half of the book explaining how the “obesity epidemic” is artificially constructed and then the second half explaining that more people are fat now because “we” don't have as many reasons to exercise and “our” food is more plentiful and calorically dense than the food of previous eras.

¹⁷ See Gard and Wright's *The Obesity Epidemic: Science, Morality, and Ideology*, for a longer discussion on the inevitability of how the “obesity epidemic” gets explained through “Neo-Darwinian theory” (Gard 32–34). This myth can also be seen in texts that argue that “modern,” processed foods are responsible for increasing the number of fat people in the world (e.g. Aamodt; Hobbes).

versus calories out – that did not come into being until the early 1900s (Gilman; Levine 81).^{18, 19}

Viewing history through this myth makes it impossible to imagine that *many* people were fat in the past, since the myth asserts that the only way to get fat is via gratuitous consumption.

Associating thinness with scarcity and scarcity with many peoples and places in the past erases whole histories of diversity in eating habits and body types. It also makes it impossible to see how fat could have been (and was) implicated in nineteenth-century scientific knowledge production, especially the development of racial taxonomies and, eventually, eugenic ideas.

The remainder of this exam is thus a novel history of fat, one in which the myriad, multiple, and sometimes contradictory historical conceptions of fatness are brought together to expose not how “fat” is linked to bodies, but how it is linked to power, oppression, and inferiority. The history of fat is not a history of bodies. It is the history of an imagined embodiment used by those in power to separate themselves (to the best of their ability) from the inferior. It is also the history of the failure of those attempts, and of a slippery category that resists definition. This slipperiness raises enormous questions about how much of our current world is built on fat-related categories and, by extension, who is harmed by systems that attempt to erase fat’s ongoing inconsistency.

¹⁸ The idea that energy input versus output might affect human bodies is credited to Santorio Santorio (also written Santorio Sanctorious), an Italian intellectual, in the late 1500s or early 1600s. As Nestle and Nesheim explain in *Why Calories Count: From Science to Politics*, “perhaps suffering from some kind of obsessive compulsive disorder, he weighed himself, everything he ate and drank, and everything he produced in urine and feces nearly every day for thirty years. From these observations and measurements, Sanctorius observed the effects on his body of the difference in weight between the foods he ate and the waste products he excreted. He attributed this difference to ‘insensible perspiration’” (24).

¹⁹ Not coincidentally, this model was developed around the time Taylorism was gaining popularity and a general logic of increasing efficiency in labor was permeating science. As Levine explains of William Olin Atwater, the man largely responsible for popularizing the calorie as a nutritional concern in the US, “Atwater took an economic approach to calories, positioning himself as the key expert in helping American workers live with fewer food dollars. In another set of his studies, after conducting a multiyear inventory of the diet and calorie intake of American workers, Atwater identified areas where workers could consume more calories with less financial output. Atwater determined that many American workers could spend much less money on food and still fuel their labor outputs. Wages, he argued, could be reduced if workers were better educated about calorie needs and the economics of eating” (126).

Fat as a Floating Signifier in 2 Thought Styles

In *Genesis and Development of a Scientific Fact*, Ludwik Fleck puts forth a model of how a scientific model emerges, becomes popular, becomes canon, and, eventually, recedes as a different model gains favor in a given scientific community. Fleck calls these communities “thought collectives,” which he defines as “a community of persons mutually exchanging ideas or maintaining intellectual interaction” (39). Thought collectives are the location of cognition as a social process, where knowledge emerges from the relationship between “the knowing subject,” “the object to be known,” and “the existing fund of knowledge” (38). As a result, whenever one “recognizes something,” one recognizes it “on the basis of a certain fund of knowledge,” “as a member of a certain cultural environment, and “in a particular thought style, in a particular thought collective” (39). Building on this, Fleck argues that thought collectives are “the special ‘carrier’ for the historical development of any field of thought, as well as for the given stock of knowledge and level of culture” (39). Thus, in historical work, one can identify particular thought collectives and their respective “thought styles” to understand how certain ideas came into being, how they were spread and maintained, and why they made sense within a particular era.

I am using Fleck’s model of thought styles and thought collectives to explain the many meanings of “fat” in different times and knowledge systems for three reasons. First, thought styles constrain the perception and logic of thinkers inculcated into them, such that “a stylistic bond exists between many, if not all, concepts of a period, based on their mutual influence” (9). Thinking about the stylistic links between the different meanings of “fat” in a given thought style helps explain how they can be linked even if they contradict one another. Second, any given thought style is “characterized by common features in the problems of interest to a thought

collective, by the judgment which the thought collective considers evident, and by the methods which it applies as a means of cognition” (99). This helps me explain how different concerns over fatness correspond to different ideas about how the world works (or should work) and different methods of determining fat’s boundaries and causes. Finally, although any given thought style is (historically) specific to a given thought community, “every thought style leaves remnants...[and] contains vestiges of the historical, evolutionary development of various elements from another style” (100). This helps me explain how one historical way of thinking about fat can set the stage for another and draw connections between meanings in different thought styles without assuming they directly intercalate with one another.

The following sections explore the many meanings of “fat” as a floating signifier across two thought styles: taxonomic race science, in which attempts to forge the link between fatness and non-whiteness were repeatedly made and repeatedly failed, and the rise of normality and abnormality, in which fatness first became deviant and then became a target for elimination via eugenic logic.

Thought Style I: The Rise of Taxonomic Race Science

Hierarchizing races as a scientific project began in the 1700s as European countries tried to produce explanations of and justifications for their ongoing colonial conquests.²⁰ As Michel Foucault explains in *The Order of Things*, the Enlightenment ushered in a new era of natural

²⁰ Note that this is not the beginning of what we would now call a “racist discourse.” In *Racial Formation in the United States*, Omi and Winant detail that the modern conception of race emerges with “the rise of Europe and the arrival of Europeans in the Americas” (Omi and Winant 113). As they explain, “it was only when European explorers reached the Western Hemisphere, when the oceanic seal separating the “old” and the “new” worlds was breached, that the distinctions and categorizations fundamental to a racialized social structure, and to a discourse of race, began to appear.” Strings charts the first emergence of such a discourse in the middle of the 1600s with the rise of the Dutch East India Company, which sent its members down to the Cape of Good Hope to enslave the Khoikhoi people who lived there. As slavery became more popular, black people came to represent “*différance*, or a perverse primitivity and backwardness, a ‘polemical otherness’” (Strings, *Fearing the Black Body* 52). Omi and Winant call this process racialization, which they define as “the extension of racial meaning to a previously racially unclassified relationship, social practice, or group” (111).

sciences in which observing and ordering the natural world became a dominant form of knowledge production (Foucault, see chapter 5 “Classifying”). Along with plant and animal specimens collected from “exotic” lands, some natural philosophers began classifying people into taxonomic categories by using various physical features as evidence of fundamental difference.²¹ In *Fearing the Black Body*, Sabrina Strings explains that the primary motivation of this project was to “attempt to pin down fundamental physical differences between Europeans and non-Europeans...to serve as proof of European superiority” (*Fearing the Black Body* 67). In *Racial Formation in the United States*, Omi and Winant claim that “the invocation of scientific criteria to demonstrate the “natural” basis of racial hierarchy was both a logical consequence of the rise of this [taxonomic] form of knowledge, and an attempt to provide a more subtle and nuanced account of human complexity in the new, ‘enlightened’ age” (115). Which body parts served as evidence of physical difference varied widely across different scientific practices and depended largely upon which “exotic” peoples European men came into contact with or read about; in addition to skin color, skull shape, height, body type, and facial hair all became signifiers of fundamental difference between different kinds of humans (Schiebinger).

