Historicizing Fat in Anglo-american Culture

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“KILL THE PIG!”

Lord of the Flies, “Piggy,” and Anti-Fat Discourse

• ZEYNEP Z. ATAYURT •

A recipient of the Nobel Prize for Literature, William Golding is best known for his novel Lord of the Flies (1954) with its haunting story of how a group of boys, stranded on an uninhabited island, descend into savagery. Indeed, widely taught in the English-speaking world, Lord of the Flies is now familiar to several generations. Given its status as a mainstay in the high-school curriculum, it is important to consider how it has largely been read. For the most part, it has been considered “a moral fable” that speaks to the depravity of human nature, balanced as it is between “good” and “evil.”\(^1\) Golding, like his contemporaries Graham Greene and Angus Wilson, became interested in moral issues as they considered the events of the world wars, including such atrocities as the Holocaust. Golding himself witnessed firsthand the brutalities of war when he served in the British navy during the Second World War. These experiences led Golding to a bitter understanding of human beings as “a species,” in Golding’s words, “that produce evil as a bee produces honey; as naturally as the humble insect produces sweetness, we produce wickedness and violence which sour our lives.”\(^2\)

Undoubtedly, such notions of “violence and wickedness” are prevalent in Golding’s Lord of the Flies. In this essay, I argue that Golding was also interested in showing how such violence is socially produced. To be more specific, Golding uses the novel to critique the weight stigma of his day, which leads, ultimately, to the ritualized murder of “Piggy,” “a very fat boy.”\(^3\) By focusing our attention on weight stigma, we can see first how Golding traces
the existing fatphobia and weight stigma of the youth to the “grown-up,” civilized society of contemporary Britain and second how Golding finally uses the intelligent, civilized Piggy to challenge the destructiveness and negative stereotyping of fat. Such a reading of the novel is especially useful now given the contemporary obsession with childhood obesity that encourages, whether consciously or not, such scapegoating of the obese child.

MORAL PANIC OVER OBESITY

Criticism of the Lord of the Flies has not appreciated the extent to which it offers a critique of fatphobia and weight stigma, which I argue is at the heart of the text. In this, criticism has also failed to acknowledge the extent to which it intervenes in contemporary fatphobic discourses. In this section, I focus on fatphobic discourse in order to expose to view how the fat child was imagined in the 1950s and into today. Obesity was considered a threat to the political, economic, and social order, but also as a “disease best dealt with using medical interventions.” Perhaps because we are still in the grips of such panic, which has, if anything, become more intense in recent years, we are likely to ignore the fatphobia in Lord of the Flies. Indeed, we are likely to see the fatphobia in the text, most obvious in the violent murder of Piggy, as “natural” behavior rather than as behavior that has its origins in the civilized, adult world from which the children come.

“Fat” or “obesity” has been a stigmatized category at least since the early twentieth century. Those who do not conform to a narrow norm are seen as political, social, and even moral threats. The emergence and intensification of this stigma, evident in the recent fears over the “epidemic” or “pandemic” of obesity, has given rise to a pervasive fear and dislike of fat and thus fat people. Historian Peter Stearns argues that the turn of the twentieth century brings about a pervasive stigmatization of fat. With the shift toward a consumer economy, the middle class has begun to perceive a “need for a demanding compensation for changing personal behaviors.” Accordingly, the idea that “people could preserve or even enhance their health and also establish their moral credentials by means of disciplining their bodies through an attack on fat” has become increasingly prevalent. As Stearns’ in-depth analysis of weight stigma demonstrates:

The widespread association of fat with laziness directly translated the desire to use disciplined eating as a moral tool in a society where growing consumer tastes seemed to contradict the ideal work ethic. An appropriately slender
figure could denote the kind of firm character, capable of self-control that one would seek in a good worker in an age of growing indulgence; ready employability and weight management could be conflated. This connection had begun to take shape among psychologists and educators who promoted athleticism and muscularity as proofs against moral as well as physical indolence.7

Given the assertion that an “athletic” and “muscular” body is an indication of having a “firm character,” fat is increasingly characterized as “repulsive, funny, ugly, unclean and, more importantly, something to lose.”8 Many public schools in Britain and in the United States are likely to teach just such a belief to their pupils for obesity prevention. In Britain four-year-old school children are put to “fat tests”—“an invasion of privacy” that further stigmatizes “the largest.” A 1999 study of 115 middle and high schools in the United States found that “20 percent of school teachers said they believed obese people are untidy, less likely to succeed and more emotional.”10 The increasing negative associations ascribed to fatness obviously reinforce the anti-fat bias at educational institutions, and thus promulgate the fear of fat amongst youngsters. While anti-fat campaigns like those that restrict the sales of junk food and sweets on school premises certainly seem unequivocally beneficial, they also encourage the stigmatization of fat children. This, added to the continuous preoccupation with childhood obesity in the popular media, has had the effect of fostering an atmosphere where young children are drawn into a state of extreme self-consciousness about their body image in a climate of fatphobia and weight stigma.

A number of discourses intersected to aggravate this fear of fat and to privilege the thin and muscular physique, especially of the male body. The era before the twentieth century often associated plumpness with a number of positive attributes such as “prosperity, good health, good character”; in contrast, the period around the world wars replaced such associations with a fear of fat, albeit now understood through a broadly political discourse. Fat in this period was seen as a danger to a collective national security (as it still is today), and “gaining weight” was considered “unpatriotic.”12 Conceptualized as “lazy, dishonest and untrustworthy,” the fat body was regarded as a threat to the lean, disciplined, militaristic nation.13 Discipline over the body was necessary not only for making the citizen a productive member of society, but also for maintaining and extending the political strength of the nation. In early twentieth-century Britain, physical fitness was increasingly seen as having a central role in preserving its imperialist power. Increasingly, there were public outcries that the national military strength of Britain might
decline because too many male recruits were “unfit”—a word that was often used to characterize the “fat” body, more specifically. As J. M. Winter notes, “between forty and sixty percent of the recruits for the British Army was turned down as physically unfit for the service.” Physical toughness, especially in recruiting-age men, was an issue not simply of health but also of national security.

