Historicizing Fat in Anglo-american Culture

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introduction

CHANGING CONCEPTIONS
OF THE FAT BODY
IN WESTERN HISTORY

• ELENA LEVY-NAVARRO •

Even as critical fat studies is emerging as an academic area of study, fat remains a relatively underexamined category. The reasons for this oversight are no doubt complex, involving both the broader cultural milieu of the English-speaking West as well as the aesthetic and political investments of individual academics. Some might consider fat a marginal identity category that is reclaimed only by a few on the radical fringe. Having no interest group worthy of note, fat is not a category worthy of critique, such academics might assume. Others might mistakenly consider fat a natural category that is merely descriptive and thus not to be considered with a critical eye. Others perhaps are simply too invested in the norm of thinness and the contemporary views of health to be able to interrogate the operations of power therein. For those academics who share the broader cultural obsession with dieting, it will be difficult to consider the artificiality of a category that to them can only be an undesirable, if not pathological, condition.

Still others might find the category of fat too ideologically useful. Its multiple associations and underlying cultural logic can be used to support a variety of arguments. Because of this, they are unable to underscore the artificiality of fat as a category or to see how it is often used to reinforce other inequalities of power. Recently, a cultural critic evoked the specter of “obesity,” with all the attendant moralized assumptions, in order to describe the abject plight of the working class and poor. Her argument draws on per-
vasive cultural assumptions that have come to be attached to the fat body: namely, that the fat person is a victim of her appetites and that she is the very embodiment of “death.” Even as she examines the artificiality of class relations, the category of obesity is taken as a transhistorical, natural category. Such assumptions appeal to certain elite readers, who do, indeed, see the supposed fact of obesity as a sign that the working class and poor are in need of (their) help. What such an analysis misses, however, precisely because it takes the category of obesity as a given, is the way that the category of obesity itself is used to legitimize class inequities. As obesity is seen as the problem of the time, associated especially with the working class and poor, a number of institutions in our bio-health regime institute measures to “help”—that is, police—the bodies and behaviors of the obese. In other words, the category of obesity is used to secure class inequities. This collection engages in historical and cultural analyses in order to prompt the reader to consider how fat as a classification serves to secure power relations.

_Historicizing Fat_ places fat (and related categories like “obesity”) front and center as a category that has a history and thus is in need of more cultural and historical analysis. Indeed, the essays here underscore the extent to which fat becomes an overdetermined category that has played an important role in the development of modernity in the West. The essays collected here demonstrate that fat is involved with a number of the institutional changes that come with modernity itself: the growth of the (British) Empire, the rise of the nation-state, industrialization, the rise of consumer capitalism, to name just a few. It is no accident that our cultural imaginary equates the fat body with the corruption of modernization itself. From at least the eighteenth century, “obesity” was identified by George Cheyne as an “English malady,” where that malady was seen as a sign of an overconsumption equated with modernization itself. If anything, such associations become hardened in the nineteenth century at the period in which such a pathological understanding of fat is intensified. Those who want to critique Britain can make use of such associations to make their point. Thus, caricatures of a bloated John Bull, the personification of Britain, are used to critique various forms of corruptions that are associated with the process of modernization. In one caricature, for example, John Bull’s belly bulges forth in its immensity, his belly partitioned into various British colonies. Such a caricature critiques the British Empire as a form of middle-age bulge that has corrupted and enervated the British nation. The fat is implicitly seen as a newfangled corruption, an extraneous layer that comes with age; Britain can be cured, then, only if he is trimmed down to some earlier and truer condition.
The essays here suggest that the latter part of the nineteenth century especially is a pivotal moment in which the category of fat often functions as a master term that works in conjunction with other definitional nexuses, including those of race, sex, gender, and class. In making this point, these essays encourage others to focus attention on the category of fat. The goal has never been, however, to posit a hierarchical relationship between terms, nor has it been to argue that fat is worthy of consideration only insofar as it works in conjunction with other implicitly more important definitional terms. Neither the category of fat nor the cultural phenomenon of fatphobia should be considered of lesser importance to other definitional terms and oppressions. Indeed, the extent to which these terms often work in concert should make us all more committed to considering their complex historical interdependence. To exclude systematically one term from historical or cultural analysis is to impoverish our ability to understand the intractable nature of various oppressions. The organization of *Historicizing Fat* underscores the extent to which fat has often operated as a master term, securing structural inequities that come into being with modernity especially. *Historicizing Fat* consists of four sections: after the introductory section, “Foundations,” three sections follow, entitled “Fat and Empire,” “Fat, Class, and Culture,” and “Fat and Normativity.”