During this period and into the middle of the 1800s, European philosophers attempted to turn fat and other kinds of “disproportionate” bodies into evidence of intrinsic, group inferiority. However, this endeavor proved difficult and definitions for fat, corpulent, or otherwise disproportionate bodies varied depending on race, gender, location, prestige, and theories of causality. In *Fat: A Cultural History of the Stuff of Life*, Christopher Forth explains how “empire provided countertypes against which models of white manhood and womanhood could be

²¹ Omi and Winant note that “the immediate need to classify and categorize” based on similarity and difference in physical appearance had already surfaced prior to the spread of taxonomy, since the “the exercise of power required these distinctions” (Omi and Winant 114). However, they clarify, it wasn’t until later that these classifications became a scientific endeavor.

measured, usually by drawing attention to physical extremes that threw into relief the ‘moderate’ bodies that whites were supposed to possess” (*Fat* 210). Colonial pursuits put Europeans into contact with peoples from Africa, Asia, Australia, and the Middle East, all of whom became sources for bodily and cultural comparison. However, far from providing a coherent taxonomy of fat others to Western Europe’s thin selves, each of these contacts provided many different bodies and different explanations of and associations with fatness. Thus, while this period did succeed in linking fatness to inferiority, the linking of fatness to specific (racial) groups was less successful.

African peoples in particular held a special place in the European colonial imagination. Colonizers who traveled to various parts of Africa returned with stories meant to both repulse and fascinate upper-class white Europeans. Forth reports on two explorers, Mungo Park, a Scottish explorer who traveled “among the Moors” in the late 1790s and René Caillié, a Frenchman who traveled in the Brakna region in the 1820s, who both returned to their countries to tell tales of how “Africans” forcibly fattened their girls and women (*Fat* 214–15). These stories were corroborated by the traveling exhibition in England and France of Sara Baartman, a Khoikhoi woman kidnapped from South Africa in 1810.²² Displayed as “the Hottentot Venus,” Baartman’s body became the first-hand evidence of the “savageness” of African peoples (*Fat* 215).

However, not all the African peoples Europeans encountered were fat. As Zine Magubane lays out in “Which Bodies Matter? Feminism, Poststructuralism, Race, and the Curious Theoretical Odyssey of the ‘Hottentot Venus,’” although much scholarship on Baartman

²² As Amy Erdman Farrell notes in *Fat Shame*, we have no way of knowing what Baartman’s real name was. The names Sara and Saartjie were given to her by Dutch trader Alexander Dunlop (65).

has claimed that she represented “Blackness *in nuncce*” for European natural philosophers,²³ other travel reports from the early 1800s reveal that explorers found a multitude of peoples and a multitude of body types on the continent of Africa. As she explains, English statesman John Barrow differentiated between “colonial Hottentots...who lived inside the colony” and “savage Hottentots” who lived in outlying regions, claiming that the “Hottentot Apron”²⁴ was found only on the “savage Hottentot,” not the “colonial” (or bastard) Hottentot (822). Magubane continues:

It was widely agreed that the Xhosa (called variously Kaffirs, Caffirs, and Caffers) and the San (pejoratively referred to as Bushmen) were wholly unlike the Khoikhoi...Lichtenstein (1812, 303) concurred with Barrow that “the Kaffirs have in many respects a great resemblance to Europeans. Indeed they have more resemblance to them than either to Negroes or Hottentots.” Thomas Pringle (1834,413) echoed Barrow when, after describing the Xhosa as being “dark brown” and having “wooly hair,” he declared them as having features that “approached the European model” (823).

If one considers these tales, as well as the racial degradation of the Irish (which I will return to later in this section), Magubane argues, it is clear that race, body type, and primitivity are not stable or stably-linked categories in the early 1800s.

Forth’s focus on the materiality of fat reveals two alternative ways fatness was linked to Blackness, primitivity and inferiority. First, corpulence was not just physical, but metaphorical. If Africans weren’t physically corpulent, they could still be criticized for the “general ‘softness’ and indolence of their character” (*Fat* 217). As he explains, Europeans “managed to find corpulence regardless of physique by decrying the lack of enterprise and ‘obesity of mind’ they

²³ Here Magubane is most specifically criticizing Sander Gilman’s work on Baartman, in which he assumes that “Baartmann’s color and sexual difference not only marked her as different but also rendered her fundamentally the same as all other Black people,” which lets him “move from a discussion about Baartman to making much broader claims about perceptions of African people as a whole” (822).

²⁴ Based on colonial travel ethnographies and the display of Baartman, European natural philosophers claimed that Khoikhoi women had three distinctive physical features that indicated their primitivity: their breasts, buttocks, and labia. Their buttocks were pathologized through the invention of “steatopygia,” a condition which is literally defined as extra fat on the buttocks (Thomson 72). The labia, which was supposedly “enlarged,” was referred to as the “Hottentot apron” (Farrell 65). Thus, by claiming that only “savage Hottentots” had the “Hottentot apron,” Barrow is claiming that this physical feature indicates the greater primitivity of this group.

detected among African pastoral peoples” (*Fat* 218).²⁵ In this usage, the meaning of “obesity” is completely divorced from body size but retains its derogatory meaning.²⁶

Second, fat was linked to primitivity via its physical properties. In the 1600s, Europeans exploring Africa reported “native peoples smearing their bodies with fat and eating foul-smelling fatty meats” (*Fat* 202).²⁷ Additionally, French missionaries in North America wrote degrading reports of “indigenous healers who smeared their bodies with pitch” (*Fat* 202). These reports resulted in white, and especially upper-class, Europeans associating fat as a material with contamination and a buildup of filth inside and outside the body. As a result, by the 1830s, British women who could afford it were hiring cooks to take care of the “dirty” and “contaminating” kitchen work to avoid contact with grease and entrepreneurial men were selling Castile soap to “clean middle class-bodies, inside and out” (*Fat* 202, 204).