During the early years of the Second World War, a panic over national security was evident in the pervasive concern that the prevalence of “overweight” and “obese” recruits would weaken the British military forces. To address this perceived problem, the postwar period sought to encourage physical fitness, often as an express antidote to fatness. Although the notions of size and fitness of an individual body were tacitly considered to be of the utmost importance for the welfare of the state and its military, the physical fitness and weight-loss programs of the postwar period were often promoted more toward what was conceptualized as an individualistic (rather than nationalistic) reform. As Mike Featherstone explains, the daily press in postwar Britain popularized the notion of weight loss as a way of changing and regulating the individual’s life. From popular newspapers, such as The Sun and The Mirror, and from the array of “diet books”—which “multiplied in the postwar phase”—the population learned that they must look good to get more out of their life. Within such logic, as Featherstone explains, “fitness and slimness become associated not only with energy, drive and vitality but worthiness as a person; likewise the body beautiful comes to be taken as a sign of prudence and prescience in health matters.”

Precisely because Golding addresses an emergent fatphobia that has become more prominent in the twenty-first century, his book is, if anything, more relevant today. The fat boy continues to be stigmatized today. Our popular media continually decries the rise of “childhood obesity,” as it warns us about how this epidemic will affect the longevity of the future population. Obesity is overemphasized as a fearful disease that will affect “fifty percent of children in North America and thirty-eight percent of children in the European Union by 2010.” However, as Charlotte Cooper states, “when we define fatness as a ‘disease’ we are acting within powerful social boundaries which control what we believe to be right and appropriate, or shameful and abnormal.” The fear that obesity elicits in our culture at large cannot be sufficiently explained only by medical or physiological explanations. Even in the medical discourse, there is a significant desire to define obesity as a phenomenon that is de facto one of disease. Thus, our dominant society has entered into a war on obesity or an intervention against the pandemic of obesity that has a significantly negative impact on the obese themselves.
As Mary Douglas has argued, “the idea of society is a powerful image” which “has form, has external boundaries, margins, internal structure” whose “outlines contain power to reward conformity and repulse attack.”

As Douglas has pointed out, cultures often associate the notion of “impurity” with that which violates its established laws, often literally equated with the boundaries of the body as a danger to the culture at large. Childhood obesity is seen as just such a threat to society’s order and its control mechanisms. The fear over it, which often translates into the fear over the fat bodies of actual children, serves to promote social conformity. In Mary Douglas’s formulation, “order implies restriction from all possible materials. So disorder by implication is unlimited, and is destructive to existing patterns as it symbolizes both danger and power.” Fatness often registers in modern society as “disorder,” a disruptive potential to the prevailing order. In this light, the media message of “obesity prevention,” therein, functions as a manipulative social and cultural construct.

The preceding remarks indicate that the fat body is at the nexus of a number of discourses that all see it as problematic, disorderly, and revolting. The broad cultural fear of the fat body cannot then be adequately explained through any purely medical reason. Our fear for the fat body and for the phenomenon of fatness (or obesity) is rather suggestive of a broader cultural anxiety over excess. Such fear can be used to promote a bodily norm that can in turn become a hegemonic display in which the category of obesity is used to exercise social exclusion. Fat children and adults must be either reformed or avoided because they present a danger to us insofar as they are taken to be polluting or, as one recent study would have it, “contagious” as a “disease” which “spreads through social ties.”

Lord of the Flies illustrates and more importantly challenges this emerging dislike of fat by showing how it leads to the violent exclusion of individuals like Piggy.

GOLDING’S CRITIQUE OF FATPHOBIC STEREOTYPES THROUGH PIGGY

A reexamination of Golding’s much underexamined Piggy enables us to see how Golding critiques the fatphobic stereotypes of his day. Indeed, Golding goes so far as to criticize a lean, militaristic norm, which is used to marginalize intelligent, humanistic people like Piggy merely because they fail to measure up to its mean standard. Leonard S. Taitz describes this contemporary Western standard, exemplified by the lean hunters on the island, as one that “lean[s] heavily towards slenderness and clear-cut muscularity as norms...
to which modern Western man should aspire.” Taitz further summarizes some of the historical shifts considered in the last section when he writes that “this approbation of leanness which has reached the point where obesity is treated not only as a disease but as a sign of degeneracy may make an obese individual a member of a despised, downtrodden and even persecuted minority.”

Long before Taitz offered this theorization, Golding offered his own powerful critique of weight stigma in *Lord of the Flies*. Criticism has entirely overlooked this aspect of the novel in part because it has been largely focused on the novel as a critique of human nature. Because it is focused on arguments that are essentialist in nature, criticism cannot fully appreciate that Golding critiques the socially constructed weight prejudice he shows the youth on the island to have internalized. The plot underscores how such fatphobic stereotypes have a central place in the marginalization and murder of Piggy. Sadly, criticism of the novel has sometimes reinforced these same stereotypes in its consideration of Piggy. Critics have called Piggy “unattractive,” “unpleasant,” “ludicrous,” even a “spoil-sport.” Such characterizations play upon the kind of fatphobic stereotypes examined in the last section. The first two especially establish the thin (male) body as the norm against which Piggy is judged. The last term expressly adopts the perspective of the mean, thin hunters, who are, after all, the ones who most see Piggy as a “spoil-sport” because he discourages them from giving way to their anarchic, ritualized “fun.”