In their scope and argument, the essays collected here appeal to a broad range of interdisciplinary readers. Critics from a variety of fields would benefit from considering the important role that fat plays in the emergence of the modern subject and the modern, imperialist state. For the present moment, however, I would like to address cultural critics especially because, with the important exception of those in critical fat studies, they have refused to consider fat as a cultural construct. This oversight is perhaps most glaring precisely because so many cultural critics take a constructionist approach to other aspects of materiality, especially those of race, gender, and sex. Indeed, even as cultural critics have heeded the constructionist philosophy articulated by Judith Butler in her 1993 *Bodies That Matter*, they have ignored her injunction that other material phenomena, including what we know as weight, are in need of a critique that would give them a history and historicity. The time has come for this oversight to be rectified and for more people in academia, including those in cultural studies, to turn their attention to fat as a cultural construct. A failure to consider fat has the unfortunate consequences of reinforcing the pervasive contemporary belief that fat is a tranhistorical, universal phenomenon. In leaving the category unexamined, it becomes a means by which other structural inequities can be secured. If
Alex Evans’s essay challenges those in critical fat studies to take class more seriously, it also challenges cultural critics interested in class to take fat more seriously. As he demonstrates, the working class and poor in England and elsewhere in the (late) modern West have been subjugated in part through the deployment of ideological myths about the obese (and obesity).

*Historicizing Fat* is focused on the Anglo-American West, and especially on the broad process of modernization that began in the early modern period and continued into the present. In part, this focus should be seen as reflecting the interests of the authors. Simply put, the authors interested in the topic happened to be those who were interested in the periods from the early modern to the near present in the West. The emphasis is perhaps more than accidental since I take this area of study to be one that would be most immediately of interest to those who are impacted by contemporary politics in the developed world. That is, those of us who are living under the scare of the obesity epidemic might be expected to look for precursors to our own contemporary condition. Why is it that the obesity epidemic can be seen as the “terror within” or is so often seen as dangerous as the threat of terrorism itself? Given this cultural moment, writers might be especially interested in the relationship between fat and the processes of modernization that explain in part our own contemporary condition. This focus on the West, and on the nineteenth century in particular, might be explained precisely because it is this period that gives rise to our own understanding of fat.

Significantly, most of these histories of fat emerged in the post-9/11 United States, with the important exception of the 1986 publication of Hil-lel Schwartz’s *Never Satisfied: A Cultural History of Diets, Fantasies, and Fat*; Peter N. Stearns’s *Fat History* may have been published in 1997, but it was republished with a new preface in 2002. Subsequent years witnessed the publication of several other histories of the fat from Sander L. Gilman’s 2004 *Fat Boys* to the 2004 collection *Cultures of the Abdomen*, edited by Christopher E. Forth and Ana Carden-Coyne, to my own 2008 *The Culture of Obesity in Early and Late Modernity*. *Historicizing Fat* builds upon these histories in focusing on the broader process of modernization that gives rise to our pathological construct, obesity. The collection also suggests areas for further investigation. Anne Brumley’s essay and my essay suggest the need for further considerations of the early modern and premodern periods. An understanding of these periods, whether it is to understand their own fatphobia or to understand how fat does not register in the same way to them, will help expand our own understanding of fat and body size generally. Brumley describes literary traditions that offer a very different understanding of the fat body, including a classical literary tradition that privileges the thin male
Further exploration of our classical and medieval past is needed to understand the multiple ways in which fat and thin bodies have been understood and experienced. Although we cannot predict beforehand what such studies might demonstrate, it is hoped that they will challenge our own modern categories. For the very same reasons, we need more examination of nonwestern understandings of fat/thin bodies.