The connection between internal and external fat was also supported by humoral theory, which still held some power over explanations of human physiology until the mid-1800s. For instance, in 1837, Julien-Joseph Virey, a French anthropologist, reinvigorated a long-standing idea that different races were biologically distinct. While other anthropologists were moving toward an idea that different environments caused racial difference, Virey and his followers argued that “black skin was caused by a superabundance of black bile beneath the skin.” They

²⁵ I am not discussing England’s colonial relationship with India in this section, but Forth also notes that this assumption was extended to Indian people: “Such generalizations could also be extended to all black people who, like most Indians, were thought to have fat on their minds even when their bodies were thin” (218).

²⁶ The term “obesity” was first used by English physician Tobias Venner in 1620 to lament the rate of corpulence among the English: “Using for the first time the word ‘obesus’ to describe excess fat, Venner argued that ‘obesity’ had adverse health consequences” (Strings, *Fearing the Black Body* 57). Vigarello describes Antoine Furetière defining obesity in 1701 as “Medical term. State of a person carrying too much fat or flesh” (Vigarello 92). Thus, from its very origins, “obesity” is a term meant to pathologize a particular type of embodiment.

²⁷ Interestingly, one explorer, although still disgusted by the use of grease on the body, noted that the Khoikhoi “smeared their bodies with butter and sheep’s fat, mixed with soot, to darken their appearance and protect themselves from the sun...[noting] that otherwise ‘the continual excessive Heats would, in all Probability, exhaust and destroy them’” (203).

then connected this to fatness through the idea that “an overflow of black bile could cause gastrointestinal disorders and weight gain” (*Fearing the Black Body* 85). One humor became responsible for both blackness and fatness.

Although this explanation was not applied to white people, the association of fatness with unbalanced and disgusting humors was. In 1807, physiologist Anthelme Richerand wrote about the link between fat consumption, internal fatness, and the leakage of fat from the body. On the latter point, he claimed that “African negroes” secreted copious amounts of a “fetid fatty oil,” a “humour which soils our linen,” as an internal secretion that complemented “the tallow, the fat, and the disgusting substances with which the Caffres and the Hottentots anoint their [bodies].” However, he then claimed to know this internal-external humoral connection was true because he also knew several white people “overloaded with fat” who “sweated copiously” and “[greased] their linen in less than twenty-four hours” (Forth, *Fat* 204). Thus, fat, viewed through a humoral lens, came to represent deviance and primitivity in both white and Black peoples.

Through grease, fatness was also linked to gluttony. Those who ate fatty foods materialized the principle of “you are what you eat,” aligning Africans and fat white people with grease, animality, and sub-humanity. The idea that “man in his natural state” is gluttonous and therefore will eat himself into fatness gained momentum through the work of French food writer Jean Anthelme Brillat-Savarin, who said “savages will eat gluttonously and drink themselves insensible when ever they have the chance to” (Gilman 160). Thus, thinness via the disciplining of man’s “savage” will, became a benchmark of civilization.²⁸

²⁸ Interestingly, Brillat-Savarin and others believed that “savages” couldn’t get fat because they lived in scarcity, which then inevitably led to gluttony should food be present. This became relevant when Captain James Cook visited the island of Tahiti, where, he assumed, there would be no fat people because there was never scarcity to trigger gluttonous eating. Instead, he found fat men and even recorded “that in the language of the Society Isles the word for ‘obesity or corpulence’ is *Oo’peea*” (Gilman 161).

Discipline and willpower as the opposite of fatness, gluttony, and, by extension, primitivity, became a way of creating “gradations *within* whiteness” (Strings, *Fearing the Black Body* 129). Thinness as a signifier of discipline gained momentum in the United States in the late 1700s and early 1800s as part of the Great Awakening, a widespread renewal of Protestant fervor. Protestantism preached temperance, inspiring numerous Americans to abstain from alcohol, eat a temperate diet, and slim down.²⁹ White elites proved their superior (pure) Anglo-Saxon heritage through their superior physical forms – tall, pale, and slender compared to the short stoutness of more primitive, or “colored” whites (*Fearing the Black Body* 130).

The primary target against which Anglo-Saxons differentiated themselves was the Celtic Irish, a group British ethnologist James Cowles Prichard described in the early 1800s as alternately “part African” and “part Asiatic” (130). Along with Prichard, essayists Thomas Carlyle and Ralph Waldo Emerson in the US spread the message that the impure racial heritage of the Irish could be read from their “small and swarthy” bodies (131). Carlyle was so convinced that the Irish were inferior and therefore gluttonous and unable to control their appetites that he blamed the Irish Potato Famine of the late 1840s on their “potatophagi,” their unchecked appetite for the potato that led to their ruin (132).

One final idea put forth by some natural philosophers during this era was the environmental theory of race. First popularized by Buffon, a French intellectual whose 1749 *Histoire naturelle, générale et particulière* was one of the origins of taxonomic racial thinking, the environmental theory of race claimed that physical differences were a result of human adaptation to different environments. Buffon originally used this theory to claim that Africans

²⁹ 1830s Popular Health movement led by minister Sylvester Graham, who claimed that “a diet rich in animal foods was the cause of American dyspepsia, an allegedly widespread illness among the well-to-do. He also argued that stimulants such as tea, coffee, and spice, especially when combined with a meat-based diet, provoked a ravenous, un-Christian sexual appetite in men” (Strings, *Fearing the Black Body* 126–27).

were fat because they were “able to stay nourished with little or no effort” on their abundant land, making them “simple and stupid” (*Fearing the Black Body* 77). This idea was contradicted by later scholars who argued for the inherent gluttony of Africans, but the logic of physical traits being linked to weather remained. For instance, in 1810, the American minister Samuel Stanhope Smith thought that Americans descended from Anglo-Saxons were slimmer than citizens of England or Ireland because “the cold climate [of North America] had a slimming effect, as people in his environs could not sit lazily in the sun and enjoy the fruit of the land, as it was implied those of other races in hotter climates did” (133). In contrast, Forth reports that others used fat British people as evidence that “the cold and moist climate of the Island nation” and “the commercial success” of the English economy/empire “encouraged elites to eat more and exercise less,” thus blaming the cold for their corpulent – rather than slender – physiques (Forth, *Fat* 221).

Fat was a troubled category during the rise of taxonomic thinking and race science. As European natural philosophers sought to connect physical features to inherent character, fat – whether internal, external, or metaphorical – became a container for many different meanings but never a characteristic solely of one race, despite the many attempts to link it to Blackness. However, the link between fatness and primitivity was tightly forged through many different explanations, such as unbalanced humors, laziness due to climate, the “savage’s gluttony, or material contamination with grease. This link, close to but not identical with the attempts to link fatness and Blackness, helped explain the presence of thin, tall African peoples as well as short, stout Europeans – groups who would otherwise have disrupted neat racial categories. So although fat had many meanings and was defined in myriad ways, some definitions retained more stability than others.