It is no accident that Golding makes Piggy fat, even as he makes it clear that the other boys see him through the fatphobic stereotypes of the civilized mainland. Golding can play upon and challenge the stereotypes of society, which enter into and finally infect the boys’ makeshift island society. In his portrayal of Piggy, Golding works to reverse the negative conceptualization of fat in terms of “disease,” “disorder,” and “danger.” Piggy represents the voice of reason, wisdom, and democratic order, as against the savage anarchy and even fascism of the hunting gang of boys. Far from being the lazy and indolent figure that the fatphobic stereotype would assume him to be, Piggy is intellectual, orderly, and energetic, at least in his intellectual capacities. Because of this, he can even for a time forestall the destructive savagery introduced by the gang of hunters. If on the one hand Golding can challenge this stereotype through his portrayal of Piggy as an exemplary figure, he can also show how such a stereotype leads to cruelty and even savagery when given free reign on the island. As a fat, weak, and disabled child, Piggy is an “outsider”; thus his presence allows Golding to explore the way in which violence is ascribed to social and cultural conditioning that is acquired from an exceptionally early age. Such social and cultural conditioning, further-
more, leads to a cruel process of “othering” in which the verbal taunting and physical brutality serve to reinforce a vicious cultural norm.

A frequently cited study shows just how early such acculturation takes hold. Conducted in 1961, the study examined the social prejudices of school children between the ages of ten and eleven. They were presented with drawings of fat children, children with crutches, children in a wheelchair, and children with amputated hands and facial disfigurement and were asked to rank them in terms of whom they would most like for a friend. The majority of the sampled children ranked the fat children last. As the authors of this study explain, “a person’s physical characteristics and appearance strongly influence the judgment of those who perceive him.” Taitz extends this argument:

Children suffer more than anyone else. The natural lack of inhibition and unthinking cruelty of school children toward those with a body habitus which fails to achieve a preconceived norm is a major cause of unhappiness. In a status-conscious society, being “different” or merely at the extreme of the norm may exact a savage penalty. Whatever one might conclude about the long-term physical hazards of obesity, there can be no doubt about its psychological and social consequences for at least some fat children. Some are merely teased, others are bullied unmercifully and some are virtually ostracized.

The cultural pressures considered here bear down in a cruel way on the children, in particular fat children, who do not fit the norm. Cramer and Steinwert’s 1998 study on the social reception of fatness amongst preschool children between the ages of three and five reaffirms “the negative attitudes” held by very young children toward their overweight peers, a tendency which becomes more extreme as children get older.

Golding uses his construction of Piggy, and the mistreatment of him by his peers, to represent and critique the common social attitudes to fatness in his contemporary society. In many ways, the story is even more relevant for contemporaries today in light of the pervasive moral panic over childhood obesity that seeks to justify our stigmatization of fat children. Golding is able to explore what can happen when such prejudicial stereotypes go unchecked since the futuristic landscape of the uninhabited island has no adult supervision to moderate the children’s actions. Even as the reader witnesses the cruelty of the treatment of Piggy, they are also challenged to see beyond the stereotypes that fuel such treatment. Golding constructs Piggy as the very antithesis of fatphobic stereotypes. Piggy is notably intelligent, rational, and
2: “Kill the Pig!”

deliberate in a way that counters the stereotype that would see the fat person as characterized by “self-indulgence,” “over-consumption,” “stupidity,” “moral weakness,” and “lack of discipline.” We have already considered the multiple discourses that led to such assumptions, but we can add to these the findings of Crandall’s 1994 study documenting the assumptions made about fat people as recorded in his sample group of undergraduate students’ answers to his “anti-fat attitudes questionnaire.” Crandall concluded that fat people are considered “unattractive, aesthetically displeasing, morally and emotionally impaired. They are denigrated by thin people, peers, potential romantic partners, their parents, and even by themselves.” His studies, as well as scientific studies generally, demonstrate that the fat person suffers at least as much from the social and psychological stigma attached to obesity as from the mere medical symptoms from the actual physical condition.

Golding associates these negative stereotypes with Jack rather than Piggy. Piggy is in virtually every way shown as not exemplifying these fatphobic stereotypes. To take one example, Piggy is not represented as characterized by “over-consumption.” For a variety of reasons, the reader might be likely to consider the fat person as the one who consumes more than his fair share. The issue of consumption was even more problematic in the lean postwar years when the food rationing that had begun early in the war had kept momentum long after its conclusion. Indeed, food rationing had lasted for fourteen years until 1954 when the Lord of the Flies was published. Even though the plot of the novel is located temporally in the “near future” and thus presumably distanced somewhat from the period of rationing, the boys in the novel can, nonetheless, be assumed to have experienced rationing sometime in their young boyhoods. Certainly, Golding himself would have viewed such issues through the lens of such rationing and food scarcity, and he, no doubt, assumed a readership who would look at this aspect of the plot in similar terms. When viewed in this context, a person like Piggy with his bulky figure might have been looked on with special suspicion, especially given that the fat were associated with “over-consumption” generally.

