Historicizing Fat in Anglo-american Culture

Levy-Navarro, Elena

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Over the past two decades, articles with titles such as “Where Fat Is the Problem, Heredity Is the Answer,” “Genes Take Charge, and Diets Fall by the Wayside,” and “Having Trouble Squeezing into Your Jeans? Blame Your Genes” have regularly appeared in respectable mainstream publications like the New York Times and Scientific American. These articles cite studies purporting to demonstrate that fat people are not to blame for their deviation from bodily norms. Instead, as a 1990 New York Times article proposes, fat is caused by a “genetic defect.” In that article, Ethan Sims of the University of Vermont expresses the hope that “the new research would lead people to be more understanding about those who are overweight”: “There’s a tendency whenever we see a person who’s overweight to feel that if they just cared a little more and pulled themselves together, they wouldn’t be fat,” a tendency that he thinks new research will counteract. He concludes, “We have to be very sympathetic.”

It is tempting for fat activists to want to take advantage of the sympathy generated by this research and to use genetic determinism as a basis on which to build a case for fat rights. Because fat people have had to live with shame and guilt for so long, they might welcome scientific evidence that blames their nonconforming bodies on their genes rather than their moral character. If fat is caused by a genetic defect, the argument would suggest, then fat people are neither morally weak nor gluttonous but merely unfortunate...
victims. Indeed, following this line of reasoning, they may even be said to
deserve some compensation for their presumed suffering or, at the very least,
special dispensation for their genetic inability to meet the corporeal standards
that define an unstigmatized individual.

Fortunately, contemporary fat activists need not consider these issues
in a vacuum. Debates over the causes of fat, and particularly the argument
that certain individuals have a hereditary predisposition to be fat, have been
around since the nineteenth century, at least. In all that time, such a claim
has not saved fat people from stigma. In fact, such beliefs have often had the
reverse effect of urging the fat person to work harder in order to fight their
supposedly inborn tendencies. In 1850, for example, Dr. Thomas King Cham-
bers argued that because obesity was hereditary, being fat required “[t]he
hourly watch over the instinctive desires”; like the philosopher Epictetus, the
fat individual must “mount guard, and lie in constant ambush against him-
self.”5 In a 2007 New York Times article, Albert J. Stunkard of the University
of Pennsylvania echoes Chambers when he proclaims “that those who tend to
be fat will have to constantly battle their genetic inheritance if they want to
reach and maintain a significantly lower weight.”6 Equally problematic, the
very idea of sympathy, as opposed to empathy, implies inequality—you don’t
pity equals—while the notion that fat must be caused by a genetic “defect,”
rather than a genetic variation, reinforces the construction of fat as a fault to
be cured or eliminated—a deviation rather than simply a difference.

What is needed then is an alternative way of framing the fat body, one that
eschews questions of etiology. Judith Butler’s theories regarding performativ-
ity offer such a means of rethinking the fat body and could provide a way
out of the dilemmas created for activists by the essentialist notion of genetic
determinism.7 In this essay, I will closely examine one nineteenth-century text,
Wilkie Collins’s 1860 sensation novel, The Woman in White, to demonstrate
at least one way in which Butler’s theories might be articulated within a spe-
cific historical context. In the novel, the character of Count Fosco espouses a
notion of corporeal identity that prefigures Butler’s theory of performativity;
in so doing, he appropriates and redeployes dominant Victorian constructions
of fat in a way that exposes their social construction and reveals the coercive
nature of bodily norms in general.

**DOING FAT**

The notion that fat people should be given rights because they are ultimately
victims of a genetic defect seems problematic, because it does not directly
challenge the stigma attached to fat but rather transfers it from the subject’s “self” (imagined as separate from her corporeal existence) to her body, from her “flawed” character to her “defective” genes. How much difference is there really between a discourse that depicts fat people as slaves to their appetites and one that represents them as victims of their bodies’ genetically programmed predispositions? Underpinning both is a vision of the subject as alienated from the body, one that reinforces the Cartesian dualism that has historically justified oppression based on gender, race, and class as well as on fat. The rhetoric of genetic determinism thus risks reinscribing the view that fat people are out of control of their bodies (with the attendant assumption that a body is separate from the self and subject to its control), which has historically been one of the primary justifications for fat hatred.

Furthermore, within the discourse of defective genes, the fat subject must deny his or her own agency and instead inhabit the disempowered position of victim in order to avoid stigma. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick explains the tendency to insist that marginalized groups claim victim status in order to be accepted: “anything that our capitalist/consumer culture does not figure as absolute compulsion (e.g., addiction), it instead recasts as absolute choice through the irresistible metaphor of the marketplace.” Such a logic assumes that if you are not at the mercy of your fat genes, you must have made choices that led to being fat and ought to be held responsible for those choices. In Sedgwick’s opinion, the desire to escape blame is behind the propensity for civil rights groups to construct marginalized individuals as victims, such as “the currently popular gay politicos’ retreat into the abjectly essentialist, ‘We deserve rights and dignity because we were born this way and can’t help it,’”8 which is echoed in the rhetoric of fat rights. In fact, Sedgwick argues that the entire nature/nurture debate is ultimately self-defeating with regard to homosexuality, because the search for the origins of same-sex attraction rests upon “essentially gay-genocidal nexuses of thought.”9 Surely, the quest for a naturalized genetic basis for fatness is equally driven by the desire to eliminate fat folk from the culture.