Taxonomic, racial thinking set the stage for the emergence of its successor thought style: statistical, evolutionary, and, eventually, eugenic logic. Whereas taxonomic thinking focused on associating appearance with inherent nature, evolutionary thinking looked forward, to questions of who should procreate and why based on concepts of normality and abnormality. However, this kind of thinking still partially depended on identifying different people's "fitness" from their external features, showing how new thought styles inherent remnants of the styles before them.

Thought Style II: Quantification, Evolution, and Eugenics

The middle of the nineteenth century was defined by what philosopher Ian Hacking calls "an avalanche of printed numbers," arising as "nation-states classified, counted, and tabulated their subjects anew" (Hacking, *The Taming of Chance* 2). However, he continues, these numbers were only the surface effect of "new technologies for classifying and enumerating, and new bureaucracies with the authority and continuity to deploy the technology" (*The Taming of Chance* 3). Much like the previous thought style, classification was major component of the "avalanche of numbers" era. However, in contrast to the turn of the century, by the middle of the 1800s, classification was based not on visible difference, but *measurable* difference. This new thought style depended on novel ways of producing knowledge, such as the application of statistical techniques to social data, as well as novel ideas and ideologies about how the world worked, such as evolutionary theory's "survival of the fittest." The combination of measuring, quantifying, calculating, and documenting led to concepts that have shaped our world ever since: the normal, the abnormal, the pathological, and the deviant. Fat took on many different meanings during this era, retaining some of its meanings from race science but absorbing new connotations via questions of average and ideal, heritability, and criminality.

The history of fatness specifically as a weight above the “average,” “normal,” or “ideal” weight for a given height began with the work of Adolphe Quetelet, a Belgian astronomer and statistician. In the 1830s and 40s, Quetelet began applying the statistical theories he learned in astronomy to the “avalanche of numbers,” thereby performing the first (or one of the first) instances of *social statistics*. He applied these theories to two kinds of data: anthropometric, meaning data created by measuring different parts of the body, and social, meaning data about a given population, such as birth rate or crime statistics. Within both of these data types, Quetelet found “bell-shaped curves,” binomial distributions which cluster around a mean and fall sharply off each side of that mean. At the peak of this distribution, the center and highest point, is the average value for the data set.

For Quetelet, that peak became *l’homme moyen*, the average man. However, the method by which Quetelet determined this average imbued it with meaning beyond a number. As Alan Sekula explains, Quetelet:

observed that large aggregates of social data – notably anthropometric data – fell into a pattern corresponding to the bell-shaped curve derived by Gauss in 1809 in an attempt to determine accurate astronomical measurements from the distribution of random errors around a central mean. Quetelet came to regard this symmetric binomial curve as the mathematical expression of fundamental social law. While he admitted that the average man was a statistical fiction, this fiction lived within the abstract configuration of the binomial distribution. In an extraordinary metaphoric conflation of individual difference with mathematical error, Quetelet defined the central portion of the curve, that large number of measurements clustered around the mean, as a zone of normality. Divergent measurements tended toward darker regions of monstrosity and biosocial pathology. Thus conceived, the “average man” constituted an ideal, not only of social health, but of social stability and of beauty (22).

Thus, by virtue of applying statistics in this way, Quetelet established the mean not merely as existent, not merely as common, but as *ideal*. As Hacking explains it, “he transformed the theory of measuring unknown physical quantities, with a definite probable error, into the theory of

measuring ideal...properties of a population” (*The Taming of Chance* 108). The average man, once brought into being, became not average, but “the type of all which is beautiful – of all which is good” (Sekula 22).

Importantly, as Sekula and Hacking point out, Quetelet was not interested in a universal *l’homme moyen*. Instead, he was specifically interested in *European* deviation. According to Hacking, “Quetelet was not talking about an average for the human species. He was talking about the characteristics of a people or a nation, as a racial type” (*The Taming of Chance* 107).³⁰ For Quetelet, each race could have its own average man; however, insights were also limited by the data to which he had access. The vast majority of his statistics were performed on data collected from white Europeans. From this, it follows that his ideals were also based on white Europeans, largely men. However, though Quetelet might have seen his ideals as specific to the populations from which he generated them, others did not. This point is beyond the scope of this exam, but is evidenced in the fact that the BMI, used widely today, is based on Quetelet’s work.³¹

In 1835, Quetelet published *A Treatise on Man and the Development of his Aptitudes*, a series of three books which reviewed his statistical work until that point.³² In the second chapter of the second book, *Of the development of weight, and its relation to the development of the height of the body*, he summarizes his findings on how an individual’s height, on average, compares with their weight:

³⁰ Note that this claim is contradicted by Cryle and Stephens in *Normality: A Critical Genealogy*. In this book, they claim that “Quetelet’s aim was broader...He referred quite simply to ‘the whole race,’ declaring that ‘humanity in its full extent’ was the proper object of anthropometrical study” (Cryle and Stephens 158).

³¹ In 1972, epidemiologist Ancel Keys selected the Quetelet Index from amongst a number of other potential measures to use as a “suitable proxy” for determining body fat percentages within a population (Keys et al.; Gutin 2).

³² The *Treatise* was translated into English in 1842 by Dr. Robert Knox (Eknoyan, “Adolphe Quetelet (1796–1874)—the Average Man and Indices of Obesity” 49).

If we compare two individuals who are fully developed and well-formed with each other, to ascertain the relations existing between the weight and the stature, we shall find that *the weight of the developed persons, of different heights, is nearly as the square of the stature* (Quetelet 83, original emphasis).

This is the Quetelet index: on average, a person's weight is proportional to the square of their height.³³ Thus, if one knows one's height, one can determine how much one *should weigh* or vice versa (height from weight). Again, the average is turned into a prescription, not just a common measurement or abstract calculation, but an ideal to which all people should aspire.

Yet most people were not measured against Quetelet's index until much later, partially because scales for people did not become available in public until 1860s (in Germany, 1880s in the US) and in the home until the 1920s and partially because epidemiological concern with the weight of populations did not become popular until the middle of the next century (Schwartz).³⁴ Instead, what Quetelet's work facilitates is a transition from fatness as a marker of inferiority and complicated causality to fatness as a deviation from the average, and therefore ideal, embodiment. Fat was no longer inferior, it was deviant, and deviancy was tied to a host of

³³ It is not completely clear what data Quetelet used to reach this conclusion. Continuing on in the chapter, he reports that took the height and weight of "twelve of the smallest individuals of both sexes, and twelve of the largest, of those who have been submitted to our observations," but he does not specify beyond that (83). The author who popularized the claim that the BMI was based on (male) French and Scottish soldiers, Eric Oliver, book *Fat Politics*, cites Hacking's *The Taming of Chance* to make his claim (Oliver 17). However, when Hacking covers Quetelet's work with the data on Scottish regiments, he states that Quetelet read "a classification of soldiers by regiment, by height, and by chest circumference in inches" with *no mention of weight* (109). Hacking cites Stigler's *The History of Statistics*, but Stigler does not specify which work of Quetelet's he is getting his data from. In *Adolphe Quetelet, Social Physics and the Average Men of Science, 1796-1874*, Kevin Donnelly clarifies that Quetelet first used the concepts of maximum, minimum, and *moyenne* when he worked with "height and weight data from Brussels and Paris" in his 1831 *Recherches sur la loi de la croissance de l'homme* and first presented his paper entitled "Recherches sur le poids de l'homme aux différens âges," which contained his adult height-weight formula, to the Académie royale in 1832 (also cited by Vigarello, p. 112-113). Donnelly hints that Quetelet built on this data in the 1835 *Treatise*, but asserts that "Quetelet did not claim the full connection between the distribution of sizes and the Gaussian error curve of measurement until his 1844 essay on probabilities" (129). I hope to clarify exactly which data Quetelet used to develop his index (renamed the BMI by Ancel Keys in 1972) in the future with the help of someone who can read nineteenth century French.