At the beginning of the novel, Piggy tells Ralph that he was brought up by his auntie who had a sweetshop, saying with a touch of pride and superiority: “I used to get ever so many sweets. As many as I liked.” This statement could be read as a poignant attempt by Piggy to cover his notably lower socioeconomic background, and thus Piggy’s indulgence in sweets should not necessarily be considered “over-consumption.” Further, his social background is not the only disadvantage we find Piggy having had to cope with. With his asthma and his very poor eyesight, he is unable to enjoy a full physical childhood experience of running fast and playing as other children do.
This physical deprivation rather than consumption of sweets would seem to be the real source of his embodiment, and it challenges the simplistic notions of “self-indulgence” and “over-consumption” that the fatphobic stereotypes emphasize.

Golding’s deliberately complex construction of Piggy challenges the prejudiced assumptions related to fatness, and thus prompts the present-day reader to question our contemporary fatphobic stereotypes directed at the obese child. Golding confronts head on such stereotypes in choosing to make Piggy the very antithesis of what we assume the fat child must be. If the fat child is assumed to be morally weak, self-indulgent, and lazy, Piggy is none of these things, having courage to oppose the boys in matters of central importance to the democratic government of the island. Indeed, when the gang of hunters want to impose a military-style junta on their newly created society, Piggy is able for a time to stop them by asserting the democratic rules represented by the fat conch. Precisely because he is to the rational reader the very embodiment of democracy, order, and pacifism, the reader is likely to find his mistreatment by the other boys as even more savage and despicable.

The gang of hunters, led by Jack Merridew, operate from the assumption that certain corporeal qualities make some superior and others inferior. Even as their agility, leanness, and fitness make them superior, they assume that Piggy, because he is unfit and fat, is inferior. He should, they assume, be ordered about by them, accepting his second-class status that is made manifest by his body. Such stereotypes are so strong that even Ralph, the other character who, next to Piggy, most values democracy and civilizing order, is initially dismissive of Piggy. Indeed, in some ways Ralph sets the stage for the violence because he first ascribes the fatphobic stereotype to Piggy and in so doing ensures that such culturally and socially learned behavior informs the society they will create. In Ralph’s first exchange with the child who will become Piggy, the as-yet unnamed fat boy appeals to his basic humanity that might in an ideal world operate outside of the fatphobic stigmatization he has experienced at home. Golding asks us to consider this moment when he writes, “The fat boy waited to be asked his name in turn but this proffer of acquaintance was not made.”

Ralph introduces to the island the same stereotypes of the fatphobic civilized world. As a short, fat boy with spectacles, Piggy, perhaps, is not someone who Ralph would have liked to make friends with: “Piggy was a bore; his fat, his ass-mar and his matter-of-fact ideas were dull: but there was always a little pressure to be got out of pulling his leg, even if one did it by accident.” As the novel progresses, Ralph’s low opinion of Piggy alters as he comes to see “Piggy” as his “true friend.”

Golding even shows Ralph as in some senses the source of the fatphobic
stereotype imposed on Piggy. Ralph is the one who, despite Piggy’s pleas, “names” him on the island, thereby introducing the fatphobia there and denying Piggy the clean break he might have hoped to have from the stigmatization he faced at home. In the back-and-forth between Piggy and Ralph, Ralph finds himself taken with the epithet. When Ralph asks him what he should be called, Piggy answers simply anything but what I was called by the schoolchildren at home. Curious, Ralph asks,

“What was that?”
The fat boy glanced over his shoulder, then leaned towards Ralph.
He whispered.
“They used to call me Piggy.”
Ralph shrieked with laughter. He jumped up.
“Piggy”! “Piggy”!
“Ralph—please!”
Piggy clasped his hands in apprehension.
“I said I didn’t want—”

As any western schoolchild still knows, the epithet “pig” refers to the assumed selfishness and voraciousness of the fat person. Piggy has clearly brought on the island the same fear of stigmatization, but he has assumed for a moment that Ralph might treat him differently. When Ralph giggles, jumps, and yells the name out, he operates from the same cruelty he has learned from his society. Ralph, furthermore, makes sure that the name sticks when he “names” him Piggy in front of the other boys. When Jack Merridew, the boy who supposedly represents “evil,” draws on his array of fatphobic epithets to call Piggy “Fatty,” Ralph “corrects” him by saying that he is not “Fatty” but “Piggy.” He bonds with Jack at this moment by othering Piggy. Golding makes it clear that just such a process is happening in the description of what follows. Everybody starts to mock Piggy: “A storm of laughter arose and even the tiniest joined in. For the moment the boys were a closed circuit of sympathy with ‘Piggy’ outside.”

This scene is commonplace, of course, as it mirrors a prevailing tendency in contemporary society, where the fat child is the victim of bullying that begins with name-calling and can escalate to violence. Such behavior is socially conditioned, drawing on and reinforcing the larger cultural stereotypes we have examined. Even though they are marooned on an uninhabited island in the Pacific and thus have no adult supervision, their mistreatment of Piggy suggests their allegiance with social codes that consider anti-fat bias as justifiable. As his peers bully him, Piggy remains silent. His silence suggests
that he has internalized these fatphobic stereotypes; certainly his shy confession to Ralph that his peers on the mainland called him “Piggy” suggests that he does, indeed, bring to the island the marks of weight stigma in which he feels shame and guilt about his body. Viewed from a different perspective, Piggy is perhaps traumatized to see that, even in this new society, he cannot escape the stigma he experienced at home. The fact that we never know his name and are given no evidence that even his best friend Ralph knew his name underscores the degree to which he is dehumanized as these fatphobic stereotypes are applied to him.