The politics of the writers are as diverse as the essays themselves, but taken together, they can be seen as interventionist in nature. Certainly, the overall effect of the historical analysis of *Historicizing Fat* is to promote an anti-fatphobic agenda. It does this in part because, in giving a history to modern categories like obesity, it makes it impossible to use such terms as simple neutral descriptions of fact that claim universality and static, transhistorical meaning. Equally importantly, the essays cumulatively offer a more fattened form of historiography that works to undermine a reductive historiography that bolsters contemporary oppressive constructions of fat and thin bodies. Even in our postmodern era, popular understandings of fat and thin depend on a rather narrow, uniquely modern understanding of temporality. For a further discussion of the historical genesis of such temporal associations, see Hil- lel Schwartz’s work, especially “The Three-Body Problem and the End of the World,” as well as my own in-depth discussion of the subject in *The Culture of Obesity.*

As I have discussed in my book, critical fat studies needs to grapple with history because a particular form of history plays a strong regulatory role in making fat a failed identity, mired in an antiquated past, and thin a normative one, placed in an elusive utopian future. The regulatory role that history plays depends on a uniquely modern form of temporality, in which history is assumed to move in a linear fashion from the past to the present to the future. Such temporal moments, furthermore, are assumed to be self-contained and thus sealed off from each other. The logic of this regulatory history pushes us to dis-identify with the past (and with the fat associated with it) and to identify with the glorious future in which our normative identity will be achieved and secured. To be short, the thin body is equated with progress, even as the fat body is seen as an obstacle to that progress. Such a logic is manifest in our popular culture; for example, the Pixar blockbuster, *Wall-E* (2008), imagines a postapocalyptic world in which obesity destroys the human civilization. Relatedly, our dreams of a future in which obesity is eradicated draw on a similar logic.

Popular representations of fat and thin draw on such an implicit historiography because the fat is made to occupy the position of the “before” to the thin “after.” Literalized in the “before” and “after” photographs that accompany diet discourse, such temporal positioning is performed and reperformed
in the daily lives of many people, whether it is the formerly fat person, who keeps her fat jeans to remind her of what she once was, or the person who purchases clothing a size or two too small in the hope that she will soon become this “new me.” Given the role that history plays in privileging the thin and marginalizing the fat, fat histories that seek to deconstruct a fatphobic agenda must necessarily both expose to view the regulatory role that such a form of history plays, even as they offer their own alternative histories. Many of the essays in Historicizing Fat do just that because they offer their histories in terms of present-day needs—aesthetic, erotic, and political. In this, it suggests that fat studies needs to do more, not only to interrogate the popular understanding of history that secures a thin norm, but also to offer alternative histories that fatten the temporal logic that stigmatizes fat people. That is, it must work to refashion and complicate the relationship between the so-called “before” and “after” in order to open up a space for alternative understandings of our lives. This can be done strategically if the subject, especially if she is fat, insists that her needs and desires, political and otherwise, are of central importance. No longer a “before” that resolutely insists that she is invested in achieving an elusive “after” identity, she uses her history to intervene in the present. In this, she offers an alternative relationship to the past and present, where the past continues to inform our lives now.

Two essays in this collection, by Cookie Woolner and Alex Evans, demonstrate one method the critic can use to offer an alternative to this oppressive regulatory form of history. Both of them employ an autobiographical turn that foregrounds their own present-day needs and desires in a way that fattens a form of history that would stigmatize and marginalize the contemporary fat person. After an introduction in which she foregrounds the fatphobia pervasive in contemporary American popular culture, Woolner quips, “This is enough to make a non-self-loathing fat girl want to take a trip back in time, to an era when fat was in fashion, when big blondes were not derided, but often praised and desired.” That is, she offers a “confession,” which places her own desires and needs front and center. Such a confession differs substantially from those that fat people are made to say, again and again. That is, she does not confess that she is abject, or that she desires a thin future; instead, she confesses that she desires a fat past and that such a past can sustain the present. The past can, and should, serve the needs of the present, Woolner implicitly insists, even as those needs are not met in any singular way. Having said this, her confession is playful as well, and her turn to history is not a turn to a utopian past. She, after all, describes the emergence of a fatphobia that
is still pervasive today, even as she describes the voluptuous body of Lillian Russell and the adoration lavished upon it by her often working-class fans. In structure, Woolner’s history refuses to follow the logic that would place the past and present in sequential and linear relationship to each other, as she explores various crosscurrents between the present and the past. That she uses the confession here as a framing device suggests one way that fat histories can work to disrupt a temporal logic that is now used to oppress the fat. That is, in giving voice to her own desires, she fattens a temporal logic that would insist that past is always prelude to the present and that the past must be sealed off neatly from the present.