³⁴ Vigarello describes other scales and height-weight standards that competed with Quetelet's in the 1800s. For example, both "William Banting and Louis-Alexandre de Saint-Germain offered their own scales beside the scale and weighing apparatus developed by Adolphe Quetelet in 1835" and Louis-Alexandre de Saint-Germain, Adrien Proust, and Albert Mathieu developed alternative ideal height-weight charts based on both medical and aesthetic concerns (Vigarello 143).

additional meanings via the comparison of anthropometric and population data. In other words, deviancy in embodiment became linked to deviancy in character, which becomes a driving force of knowledge production at the end of the nineteenth century, a point I will return to later in this section.

As some groups of scientists and statisticians took up Quetelet's methods, fatness was defined and redefined in other arenas. Within white European men, fatness became profoundly ambivalent, especially as these men could not maintain their own slenderness. As Georges Vigarello explains in *The Metamorphoses of Fat: A History of Obesity*, "there is an undeniable ambivalence, of course, that allows the fat person to sometimes be both seductive and repulsive. A double judgment exists in the mythology of the fat person, even a contradiction that is hardly explicit. It takes popular vivacity and a coating of fat that is not hanging heavily" (119). In other words, because fatness could not be eliminated, shifting boundaries were placed around acceptable fatness. The same French food writer Jean Anthelme Brillat-Savarin who said that "savages will eat gluttonously and drink themselves insensible when ever they have the chance to" also proposed that "what *les sauvages* did out of sheer appetite was in the 'civilized' world conducted in the rarefied circles of fine dining and connoisseurship" (Gilman 160; Forth, *Fat* 219). Brillat-Savarin found a loophole for his fatness and that of his peers by arguing that "male elites might still tolerate corpulence as a happy indication of their status. 'Savages' might devour their food like animals – after all, both of them 'feed' (*se repaissent*) rather than 'eat' (*mange*) – but only the civilized have the means and discernment allowing them to eat well and grow fat" (Forth, *Fat* 219). Along with the "civilized" man, the plump fat man – who was fat to an acceptable degree – was also tolerated, especially when fatness meant a return to health from emaciatedness. As David Hutson elaborates in "Plump or Corpulent? Lean or Gaunt? Historical

Categories of Bodily Health in Nineteenth-Century Thought,” becoming plump could give one a youthful appearance, indicate that an herbal treatment had cured sickness, or function as a safeguard against “wasting away from illness” (Hutson 291). Plump or fat men were also sometimes accepted as “bon vivants” or the “jolly good men” in popular culture; Forth quotes minister Henry Giles as saying ““There is something cordial in a fat man, everybody likes him, and he likes everybody. Food does a fat man good; it clings to him; it fructifies upon him; he swells nobly out, and fills a generous space in life”” (220). When bourgeois European men could not stay thin, they found ways to exempt their fatness from the scrutiny it would face in others. They did not necessarily make their bodies acceptable, but at least reduced some of the dissonance inherent in their inability to stay thin.

However, when fatness became in any way associated with non-whiteness, even in white men, it was again rejected as a sign of inferiority. During England’s occupation of India, colonizers encountered corpulence in “upper-caste Hindus” which “frequently generated comments from travellers, ethnographers and physicians” (Forth, *Fat* 211). Although there were high rates of malnutrition in many parts of India during this time, fatness was still associated with Indian people through the idea that “what was considered desirable for elites necessarily fired the passions of everyone else. If high-caste Indians deliberately became corpulent, it stood to reason that fatness must be considered a very positive thing among the populace as a whole. Ordinary people, it was assumed, must also harbour a desire to become fat, but simply cannot do so under their current impoverished conditions” (*Fat* 213). This assumption let British people associate India with fatness and primitivity, but also created problems for them when their colonial forces would spend time in India and return to England “fat and bloated” (*Fat* 224). Although British colonizers tried to “elevate” Indian soldiers to their own standards of muscular

masculinity through diet and exercise, they failed to follow their own regimes. As Forth concludes, “the fat colonial Briton had become such a stock figure that when Joshua Duke revised his weight-loss book in 1885, he had to account for this troubling situation...what had once been pitched to the native population was now primarily directed to the fat colonizers themselves” (*Fat* 225). Thus, while “plump” white men in Europe found ways to justify their weight, not all white male fatness was acceptable.³⁵

The association of fatness with primitivity was changed and fortified by the ascent of evolutionary theory in the 1860s after the publication of Darwin’s *On the Origin of Species* in 1859 and Herbert Spencer’s *Illustrations of Universal Progress* in 1889. Evolutionary thinking, combined with concepts of normal and abnormal, opened up questions of where fatness came from, whether it was inherent to less evolutionarily developed peoples, and whether or not it was destined for extinction. The answer to these questions, it seemed, was that fatness came from primitive desires, was therefore an indicator of evolutionary immaturity, and would disappear, provided all people became civilized, either through selective breeding or extinction. As Robert Verity, a British physician, explained it, “the march of civilization would eventually improve ‘the proportion and quality of the constituent structures of which the human body is composed’ and ‘transform the gross succulent body of the peasant-woman to the fine-grained nervous tissue

³⁵ The relationship between empire and fatness was also ambivalent. For instance, 1880s feminist Anna Kingsford supported the British empire’s colonial efforts by claiming that “almost all active, inventive, and conquering races are of lean habit, while inert and meditative nations exhibit a tendency to obesity” (Forth, *Fat* 221). Meanwhile, another critic “likened the expansion of British influence to a body that, much like the empires of old, had ‘grown great, or rather unnaturally bloated from commerce, and then...sunk beneath their unwieldy corpulence’ (*Fat* 222). Here fat takes on contradictory meaning with respect to empire, simultaneously providing justification for colonizing fat others while serving as a metaphor for domestic greed. Moreover, while British men worried that exposure to non-Western cultures could have a “deleterious effect on the white male body,” an anxiety that fit well with “more widespread anxieties about degeneration that circulated at the end of the nineteenth century,” they also recognized that they were mostly unique in their disdain for fatness, and that “in more than half the world it commands respect, for beyond the energetic limits of Europe physical exercise after the age of manhood is considered one of the disagreeable accidents of poverty, the fate of the necessitous (Forth, “Fat, Desire and Disgust in the Colonial Imagination” 216). Although it is certainly possible to reconcile these diverse views, their diversity shows that fat did not have a single, weight-dependent meaning during this period.

of the high-bred lady” (Forth, *Fat* 226). Evolutionary logic changed conceptions of fatness from primitive to a property of the past, a vestigial holdover from previous eras that could be targeted for elimination via strategic reproductive practices, a point I will return to momentarily.