Golding’s choice of “Piggy” as a nickname for this character would seem to be significant particularly when viewed in the context of the persistent use of the pig imagery throughout the novel. In *The Politics and Poetics of Transgression*, Peter Stallybrass and Alan White offer a “social semiotic of the pig,” exploring the image “at the intersection of a number of important cultural and symbolic thresholds.” The pig, they argue, has been a marginal creature since the Middle Ages when “it resembled a baby, lived next to and with humans, and ate similar food, yet, at the same time, it was perceived as a greedy scavenger fit only to be devoured.” The symbolic meaning of the pig, as Angela Stukator argues, “has since been transformed because of a number of social and economic changes, most notably urbanization, after which the pig became a hated object of disgust lacking any appeal.” The pig has these multiple and contradictory senses in *Lord of the Flies*. It is the pig that the boys hunt for survival; it is also this very creature which functions as an object for their own amusement in their tribalistic pig-hunt ritual which comes to epitomize the boys’ increasing degradation and violence. One of the pigs they hunt, for example, is a sow with nursing piglets; notably, this is the only image of the domestic in the entire novel, and it is this image of the domestic that is slaughtered by the gang of hunters. Once the pig is dead, the hunters transform it into the “Lord of the Flies” when they mount the dead head on a stick. To appease the insatiable hunger they imagine the god to have, they must leave the “Lord of the Flies” ritual offerings, in this case from the pigs they hunt.

The boys’ conflicting treatment of the pig resonates with their attitude toward Piggy. He is represented as a figure who arouses contradictory notions amongst the youngsters on the island—for the “littluns” he is the embodiment of motherly nurturance and protection, while for the hunters he is a spoil-sport. This contradiction also posits Piggy both as an outsider/separator and an insider/unifier. As an outsider, his peers find him unappealing, and this, ironically, has a unifying effect because they are unified in their bullying of him. Piggy is marginalized by his difference, disregarded, and ridiculed. As
C. B. Cox explains, “Piggy’s fat, asthmatic body is a natural butt for children, and continual mockery has taught him to be humble and enjoy being noticed even only as a joke.” However, does Piggy really “enjoy” being the object of laughter? Surely not. At the very beginning of the novel, as discussed above, he makes it clear to Ralph that he does not want to be called “Piggy” and thus he rejects the cultural logic that would make him the marginal figure worthy of ridicule. The boys, nonetheless, build their camaraderie on the island in part by bullying him. Indeed, Golding even makes it clear that they can use their treatment of him in order to assert a sense of normalcy on the island. Life on the island seems “cheery and normal provided that there are the likes of Piggy around to be looked down on and derided.”

The boys marginalize Piggy not simply because he is fat but also because he is mature and intelligent. Because the boys want to remain blissfully sheltered from the reality of their situation, Piggy’s hard-headed realism and maturity is often found incomprehensible and unwelcome by the other boys. Piggy wants them to acknowledge the seriousness of their situation and to work together so as to establish order under the (unwelcome) assumption that they may never be rescued. Piggy’s difference, both intellectually and physically, ironically becomes a significant motive in unifying other boys against him. His position as an “outsider” thus enables the other boys to feel “cheerful” and “normal.”

Ironically, they act against their self-interest in marginalizing and stigmatizing Piggy since their survival on the island depends on his sense of reason. Piggy, as in Gindin’s words, “believes in the values of civilization, and in the possibility of directing human constructive effort.” Piggy is at the center of the new democratic society initially created before the hunters destroy it in an effort to establish their own fascistic government of the superior few. Piggy establishes the conch as a symbol of the new society, and he establishes rules for using the conch that can ensure that they have the type of orderly deliberation necessary for democratic society. Similarly, both the idea and execution of fire-making come from his vision, made literal in the spectacles the boys use to start the fire. This fire not only marks the hearth that establishes the comforts of home, but it also provides the signal light that is needed if they have any hope for rescue. Finally, Piggy, perhaps like the sow with her offspring, is presented sympathetically as the only one with the compassion, pity, and nurturing skills to care for the “littluns.”

Unlike his peers, Piggy has no savage feelings, and his intelligence is not tempted by either the superstition or the ritualized tribal dances of Jack and his hunters. In all of these qualities, Piggy counters the negative stereotypes that associate fatness with disorder. The fat body is often seen as the disorderly body, as that which resists the norms that society would establish.
Piggy’s body even in his fatness is not seen as disorderly. Indeed, the narrator even observes that “he was the only boy on the island whose hair never seemed to grow,” a metaphorical indication of his repudiation of savagery and primitivism. With the round conch as a symbol of his trust in democratic power, Piggy asks questions about the choices they should make. He asks, “which is better, law and rescue, or hunting and breaking things up?”

His strong alliance with the conch shell reinstates Piggy as a strong defender of civilization and order. Piggy’s vision is literally at the center of the orderly society. That he continues to work to maintain clear vision is suggested by the frequency with which he cleans his spectacles and fusses over them. Piggy has the foresight and good sense of a more mature person; he exhibits a degree of caution and some organizing ability. He puts his finger on the cause of the trouble among the other boys: “them haven’t no common sense.” He displays moral and physical courage in seeking to preserve the order maintained by the conch. He is fair-minded, egalitarian, and protective of his rights, but most importantly, he is an intellectual. He can solve problems using rational thought, and he doggedly refuses to give way to the type of irrational and superstitious fears that consume the other boys. When he addresses the problem of making an easily tended fire with sufficient smoke to attract ships or airplanes, he offers the rational suggestion, “We could experiment. We could find out how to make a small hot fire and then put green branches on to make smoke.”