A personal turn is not the only way that a critic can work to fatten such an oppressive historical logic. Other essays do so by examining the past in relationship to the contemporary moment. Serena Guarracino offers her consideration of the “perverse” body of the fat opera diva by referring to the 2004 controversy over Deborah Voigt’s firing because she would not fit into the little black dress that was deemed integral to the artistic design. Appreciations of the fat body of the opera diva, then, offer an alternative to the present, even as Guarracino also suggests ways in which the appeal of the fat opera diva remains alive and well in opera culture. Zeynep Atayurt offers her new reading of the high-school curricular mainstay Lord of the Flies by discussing the cultural fear of childhood obesity pervasive in contemporary western culture. Greta Rensenbrink and Joyce L. Huff in different ways interrogate the difficulty that comes from building political movements on essentialist constructions. Rensenbrink explores the fissures that developed within the fat feminist community of San Francisco in the 1970s and 1980s when they tried to create community around essentialist understanding of fat. Huff argues that essentialist understandings of fat, as a condition that is genetic in nature, is ineffective as a way to demand fair treatment. Through her reading of Fosco in The Woman in White, Huff argues for a performative understanding of fat, as something that, if performed, can be parodied and reconstructed. My own essay addresses the present-day reader of Shakespeare’s Venus and Adonis, laying bare the way that the critical tradition surrounding it encourages us to place pleasures as secondary to a greater, moral end. All of these histories, then, are self-conscious about the way in which history can be used to offer alternatives to contemporary understandings of fat and thin. By implication, they also insist that the academic must not divorce his or her history from the needs and desires of the present, however understood.
Introduction: Changing Conceptions

MODERNIZATION AND THE EMERGENCE OF THE FAT IDENTITY

Through its historical analyses, *Historicizing Fat* as a whole explores, complicates, and deconstructs fatness as a normative, cultural category. Pat Rogers’s essay that is reprinted here offers the broad theoretical and historical outlines that are developed through more specific historical analyses in the essays that follow. In some ways, Rogers can be said to do for fat what Foucault did for sex in his *History of Sexuality*: that is, give it a history. Rogers offers the outlines of a historical process by which the (fat) identity becomes established. Beginning in the eighteenth century, such a process has its apotheosis in the nineteenth. Initially, fat was taken to be a medical condition, needing to be dealt with only when it impeded the operations of daily life. Gradually, fat comes to be associated with an identity, and reducing, therefore, becomes something that is desirable, regardless of its health implications. The fat person, burdened by an “obese personality,” must strive to reduce and uncover his true self, the thin person within. To lose weight is to transform the essential self into what one wants to be. Such a desire, Rogers rightly explains, is fundamentally modern. Equally modern is the tendency to read body size according to established “corporeal codes” in which “personal identity became lodged in physical shape.”

By the nineteenth century, and especially by the period of the high Victorian novel, such corporeal codes have become ossified to the point that they can be manipulated and parodied. By this period, the fat person was assumed to have an identity that was corrupt, lazy, weak, and overindulgent, as essays here by Nikole King and Joyce Huff demonstrate. Such corporeal codes, furthermore, reinforce and are in turn reinforced by other essentialist understandings of identity that solidify in the period, an area that needs further investigation. As Rogers explains, quasi-scientific theories concerning bodily morphology “would supply a new buttress for traditional sizism.” Such developments reinforced the sense that something important and essential about the individual was known if he was measured, charted, and categorized according to notions about the population at large. Distinctions between endomorphs, ectomorphs, and mesomorphs were all, of course, also related to other essentialist concepts of identity, including those of race. Sander Gilman has recently, for example, shown how fatness as a body type was seen as essential to understanding the nature of the Jewish racial identity. All of these developments suggest the degree to which the nineteenth century gave rise to a view of identity in which body markers were seen to reveal something essential about the person’s character. In that context, body
size and shape take on an increased importance, and the stigmatization that will surround the fat body becomes intensified.