This evolutionary perspective on fatness also received support from the late nineteenth century archaeological discovery of “Palaeolithic [*sic*] figurines depicting rotund women, which were often dubbed ‘Venuses’ with the same sarcasm heaped upon Saartjie Baartman decades earlier” (Forth, *Fat* 232). When French archaeologist Édouard Piette found “figurines with slender bodies and flat stomachs” along with the rotund figurines, he “speculated on the existence of ‘two human races’ during the Palaeolithic era, one fat and hairy and the other thin and hairless, who hated one another,” eventually writing about “a gradual transition from an ‘old fat-hipped race’ to a modest and slender one that was ‘more civilized than the other’ and which ended up conquering it” (*Fat* 234). From this, Forth writes:

He concluded that his discoveries confirmed the suspicion of anthropologists that female Bushmen (whose physiques supposedly resembled those of the figurines) were in fact the ‘oldest known race’ whose ‘fatty protuberances’ evoke ‘the most ancient appearance of humans in our regions.’ Most telling was the fact that such ‘fatty races [*les races adipeuses*] are everywhere on the path to extinction, despite the taste of the Negroes and even the Berbers for opulent forms.’ From an evolutionary perspective, extinction was thus one way of removing excess fat from the world (*Fat* 234).

The claim that humans evolved from fat to thin and that thin people were more evolutionarily advanced than fat people was also defended by paleontologist Marcel de Serres.³⁶ His archeological work led him to claim that civilization “appears to consist in diminishing the capacity of the abdomen,” or, in other words, that the thinner the group, the more advanced they

³⁶ As Forth explains, the discovery of the now-famous Venus of Willendorf in 1908 cemented the idea of a cultural evolution from fatness to thinness as well as “the contrast between ‘perverse’ primitive desire and the refinements of European aesthetic judgment” (Forth, “Fat, Desire and Disgust in the Colonial Imagination” 233). The paleolithic figures became the foil for the increasingly thin ideal woman of modern civilization.

were (*Fat* 221). This assertion echoed a larger trend from the late 1800s, a broad intellectual shift away from glorifying Quetelet's average-ideal and toward a concern for *improving* the average.

By the latter decades of the 1800s, the average had lost its normative power through claims that it did not represent the ideal, but the *mediocre*. Scholars who had taken up Quetelet's statistical methods used them to ends beyond his original vision in the new science of eugenics, which Sekula defines as "a program of social betterment through breeding" (42).³⁷ The most notable figure in this movement, Francis Galton, combined anthropometrics and population quantification with evolutionary and genetic theories about heritability and fitness to produce prescriptions for improving populations for various traits, such as intelligence. As Hacking describes, "Galton stands for improving averages, by whatever standards of value can be taken for granted. When it is a matter of living beings, that translates into eugenics. There we first focus on the Queteletian mean and then surpass it" (*The Taming of Chance* 169). With the publication of his texts *Hereditary Genius* in 1869 and *Inquiries into Human Faculty and Its Development* in 1883, Galton's ideas spread far and wide, transforming scholarship, record keeping, and state policy across Europe, various European colonies, and the United States.³⁸

³⁷ In *Enforcing Normalcy: Disability, Deafness and the Body*, Lennard Davis argues that the development of statistics led almost inevitably to the rise of eugenics: "Almost all the early statisticians had one thing in common: they were eugenicists... While this coincidence seems almost too striking to be true, we must remember that there is a real connection between figuring out the statistical measure of humans and then hoping to improve humans so that deviations from the norm diminish... Statistics is bound up with eugenics because the central insight of statistics is the idea that a population can be normed. An important consequence of the idea of the norm is that it divides the total population into standard and nonstandard subpopulations. The next step in conceived of the population as norm and non-norm is for the state to attempt to norm the nonstandard – the aim of eugenics" (Davis 30).

³⁸ Arguably, fat played a role in Galton's fame as well as his thinking about primitivity. In his 1852 book *Narrative of an Explorer in Tropical South Africa*, he reports on encounters with the multiple fat Khoikhoi people, including "Nagoro, the king of the Ovampo," described by another explorer on the mission as larger than a wagon, and the wife of a sub-interpreter, whom he describes as a "charming person, not only a Hottentot in figure, but in that respect a Venus among Hottentots" (Gilman 164–65). Galton spends a considerable number of words describing his desire to record and measure this woman, writing that he "was perfectly aghast at her development, and... was exceedingly anxious to obtain accurate measurements of her shape" but that he could not measure her using his typical methods. Instead, he uses his sextant from a distance: "I took a series of observations upon her figure in every direction, up and down, crossways, diagonally, and so forth, and I registered them carefully upon an outline drawing for fear of any mistake; this being done, I boldly pulled out my measuring tape, and having thus obtained both base and angles, I worked out the results by trigonometry and logarithms" (165–66).

Different groups pursued eugenic ends with different methods. As Stephen Jay Gould explains in *The Mismeasure of Man*, during the late 1800s, “evolution and quantification formed an unholy alliance,” using “copious numbers” to defend a newly scientific theory of racism (106). In one branch of this alliance, Galton, French anatomist Paul Broca, and others used phrenology and craniometry – measuring the skull and its contents – to study intelligence and individual propensities.³⁹ In another, Cesare Lombroso and other Italian scholars used criminal anthropology to link physical features to “innate criminality” (152). Starting in 1870, Lombroso looked for anatomical differences between criminals and “insane” men, finding a correlation between the shape and size of facial features and criminal tendencies. He used these differences to claim that not only that crime was hereditary, but that “criminals are evolutionary throwbacks in our midst.” Gould summarizes Lombroso’s theory:

Germs of an ancestral past lie dormant in our heredity. In some unfortunate individuals, the past comes to life again. These people are innately driven to act as a normal ape or savage would, but such behavior is deemed criminal in our civilized society. Fortunately, we may identify born criminals because they bear anatomical signs of their apishness. Their atavism is both physical and mental, but the physical signs, or stigmata as Lombroso called them, are decisive. Criminal *behavior* can also arise in normal men, but we know the “born criminal” by his anatomy. Anatomy, indeed, is destiny, and born criminals cannot escape their inherited taint (153, original emphasis).