His exceptional rationalism also sets him apart from the rest of the boys in a way that proves to be dangerous for him. While the boys enjoy the seeming irrationality and volatility of the fire, Piggy respects its potential dangers. Piggy would appear to the other boys a “spoil-sport” simply because his rationality makes him the one who sees how the same volatility that makes fire fun (to some) also makes it dangerous. Angry at the boys’ lack of foresight, his manner and tone are almost parental:

All the boys except Piggy started to giggle; presently they were shrieking with laughter.

Piggy lost his temper.

“I got the conch! Just you listen! The first thing we ought to have made was shelters down there by the beach. It wasn’t half cold down there in the night. But the first time Ralph says ‘fire’ you goes howling and screaming up this here mountain. Like a pack of kids!”

By now they were listening to the tirade.

“How can you expect to be rescued if you don’t put things first and act proper?”
“Then when you get here you build a bonfire that isn’t no use. Now you been and set the whole island on fire. Won’t we look funny if the whole island burns up? Cooked fruit, that’s what we’ll have to eat, and roast pork. And that’s nothing to laugh at!”

The idea of “fire” lies not only in its association with rescue, but also with all-consuming passions of Jack and his hunters. Jack and his group do not attend the fire and go hunting instead. As the passage implies, Piggy appreciates the fire as the hearth, more vital for their survival than the hunt.

Golding here as elsewhere inverts the stereotype that would make Piggy the inferior and the thin hunters, the superior. He does so not so much because he wants to stigmatize the thin body, but because he wants to critique a cultural norm, which makes certain bodies innately superior. That the thin bodies of the hunters are associated with militarism only further underscores their implication in institutions that Golding abhors. We might remember here that the fatphobic stereotypes were, in part, related to the political discourse that promoted British militarism. Thus, it should be no surprise that the fat one is here the pacifist, where the thin ones are the militaristic hunters. Golding works against the cultural stereotype that would associate the fat body with a voracious appetite in making Jack and the hunters, instead, the ones exposed as having a voracious and dangerous appetite. They indulge their atavistic passion for killing and blood-sport on the island, as evident in their motto, sung in unison: “Kill the pig! Cut his throat! Kill the pig! Bash him in!”

Golding’s construction of Jack and his hunters as consumed with their appetites and with a thirst for meat that must be satiated with ever more escalating violence subverts the anti-fat bias of the day through a juxtaposition of Jack and his group, who are irrational and literally bloodthirsty, with the fat character, who is rational and controlled.

Because the values of Jack and his hunting crew are so opposed to those of Piggy, it is probably inevitable that the latter would be made the “center of social derision.” Certainly, they are unwilling to learn from Piggy the values of, for example, tending the hearth. When Piggy reprimands Jack and his crew for failing to tend the fire, Jack bullies Piggy, hitting him in the stomach and head. Piggy’s humiliation aggravates as his glasses strike the rocks and break: “Piggy cried out in terror: ‘My specs!’” As Piggy fearfully scrambles over the rocks to recover what is left of his glasses, he is once again reduced to an object of ridicule:

“Now I only got one eye. Just you wait—”

Jack mimicked the whine and scramble.
“Jus’ you wait—yah!”

Piggy and the parody were so funny that the hunters began to laugh. Jack felt encouraged. He went on scrambling and the laughter rose to a gale of hysteria. Unwillingly Ralph felt his lips twitch; he was angry with himself for giving way.56

Perhaps Jack is upset precisely because Piggy refuses to conform to the abject expectations of the fatphobic stereotype. Certainly, he does not acknowledge Jack to have privilege associated with his thin, muscular body or his athletic skill, nor does he act as if he should subordinate himself to Jack, who takes himself in his physicality to be the natural leader. In fact, Piggy goes so far as to assert his right to make judgments on Jack’s actions and even to judge them as obstructions to the proper government of the orderly, democratic society that Piggy has installed. Surely, it is important that such a democratic order is overturned when Jack plays into fatphobic stereotypes that would make “Piggy” into a literal pig, who whines and grunts like that animal. The so-called primitive savagery of Jack is recognizably “civilized” in the way it draws on exclusive fatphobic stereotypes that unite the community at the expense of the outsider, Piggy.

Jack has learned this behavior in part through the fatphobic stereotypes we have examined. It might be argued that, having been brought up and educated in the strictly religious environment of an elite English public school, Jack is afflicted by an ascetic attitude toward the body as a site of discipline and control. “Regulation of the body,” as Bryan Turner points out, “was related for many centuries to a religious discipline that aimed to control the soul.”17 As he further argues, “within the ascetic tradition of the classical and Christian eras, body was considered as a threatening and dangerous phenomenon, in that it was seen as a vehicle for the unruly, ungovernable and irrational patterns, emotions and desires.”18 In contemporary Western society, “ascetism is designed to produce an acceptable social self.”59 According to Turner’s argument, the attainment of “an acceptable social self” involves conforming to contemporary bodily norms. To have a body that conforms to this norm—that is to have a thin and muscular body such as Jack has—is a major personal and political asset. Golding constructs Jack in a manner that calls into question this bodily norm. Jack’s young, slim body represents the “disciplined,” military body that was valued by the culture. To draw on the privileges that accrue to this body involves acting with a viciousness that results in excessive violence and antisocial anarchy. The hunters seek to restructure society so that physical power is placed at its center and most valued. Even though they can survive off the fruit, the hunters under Jack’s direction assert
the superiority of hunting. In hunting, they give into their appetites and desire for blood, violence, and pig. Jack embodies unreason, confusion, and violence, and all of these are associated with his lean, militaristic body. Certainly, Golding powerfully counters a cultural assumption that would make the thin body the body of civilized order and restraint and the fat body the body of disorder and unchecked appetite in making Jack the embodiment of the latter and Piggy the embodiment of the former.