The next three sections of *Historicizing Fat* focus on topics that underscore some of the ways in which fat has been used in the modern West. Section 2, “Fat and Empire,” focuses on how an anxiety over the state of the British Empire manifested itself in the anxiety over the supposed fattening of its primarily male citizens. Here, we might notice that the preoccupation with fat has from its very inception been intertwined with fears about the enervation of the male soldier. As I discussed in my book, such a fear can be traced back to post-Reformation England, in which the godly English feared that only a thin and muscular godly citizenry could save their state from a Catholic invasion. To speak of even more recent history, the obsession with an obesity epidemic seems to have always been intimately related to fears over what we might call national security. Scholars interested in the establishment of a norm in terms of gender and race have not appreciated the extent to which this type of thinking came into being through statistics directed at body size and shape. Adolphe Quetelet’s understanding of the “average man” comes from statistical thinking applied to the heights and weights of the Belgian military. The concept of the norm was, then, initially intertwined with body size, which, in turn, was evaluated in terms of suitability for the military. Thus, those who are “overweight,” that is over the weight of the average man, are from the beginning imagined to be weak in terms of the nation and its military. No wonder, then, that the same period in which such statistical thinking emerges, we also find fatness used as a sign of the weakness of the nation-state.

Zeynep Atayurt offers a fascinating new reading of *Lord of the Flies* in terms of just such thinking. Precisely because the novel has been read in essentialist terms, where Piggy is a character defined by his identity as fat, critics have failed to see the extent to which it critiques the fatphobia of postwar England. A man who had witnessed the horrors of war firsthand, William Golding, Atayurt argues, saw how militarism was promoted through the anti-fat discourse of the postwar period. England was concerned to remain strong, and as such, there was a pervasive fear that obesity, always already imagined as rising, would weaken the nation. Atayurt, then, encourages us to read the novel through just such a cultural context, even as she offers an important new reading of the text itself. The brutality of the cadre of lean, muscular boys comes from their socially learned hatred. They bring onto the island the hatred of the fat, even as they learn that such hatred can be used to consolidate power. Much of their power, like the power of other fascistic groups, comes from the glamour and privilege attached to the lean, muscu-
lar body. Atayurt’s point is not that thin bodies should now be marked and stigmatized, as fat bodies are, but rather that Golding is criticizing the mechanisms of power attached to body size in postwar Britain. Given that this novel is a mainstay of the secondary curriculum around the English-speaking world and given that much of this world is obsessed with the “pandemic of (childhood) obesity,” her reading offers a powerful commentary on our own present cultural obsessions.

Nikole King underscores the anxieties that circulated around the male body in the late nineteenth century in her discussion of H. G. Wells and his story, “The Truth about Pyecraft.” At the end of the Victorian period, King argues, there arose an intensified interest in the body size of British men. Only the male body that matched an elusive bodily norm, in which it was neither too fat nor too thin, could ensure the strength of Britain and the British Empire. As such, the male body was increasingly seen as something that needed to be monitored and policed. Born into a middle-class family, Wells was intensely aware of the need to police and discipline his own body. Having internalized the masculine ideals of his day, he expressed anxiety both with the overly thin and enervated body of his youth and the overly fat and enervated body of his middle-age. The story, “The Truth about Pyecraft” explores the dynamics of surveillance required to make the Englishman’s body conform to this precarious norm, even as it ultimately underscores the impossibility of doing so. Both the fat character of Pyecraft and the thin character of Formalyn prove unable to live up to the norm for masculine body size. Pyecraft’s efforts to lose weight fail to yield the desired results, and in fact, render his body more perverse than before. Equally importantly, the type of surveillance needed to discipline the male body is ultimately exposed as dangerous in itself, as the gaze of Formalyn on Pyecraft takes on a decidedly homoerotic dimension.