Lombroso’s work began with attempts to link physical features in men to evolutionarily backward, inevitable, and primitive behaviors. As he continued, however, his work expanded to other people and other parts of the body.

³⁹ Interestingly, as Gould points out, Broca measured many parts of the body in search of “meaningful” characteristics – in other words, characteristics that would let him produce a ranking of types of people. For example, he tried “the ratio of radius (lower arm bone) to humerus (upper arm bone), reasoning that a higher ratio marks a longer forearm—a character of apes,” but failed to get the comparative results he wanted across groups, finding that “whites ranked lower than several dark-skinned groups” (109). Thus, he abandoned the project, and turned to skulls instead.

In 1893, Lombroso published *Criminal Woman* (in Italian, translated to English in 1895 as *The Female Offender*), a text in which he “categorized hair texture and color, jaw shape, eye formation, breast size and shape, and the contours of the vulva, ear lobes, and thighs, comparing those of “criminal” women to those of normal women” (Farrell 67). From these comparisons, as Amy Erdman Farrell explains in *Fat Shame*, he argued that “criminal women were shorter and fatter” than normal women. Farrell continues:

While his comments here refer to both prostitutes and murderers, most of his findings regarding weight and women’s criminality focused on prostitutes. “Prostitutes’ greater weight is confirmed by the notorious obesity of those who grow old in their unfortunate trade and gradually become positive monsters of fatty tissue,” he wrote. Even before they become the “positive monsters of fatty tissue,” their “thighs, too, are bigger than normal women’s,” he argued (67).

In his criminal anthropology work, Lombroso gave the link between fatness, primitivity, and atavism new quantitative and evolutionary grounding. Much like Piette used the discovery of the Venus of Brassempouy to claim an evolutionary connection between fatness, blackness, and primitivity, Lombroso used the “atavistic” fatness of “Hottentot, African and Abyssinian women” (documented in travel accounts) to link fat European women to primitivity and inherent unfitness for civilized society (Forth, *Fat* 231). Through his efforts, fatness in European women became both evidence and justification for social demotion and exclusion.

Lombroso’s focus on women was a hallmark of both eugenic scholarship and middle-class society in late nineteenth century Western Europe and America. While men were the occasional targets of concerns over racial degeneration, after the rise of eugenics, the role of women in upkeeping the race became an object of extreme scrutiny. According to Shawn Michelle Smith in “Baby’s Picture is Always Treasured”: Eugenics and the Reproduction of Whiteness in the Family Photograph Album,” white American women were portrayed as the “the biological reproducers of whiteness,” making their health – and by extension, their weight – of

the utmost concern (203). Moreover, white women were expected to balance their reproductive duties with aesthetic ones, maintaining a figure that both pleased men *and* functioned as a sign of their social status. As Strings elaborates, the rise of ladies' magazines, especially in the US, helped perpetuate this narrative by providing a platform on which to distribute information about appropriate weight, bodily proportions and dress: "the power of the slender aesthetic as an American beauty ideal lay in its repetition" and women's magazines – including Godey's Lady's Book, Harper's Bazar (then with only one a), and Cosmopolitan – repeated "an ideal rooted in the multiple and colliding factors of Protestant asceticism, scientific racism, and the proto-science of health and beauty (*Fearing the Black Body* 139). Fat gained multiple meanings through this emphasis, and its boundaries were again muddled.

When women's bodies were judged by their perceived fertility or readiness for childbearing, neither thinness nor plumpness was universally valued. Fatness beyond a particular threshold, however, was still considered a degraded, primitive embodiment. For instance, John Harvey Kellogg, one of the American physician/eugenicists responsible for popularizing temperance in food and drink after the Second Great Awakening, led a campaign against "young, scrawny, Anglo-Saxon women" whom he accused of taking "the fashion of slimness too far" and "threatening the future of the nation" (Strings, *Fearing the Black Body* 175). They needed, he claimed, a "massive overhaul" of their "diet and physiques" in order to not compromise "the future of white America" with their "illness" (179). This attitude continued well into the 1920s, as "mostly male doctors saw themselves as fighting the uphill battle of the too-slight, empty-wombed woman that fashion had wrought" (184). Yet while Kellogg and his contemporaries condemned slimness as a cause of infertility, doctors in other branches of medicine blamed fatness for the same problem. In 1897, Dr. John Gaff, published "Obesity as a Cause of Sterility"

in the *Journal of the American Medical Association (JAMA)*. In it, he claimed that in general, “obesity was the only probable cause of infertility,” and that fat women were offensive not only for their reproductive failures, but also for their appearance (193). Thus, fatness, up to a certain point, alternately represented both ill health *and* good health.

For American women, fatness could also signify a body’s alignment with or betrayal against the nation. Overly thin or overly fat women were failing their duty to uphold both the superiority of their race and of their country. Their bodies had to be tightly regulated so that other could be compared and deemed inferior to them. Strings quotes a Harper’s Bazar writer to this effect:

By the time of his writing in 1877, a healthy, sleek figure was being cultivated in America. The “scrawny sallow peaked woman” of the past was disappearing. The new woman would be “comelier and rounder.” Nevertheless, these new American women were “not likely to become gross and obese, as so many of their European sisters,” but would instead aim for a vigorous leanness, and not a Byronic, peaked sickliness (referring to the gaunt British Romantic poet, Lord Byron) (141).

In this quote, “comely” American women were responsible for being superior to “gross and obese” European women to show the US’s exceptionalism, but they were also responsible for being “healthy” and “sleek” enough to reproduce their race and ensure the nation’s future dominance. As a result, fatness maintained a negative connotation regardless of whether it was contrasted with slenderness *or* plumpness. Clearly, although a degree of “roundness” was acceptable, fatness and proper white, American civility were mutually exclusive.⁴⁰

⁴⁰ Although I have spoken about a specifically American context here, in Europe, women’s bodies were also expected to be “balanced” between fatness and thinness. For example, Brillat-Savarin, the French man who claimed that fat European men were civilized, did not extend the same generosity to women. According to Forth, “for Brillat and many others the imperatives of female beauty demanded that one maintain ‘*une juste portion d'embonpoint, ni trop ni peu*’ (exactly plump enough, not too much nor too little)” (Forth, “Fat, Desire and Disgust in the Colonial Imagination” 227).