The conflicting trajectory of these characters further restates Golding’s critique of the culture that stigmatizes certain body types. Golding’s construction of Jack and Piggy, one representing terror and anarchy, the other democracy, reason, and social welfare, dismantles the rigidity of the cultural implications written on the body. The difference between Jack and Piggy can be further analyzed in terms of a counterdiscourse of Foucault’s theorization of the “docile body” which represents a “trained, shaped body” that “obeys and responds.” As Foucault argues, the disciplined, obedient body allows itself to be colonized by external dictations and impositions. In this respect, Jack’s slim body, which epitomizes the classical body that is “monumental, static, closed, and sleek, corresponding to the aspirations of bourgeois individualism,” could have been thought to represent a sense of discipline and regulation, while Piggy’s “excessive” embodiment would have culturally been considered a body “out of control” or a site of “disorder.” Golding’s construction of Jack and Piggy reverses these conceptualizations. Even though Jack initially appears to be a young boy whose “docile body” renders him a model of discipline and order by virtue of his religious background, Jack appears in very different light when he breaks the democratic rules of the island by disregarding the conch and creating disorder. As he says, “Bollocks to the rules! We’re strong—we hunt!”

According to the norms of Golding’s day, Jack’s thin body is the ideal body that manifests its virtue in its supposed restraint, while Piggy’s fat body manifests its excess and immorality in its violation of the boundaries of the body. In contrast to this stereotype, Piggy proves surprisingly disciplined as he works painstakingly to preserve a sense of order and discipline. He constantly insists that the conch be respected and used to structure their deliberation so that they maintain a democratic, rational society modeled on what he sees as “what grown ups would do.” His common sense makes him a democrat and intellectual that is the very antithesis of the “officer class,” embodied by the lean Jack. Jack, who would govern by the strength of his body, represents a very different form of government, one in which menacing threat and extortions from a small junta would prevail. Golding, then, makes an interesting point in associating Jack with all that is disruptive to the more
ideal and pacifistic deliberative democracy. Indeed, Golding associates the type of stereotypes that privilege the thin body at the expense of the fat one with a destructive form of government. Certainly, such a system implicitly privileges the thin and strong as those who should be de facto leaders, even as it asks the fat and presumptively weak to subordinate themselves to these same people. Ralph, initially torn between these two views, ultimately learns to prefer the form of government promoted by Piggy because he sees the violence and chaos that result from the fascistic form of government promoted by Jack.

Bakhtin’s theory of the carnivalesque helps us see how Golding consistently works against the grain of fatphobic stereotypes. Perhaps as the association of the fat character with the comic character suggests, the fat character is often seen in his grotesque embodiment to be the very symbol of the carnivalesque. Indeed, a number of critics have observed that the fat body often occupies the place of the grotesque rule that revolts against the established order. Bakhtin famously formulated the distinction between the “classical” body and the “grotesque” body, where the latter bulges forth beyond clearly demarcated bodily boundaries and thus symbolizes a more general misrule. In his massively influential Rabelais and his World, Mikhail Bakhtin explores carnival in relation to subversion and liberation, where rigid hierarchies are distorted and challenged by triumphant laughter. In its ideal form, Bakhtin views carnival as “the true feast of time, the feast of becoming, change and renewal,” which celebrated “the gay freedom of thought and imagination.” Conventionally, the figure of Piggy, named after that most marginal of animals, would be the figure of carnivalesque misrule, but as we have seen, he is, in fact, the figure of order in the context of the island.

Golding makes Jack the figure of misrule, but a misrule that is dangerously destructive and violent. Jack’s blood sport that culminates in the ritualized “feast of misrule” challenges the idealistic account Bakhtin offers of the carnival as a potentially liberatory state of disruption. Indeed, it turns into a fascist exercise of power abuse under Jack’s leadership. The carnival, as Dale Bauer suggests, “is the realm of desire unmasked, taken out of the law of the culture, and involved in an economy of difference. While authoritative discourse demands conformity, the carnivalesque discourse renders invalid any codes, conventions or laws which govern or reduce the individual to an object of control.” Ironically, the carnivalesque as practiced by Jack’s small ruling group of hunters only subverts the order through the act of violence, rule-breaking, and savagery that they practice, all of which Jack takes to be “jolly good fun.” While they assert their right to break the rules, they impose their will on their fellow boys; thus, the carnivalesque serves to pro-
mote the oppressive totalitarian regime, in which the frightened masses look to the strong junta to protect them from imagined threats. Far from being the ideal, liberating experience that Bakhtin often sees it to be, the carnivalesque comes to manifest primitive instincts that are, ultimately, darker and evil forces. Behind their masks of paint, Jack and his hunters lead a guilt-free existence, and act as they wish. Ironically, even as Jack’s group seek to invalidate the “hierarchical rank, privileges, norms and prohibitions,” as proposed by Bakhtin’s account of the carnival, their subversive acts that under Bakhtin’s formulation should be liberatory in fact reproduce the power and control dynamics of the mainland in an intensely destructive form.

The ironic culmination of the fascistic carnivalesque is made most obvious in the cruel murder of Piggy, the voice of reason, order, and deliberative democracy. In a futile but courageous attempt to put an end to the prevailing state of anarchy initiated by the actions of Jack and his hunters, Piggy seeks to assert the rule of the conch. Significantly, Piggy dies as the conch is destroyed. As the narrator says, “The rock struck Piggy a glancing blow from chin to knee; the conch exploded into a thousand white fragments and ceased to exist.”