Joyce Huff uses the 1859 Wilkie Collins novel, *The Woman in White*, to explore the basis on which the rights of the fat can be articulated. In particular, she argues against a predominant tactic now used, in which the rights of the group are asserted through an abjectly essentialist argument (“we were born that way”). In the Victorian period, Huff argues, efforts to argue that obesity was genetic did not result in a more permissive attitude toward the fat, but rather in a less permissive one. Huff’s reading of Fosco in *The Woman in White* suggests that a turn toward performativity can be used to parody and finally overturn essentialist identities, including that which circulates around fat. Fosco performs a fat drag, which subverts the supposedly natural and given relationship between outside or artificial and inside or authentic. Fosco can play with our automatic assumptions in order to
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manipulate us, and, in so doing, he can reperform the fat identity in a manner that calls into question the cultural associations between fatness and laziness, fatness and overindulgence, and fatness and a lack of control. Fosco proves to be quite in control as he draws on such assumptions in order to execute his will over his interlocutor. Huff’s exploration offers a new way of understanding the nineteenth-century construction of fat, but it also offers a model for fat activists of other ways to intervene in our current historical moment.

The essays in section 3 all consider the complex and changing relationship between fat and class. This section helps to rectify the general oversight of fat studies to consider class. As Evans explains, fat studies (with important exceptions) has tended to be more informed by feminism and gender studies and as such has focused more on the interrelationship between body size and gender or sex. Anne Brumley glances at class in her own essay, which considers two traditions that informed the understanding of the fat and thin body in the early modern period. For our purposes, her essay interestingly demonstrates that there is a long tradition of associating fatness with the lower classes. Jonson himself, perhaps unwittingly, helped to establish a neoclassical tradition that was taken to privilege the thin male body, best exemplified by the body of James I’s favorite, George Villiers, the Duke of Buckingham. In its cruder form, such a tradition would come back to haunt Jonson, when it was later used against him. Having grown quite fat in his middle years, the fact of his fatness was used to insist that he should more appropriately be a bricklayer than a poet. In his final collection of poetry, the posthumously published *The Underwood*, Jonson struck back by drawing on multiple traditions to understand his body in a more capacious (and favorable) fashion. Much like Huff’s Fosco, Brumley’s Jonson is a figure who can performatively reimagine multiple ways in which the fat (and thin) body can be understood. Jonson’s writing offers an alternative understanding of the body, and especially the body of the poet, to those that would emerge in the course of the Romantic period in particular. Jonson offered in part a model of a fat poet, whose fatness is a sign of his wisdom, that challenges the assumption that the poet must be lean and even consumptive.

Cookie Woolner’s essay is centered on changes in American popular culture, especially theatrical traditions, at the turn of the twentieth century. Lilian Russell’s voluptuous body was at the center of aesthetic changes in the period, and in its excess of appetite and consumption, it was at the center of the ambivalent attitude toward consumption. Until the beginning of the twentieth century, the American excess epitomized by her excessive appetite and voluptuous body was admired by many, if not most, Americans. Stories about Russell’s excess, especially stories about her eating contests with
Diamond Jim Brady, were immensely popular because they epitomized the desirable excess of the period. The working-class and immigrant fan could well admire an excess that they hoped to achieve in the turn of the century. Gradually, such excesses were viewed with suspicion, and reviewers and others began to criticize her for her excess, including her excess fat, in the early twentieth century. The now diminished Russell is perhaps exemplified by the Lillian Russell of her advice column, in which she recommended reducing to her female readers as a way to make their bodies conform to the contemporary fashion. Woolner’s analysis, however, also suggests that such a tradition remains alive and well, even in a somewhat diminished form, among those who appreciate the trashy excesses of Anna Nicole Smith. In part, her analysis suggests a need to consider tastes that go beyond those of the dominant and mainstream culture. A consideration of the tastes of the working class, the poor, the immigrant, and the nonwhite is likely to reveal more expansive understanding of body size.