This mutual exclusivity caused problems for white Americans who could not stay thin. Viewing fatness through the lens of eugenics thus raised questions around whether or not fatness was heritable, whether it was caused by “nature” or by “nurture” (a phrase first used by Francis Galton himself (Gilman 122)), and whether white people who tended to become fat were somehow “hybrid” or “impure” Anglo-Saxon. In the US, Galton’s ideas were taken up and widely propagated by Charles Davenport, who founded the Eugenics Records Office at Cold Spring Harbor Laboratory in 1910. Davenport, Strings reports, was deeply concerned with the relationship between stature and race, claiming that “obesity was a vile condition to be avoided” and that obesity was “racially inherited” (*Fearing the Black Body* 158). In his 1923 book *Body Build and Its Inheritance*, Davenport distinguishes between the slim build of “Nordic” types and the fatness of “southern and eastern Europeans,” echoing the Protestant anti-Irish/Celtic sentiments of the previous century but drawing new boundaries around which kinds of white people were superior. Eschewing “nurture,” or the influence of diet and exercise on body type/weight, he concluded that “the fact that the body reacts to food and climate must not blind us to the constitutional factors that are probably present in racial obesity” (Strings, *Fearing the Black Body* 159). In other words, for one of American’s most prominent eugenicists, fatness was an issue of “nature” for some races, while an issue of “nurture” for others.

This eugenic view of fatness was reinforced by the concurrent emergence of marital advice for white people. As Forth explains, “Some proponents of eugenics saw fatness as a largely hereditary defect...and, for the good of the race, discouraged marrying fat people without first checking their family history” (Forth, *Fat* 262–63). Moreover, these proponents, such as Dr. W.J. Robinson in his 1916 essay “Who May and May Not Marry” in the *American Journal of Clinical Medicine*, recommended that “those who did choose to marry the fat should make sure

they were themselves slender, with the idea that corpulence would eventually be bred away” (*Fat* 263). This advice is the culmination of the eugenic thought style about fatness: whereas fatness starts in the 1800s as something deviant, by the early 1900s, it becomes something *eliminable*, either through the gradual extinction of the races predisposed to fatness⁴¹ or the careful and deliberate breeding of white people who carry this unfortunate trait (See George A. Bray, “The Inheritance of Corpulence” for more detail on this reproductive strategy)

By the beginning of the 1900s, a new thought style about fatness was beginning to dominate scientific, medical, and public thought about weight and size, but the logic of the eugenics era did not disappear. Instead, as Fleck’s theory explains, it was transformed and absorbed into its successor thought styles, influencing future research questions and approaches. One need only look at the 1990s fervor over the discovery of an “obesity gene” to see that the desire to eliminate fatness in the interest of human “progress” has not left us (Gilman 117–18; LeBesco 69). Rather, it has been adapted to work in harmony with new technologies and understandings of heredity and the body.

From the mid-1800s to the early 1900s, fatness held many meanings and was explained in myriad ways. While Quetelet worked in Belgium to quantify weight and determine average and ideal men, Protestants in the U.S. used the temperance movement to associate fatness with a lack of discipline and religious commitment. Rich, white men in England declared their round stomachs evidence of civility, while claiming the same shape on a non-white person was indicative of incivility. The emergence of evolutionary theory changed conceptions and

⁴¹ As Strings explains, American doctors during this period assumed that because Black people were “constitutionally inferior,” they were “doomed to die off” (Strings, *Fearing the Black Body* 179). Thus, “whereas racial scientific literature in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries had made much of the physical and temperamental inferiority of black people, especially as it pertained to their presumed inability to control their base animal instincts, the eugenicists of the turn of the twentieth century devoted considerably less attention to them.” (See Braun 41–42; Gould 69 for more on this theory.)

explanations of race, size, and body shape, strengthening existing hierarchies in colonial race science and linking fatness not only to primitivity, but prehistory. The emergence of eugenics changed the meanings of fatness as women's bodies became the site of race reproduction in the US and signifiers of criminal tendencies in Italy. Whether fatness was contrasted with the average, the ideal, the slender, or the properly plump, it was nevertheless used as a foil to propriety, civility, and vitality. As a floating signifier, it served to degrade those attached to it, pushing them to the edges of society or relegating them to a soon-to-be-overcome past.

Conclusion

The myriad meanings of fatness that I have described in this exam were partially absorbed into and partially subsumed by the thought style that emerged around the turn of the twentieth century: the medicalization of fatness. During the final decades of the 1800s and first decades of the 1900s, many factors coalesced into a thought style that is more familiar to anyone who has interacted with the Global North's medical-industrial complex, wherein fatness is treated as a pathology.⁴² Some of these factors include: the development and distribution of scales, first in public and then in the home; the invention of the calorie and the rise of nutrition and metabolic science; the invention and rapid spread of weight-loss dieting;⁴³ the professionalization and specialization of doctors, which led to the emergence of obesity science; the spread of the life insurance industry, whose actuaries began correlating higher weight with shorter lifespans; the emergence of psychoanalysis as a new mode of explaining undesirable appearance; the development of film and its ability to spread bodily ideals farther and more

⁴² I am not alone in claiming that this thought style is more familiar to a current reader than previous styles. For instance, Vigarello argues that "the body of the 1920s is quite simply the herald of today's body" (166).

⁴³ The first popular weight loss diet was developed by a British undertaker named William Banting, whose 1863 pamphlet *A Letter on Corpulence* was read widely and reproduced in multiple languages. It was so popular that dieting for weight loss became known as "banting" and those who dieted followers of *Bantingism* (See Gilman 61–66; Huff for more on Banting).

clearly than prior media; the increasing popularity of sports and athleticism; the rise of Taylorism and expanding economic thinking and utilitarian logic to bodies and consumption; and the increased monitoring of children's bodies via the public education system (see Vertinsky for more detail on these latter factors). All of these factors gave new, and more standardized, meanings to fatness, although they still did not settle the boundaries between fat and thin, nor pin down the causality of fatness. Further elaboration on these points are presently beyond the scope of this exam, but I plan to return to them at a future date.

What I have shown in this exam are some of the many diverse meanings of fatness prior to the one that is most commonsensical today, that is, fatness as a disease state. My interest in doing so stems from a desire to profoundly denaturalize what most in the medical-industrial complex take for granted, that fatness is bad because it is a sign of ill health and/or gluttony. What this exam begins to show is that fatness was condemned and degraded long before it was associated with any health state, and that this condemnation interlocked with other forms of oppression and hierarchizing kinds of people. The way fatness is currently treated cannot be divorced from the ways it was used to promote and defend racism, sexism, and colonialism or the eugenic quest to eliminate fat people.

A fat liberation standpoint, drawing on feminist standpoint theory, is an essential methodological and epistemological tool for generating new histories of fatness that do not anachronistically apply present understandings to previous times and places. A commitment to fat liberation exposes the power inherent in "fat" as a classification and enables inquiries into how "fat's" categorical power has been historically assigned and maintained, whom it has benefitted, and at what cost. This is profoundly different than projects that look to history to answer the question of whether the obesity epidemic is "real" or not as well as those that look to

rehabilitate fatness by pointing out how it was previously “valued.” A fat liberation standpoint yields knowledge that is “potent for constructing worlds less organized by axes of domination” (Haraway 585). Understanding fat as a floating signifier – as a tool for hierarchizing kinds of people – rather than a “natural” category, is one step towards constructing those worlds.

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