Golding parallels this murder with the ritualized killing of the pigs by using language that makes the one reminiscent of the other: “Piggy’s arms and legs twitched a bit, like a pig’s after it has been killed.”

Golding uses the same imagery in his descriptions of the dead pigs and the character Piggy: “The pigs lay, bloated bags of fat” and “Piggy a bag of fat.”

Although such imagery draws on the kind of fatphobic stereotypes used by schoolyard bullies, Golding clearly does not mean for the reader to see either the pig or Piggy in these negative terms. The terms, instead, seek to align the reader with Piggy and to comprehend the dehumanizing effects of the totalitarian regime embodied by Jack and his gang. They represent the consuming passions of their society, which transforms all it touches into a mere dehumanized object.

Piggy himself embodies the ambiguous position of the pig; thus, he has elicited among the boys both the laughter and fear. Even as his embodiment has been the object of ridicule, his rationality has posed a threat, especially to the fascistic group, who want to promote their superiority over the other boys. Indeed, Golding exposes to view the danger of such a form of government, when he shows Piggy being hunted and killed with the same ritualized methods used to hunt the pigs. Piggy’s death, as C. B. Cox aptly notes, “is a poignant reminder of the unjust and cruel treatment given by society to so many good men.”

With the death of Piggy, Golding makes us interrogate society’s prejudices against fat individuals. Ralph offers us an example of the potential for reform in the reader, as he grieves for the loss of his “true, wise friend.”

Coming from the young man who had given him the name of
“Piggy” and thus reinscribed the dehumanized stereotypes from the mainland, such a realization suggests that Ralph has learned to question the prejudices that have made the boys devalue the friend he has come to admire. It is in the end Piggy whose wisdom gives a “new understanding” to Ralph, who weeps for the death of his friend.\(^7^4\)

In many ways *Lord of the Flies* is eerily prophetic in terms of its portrayal of a society that prioritizes physical might over intellectual deliberation and in terms of its representation of the stigmatization of fat children as a cultural and social construct that is acquired at a young age. In placing the boys on an island, Golding could expose to view just how much social constructs are internalized at an early age. Even there, those prejudices of the mainland seem to affect the interactions between the boys, and those same prejudices serve, in part, to promote the small group of boy-hunters who tyrannize over the other boys through the ritual promotion of their superiority. Despite the fact that our culture values children as potential for the future, the reader looks on with horror to see how they reinscribe the same values as those of the civilized world. Indeed, those of the postwar generation who had first-hand knowledge of fascistic governments would all too horrified to see these boys play the very same “games.” The one boy who is most ostracized and finally murdered is the one who promotes a world of democracy, reason, peace, and even, to speak religiously, salvation. However, if the island is a microcosm of the adult world, the behavior of the boys obviously indicates how our society is a far cry from Piggy’s ideal society. Golding explains his critical stance as follows: “I have a view which you have not got and I would like you to see this from my point of view. Therefore, I must first put it so graphically in my way of thinking that you identify yourself with it, and then at the end I am going to put you where you are, looking at it from outside.”\(^7^5\)

This is the poetic quality that Golding achieves in *Lord of the Flies*, which vividly “enlichtens and horrifies by its nearness to, rather than its distance from, reality.”\(^7^6\) Even on the very first page, there is this implication that the boys represent contemporary Western society, and what they do on the island signals a microcosmic version of the social and cultural environment they were born into. As the narrator says, “The fair boy stopped and jerked his stockings with an automatic gesture that made the jungle seem for a moment like the Home Counties.” If the behavior of the boys represents, in Walter Allen’s words, “general human behavior in the absence of restraint,” then Golding uses the novel to warn our contemporary society of the dystopia that results when people give free reign to their unjust stigmatization of fat people.\(^7^7\) The text’s importance lies not only in its depiction of fatphobia, but also in its reversal of the false assumptions attributed to fatness. Being
the most intelligent and sensible boy, Piggy inverts the repressive meanings inscribed on the body. In this respect, Piggy accommodates a new and a more positive appropriation of fatness, and his story reads as a critique of many negative stereotypes commonly associated with fat people. As though Golding had never written, however, a recent reality television show called *Fat Teens Can’t Hunt* aims to teach ten overweight young Britons to lose weight in a month while living amongst an Aboriginal community. The program offers a clear and sad counterpoint to Golding’s critique of contemporary anti-fat bias. It is sad to look back on *Lord of the Flies* with its powerful critique of fatphobia to see that we have, if anything, only furthered such stereotypes.

**NOTES**


6. Ibid.

7. Ibid., 59–60.


20. Ibid, 95.
24. Ibid.
28. Ibid., 242.
32. Crandall, “Prejudice against Fat People,” 885.
33. During World War II in Britain, all sorts of food were rationed including meat, cheese, tinned tomatoes, rice, jam, tea, eggs, peas, canned and dried fruits, biscuits, sweets, and cooking fat. Due to the continuing food shortage, the sweet ration was halved in 1946.

35. Ibid., 3.
36. Ibid., 68.
37. Ibid., 225.
38. Ibid., 6.
39. Ibid., 17.
40. Ibid., 17–18.
42. Ibid., 44, 47.
49. Ibid., 200.
50. Ibid., 145.
51. Ibid., 143.
52. Ibid., 45–46.
53. Ibid., 125.
54. Ibid., 165.
55. Ibid., 75.
56. Ibid., 76.
58. Ibid., 11.
59. Ibid., 23.
63. Ibid., 153.
70. Ibid., 201.
71. Ibid., 147, 199.
74. Ibid., 129.