Many of us do not often see how the thin body gets privilege precisely because in our culture the thin body is the unmarked one. We often assume that it is thin and healthy, the one adjective leading inevitably to the other. In the same way, we assume that the thin and healthy (male) body is the elite one because it deserves it. The thin person, after all, has risen to his status because he has shown exemplary control. Alex Evans in his essay exposes to view this mechanism of power, as he examines the way that fatphobic stereotypes have been deployed against the working class and immigrant population in Tony Blair’s England. The Third Way of New Labor, after all, differentiated itself from Old Labor because it had trimmed the fat. Now, it is assumed, all bodies could rise autogenically to the class they deserve, or sink to the class they deserve, if they exhibited the self-control emblazoned by weight-loss. Because such an ideology places all emphasis on personal responsibility, the broader social conditions that lead to poverty remain unexamined. Evans proposes that we intervene in this vicious way fatphobic stereotypes are used against the working class and poor to insist that they are to blame for their economic circumstances by employing strategically thinphobic stereotypes against the professional elite that are currently privileged. Such stereotypes would have the effect of rendering visible now the operations of power that are invisible. At the same time, the thin body of the professional elite is allowed to retain its virtue to the extent to which it is unmarked and eludes critique. The strategic deployment of such anti-thin stereotypes would have the effect of making us consider elite appetites, consumption, and privilege.

The final section, “Fat and Normativity,” considers the relationship of normativity to body size. Much more research remains to be done on this
subject, but I would say here that the fat body came to be seen as the non-normative body at precisely the time that a certain type of statistical thinking came to predominate. Adolphe Quetelet famously established the “average man” against which others are measured, where the “average” takes on a regulatory and moralized function. Modern understandings of fat are especially indebted to such thinking. In discussions of normativity, especially in queer studies, it is not often considered that the very first use of such statistical mapping was applied to body size and especially to weight. Indeed, in contemporary western culture, categories such as obesity, morbid obesity, and overweight depend on a statistical reading of the population and often on a statistical reading of the population that takes the “average” from a period sometime before the present. (One must ask, for example, how 60 percent of the U.S. population can be “overweight” if the designation depends on the average of the population.) The essays in this section do not necessarily consider the rise of such statistical thinking, but they do consider a normative understanding of body size. At the same time, Guarracino’s essay and my essay consider the way that the fat body has the potential to disrupt such a normalizing logic precisely because the fat body is seen as perversely defying the norm.

My own essay surveys and seeks to disrupt a critical tradition that emerged around Shakespeare’s narrative poem, *Venus and Adonis*. Often read today as a poem that is anormative regarding the category of sex, I read the poem as anormative regarding body size. The body of Venus had come to be seen in the course of the nineteenth century to be big, outrageous, and voluptuous. Its nudity was taken to be a synecdoche for the outrageousness of the poem. Such a tradition culminated in the twentieth century when professional male literary critics denounced the poem as unsuccessful because Venus as a middle-aged, fat woman could not, they assured us, be an object of (heterosexual male) desire. Such a critical tradition, still intact insofar as fat remains a category that is unexamined, exposes to view the thin-normative assumptions that emerge among nonprofessional critics in the nineteenth century only to be solidified by the professional academy of the twentieth. Such a norm can be questioned, and alternatives explored, if critics voice alternative, nonnormative desires. In this case, I use the last section to discuss my own desire for Venus’s fat body, a body that in its grotesque oozing nature represents a challenge to our own modern preference for closed, contained, and autonomous bodies.

Serena Guarracino focuses on the power given to the anormative body of the opera diva from the nineteenth century to today. Her essay significantly establishes the degree to which normative understandings of the body allow
for alternative attachments to it. Even as the fat body of the opera diva was beginning to be marked and stigmatized according to the emerging medical discourse of the nineteenth century, it could still be a powerful and anormative object of desire to the opera fan, especially the opera queen. Indeed, the body of the opera diva, placed at the center of a number of contradictory discourses, makes itself available to those of us who want to cultivate more fattened attachments to other bodies. In this, Guarracino offers us a model of a queer and fat engagement made available even in the midst of a fatphobic and homophobic dominant culture in the West.

The final essay of the collection, because focused on an actual fat activist community, offers lessons on the possibilities and the limitations of identity politics in community building. Greta Rensenbrink offers a detailed portrait of the activities of a group of fat feminists in the 1970s and 1980s and their ability to build a community that offered a more expansive and positive understanding of the fat identity. As they sought to create a fat woman’s culture around essentialist constructions of identity (both woman and fat), they inevitably ran against problems that Rensenbrink’s analysis suggests might be endemic to identity politics itself. The women, for example, had to decide what constituted fat even as they used such a definition to exclude certain individuals that did not measure up to that identity. Ultimately, efforts to establish a fixed and knowable understanding of the fat identity caused tensions in the fat feminist community and in the larger feminist community. Perhaps their failure might teach us more than their successes, which were many. Their failure shows the limitations of building a political movement and a community on any essentialist identity construction, precisely because such constructions are always already unstable and mutable, but it also suggests the possibility of building a community on shared interests and commitments rather than on identities. Could a community be created around an anti-fatphobic agenda rather than around any single identity? Could such a community constitute itself in other ways, wherein, for example, the anti-fatphobic agenda could bring people together with other agendas, like the anti-homophobic agenda, in more provisional ways?

In these days in which we daily hear that the obesity epidemic will cause the imminent collapse of our civilization, *Historicizing Fat* asks us to take a very different approach—a longer view perhaps. By looking backward at histories of other times and places, we can begin to consider alternative ways that “fat” (and “thin” for that matter) were understood and experienced. In a project that requires many more voices, many more bodies, such histories will necessarily push us toward seeing our own constructs, like that of “obesity” or “overweight,” as historically specific constructs. Perhaps also with such
a project, we can begin to address our own, often visceral, responses to the bulging bodies that are daily strewn across our television screens. Such bodies are supposed to, of course, frighten us, even as they are supposed to make us all feel, automatically and without question, that our civilization is falling of its own dead weight. The historical project of historicizing fat should, ultimately, make us question such visceral associations. For a moment at least, we can pause, and imagine what those bodies might have represented to other times and places. At the same time, we can—perhaps—begin to imagine and explore very different ways of inhabiting our own bodies and relating to the (fat) bodies of others.

NOTES


2. George Cheyne, The English malady; or, A treatise of nervous diseases of all kinds, as spleen, vapours, lowness of spirits, hypochondriacal, and hysterical distempers (London: 1733).


The above list consists of only those with a cultural studies and/or literary approach to the subject. Much has been written in the area of fat studies, which comes from other approaches to the subjects, including those informed by medical and health sciences, legal studies, and sociology, among other fields. The first to see fat as a cultural construction were the second-wave feminists. That influence is evident in the way that writers play upon the title of the massively influential popular feminist book, Fat Is a Feminist Issue: The Anti-Diet Guide to Permanent Weight-Loss (New York: Paddington Press, 1978), a book whose influence is apparent in the fact that it has been in continuous publication since its first imprint. See, for example, Sander L. Gilman, Fat Boys: A Thin Book (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2004), 1, with the title “Introduction: Fat Is a Man’s Issue” that is followed by the title of the first section, “A Woman’s Issue?” For a brief consideration of second-wave feminism and “fat,” see the critical and creative pieces that comprise Lisa Schoenfielder and Barb Wieser, eds., Shadow on a Tightrope: Writings by Women on Fat Oppression (Iowa City: Aunt Lute Books, 1983); and Greta Rensenbrink’s essay in this collection. The influence of queer studies on the emerging


7. Pat Rogers’s essay printed here offers one exception. See also the discussion of how Queen Anne’s fat body was a subject of mockery in her own life even as it was a source of embarrassment to subsequent scholars (Robert Bucholz, “‘The Stomach of a Queen’ or Size Matters: Gender, Body Image and the Historical Reputation of Queen Anne,” in Queens and Power in Medieval and Early Modern England, ed. Carole Levin and Robert Bucholz [Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2009]). See also Anita Guerrini, Obesity and Depression in the Enlightenment: The Life and Times of George Cheyne (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2000).


10. See the interspersed remarks in Gilman, Fat Boys, esp. 48–50.