Judith Butler exposes the problematic nature of an appeal for rights that is based on a declaration of helplessness when she writes, “discourse becomes oppressive when it requires that the speaking subject, in order to speak, participate in the very terms of that oppression.”10 Kathleen LeBesco echoes this by stating, “when civil rights are being argued for on the basis of the genetically determined helplessness of fat people, the fat body is effectively rendered uninhabitable.”11 In contrast, Butler’s theory of performativity enables a more liberatory view of fat, one that dismisses the question of etiology with its underlying assumptions and leaves room for a number of “inhabitable” fat subject positions.
For Butler, corporeal identity is an ongoing creative process rather than a fixed or determined essence. The body is something that you “do,” not something that you “are”: “[T]he body is not merely matter but a continual and incessant materializing of possibilities . . . one does one’s body.”12 Butler’s work focuses on the constitutive constraints that produce gendered subjects and sexed bodies in Western culture, but the applications of her theories are much broader, as her Bodies That Matter demonstrates. Butler herself gestures toward other components of corporeal identity, those that are “signified by the domain of biology, anatomy, physiology, hormonal and chemical composition, illness, age, weight, metabolism, life and death.” She argues further that “each of those categories have a history and a historicity,” that “each of them is constituted through the boundary lines that distinguish them and, hence, by what they exclude,” and that “relations of discourse and power produce hierarchies and overlappings among them and challenge those boundaries.”13 Butler’s elaboration of the production of sexed identities can thus provide a model for the exploration of other aspects of corporeal identity. In other words, it is possible to say that just as one must “do” one’s gender, one must also “do” one’s weight.

Significantly, Butler’s formulation of performativity has at its core the possibility of radical cultural change. The potential for changing the signification and social positioning of fat bodies is found in Butler’s concept of reiterability, or, rather, in opportunities to intervene in the reiteration of a signifying chain to subvert its effects. For Butler, matter, including bodily matter, is not static but is the result of a process of materialization that stabilizes over time to produce the effect of boundary, fixity, and surface we call matter.”14 Even unconscious and routine bodily processes participate in the reiterative procedure by which a culturally intelligible body is constructed. Daily corporeal practices become, for Butler, performative gestures through which specific social identities are embodied; the material body is thus not an essential object but rather the “sedimented effect” of a series of reiterated performances.15 And since even routine corporeal processes occur within culture, culture becomes a mediating factor in the formation of somatic identity and of the body itself. The implication is not only that the body becomes intelligible within and through social relations, which are always relations of power, but also that it must continually reiterate the constitutive constraints that define it and position it within existing power relationships.

Since the body is not a static object, the constitutive constraints that produce fat bodies and fat identities must be repeated and re-cited in order to maintain bodies within specific power relations. Butler notes that performative gestures refer indirectly to representations to provide interpretative
contexts. Corporeal practices, therefore, are citational; that is, they make sense only inasmuch as they enact gestures and modes of embodiment already endowed with cultural meaning.

Since their widespread cultural inception in the nineteenth century, reducing diets have provided a means for fat bodies to cite the norm, and diets have thus served to keep fat bodies in line. Even when one fails to lose weight, one can still perform conformity to cultural demands by visibly demonstrating the desire to conform through the ritual of dieting itself. The 1863 Banting diet is one example of a maintenance regimen that had as its goal the continual materialization of a dieting self with no endpoint in sight. In fact, the reducing body may make a more effective symbol for “right thinking” than the slender body, which Susan Bordo cites as the sign of the properly managed self in contemporary American culture, because it allows one to reiterate continually the desire to conform, to overtly “do” thin, rather than simply to “be” thin. “It is, however,” Butler reminds us, “clearly unfortunate grammar to claim that there is a ‘we’ or an ‘I’ that does its body, as if a disembodied agency preceded and directed an exterior.” Instead, the interior is constructed through performative acts; in this case, the subject-who-wishes-to-conform is actually brought into being through the act of dieting.

It is here, Butler believes, in the reiterability of corporeal practices that the potential for change and thus for some degree of liberation can be found: “If the ground of gender identity is the stylized repetition of acts through time, and not a seemingly seamless identity, then the possibilities of gender transformation are to be found in the arbitrary relation between such acts, in the possibility of a different sort of repeating, in the breaking or subversion of that style.” The historicity of the body, in other words, destabilizes the norm; repetition opens normative rituals and modes of embodiment to alternative, subversive, or incorrect citation, and thus to resignification. “What,” Butler asks, “would it mean to ‘cite’ the law to produce it differently, to ‘cite’ the law in order to reiterate and co-opt its power, to expose the heterosexual matrix and to displace the effect of its necessity?” Certain types of drag, Butler feels, achieve this function for gender norms.

What would it look like if one were to cite the fat body differently in order to disrupt the power relations in which it is enmeshed, to reappropriate and redefine the terms of fat representation and to expose the constructed nature of fat identity? In The Woman in White, Wilkie Collins’s villain, Count Fosco, may be said to effect such an appropriation and redeployment of the category of “fat.” In fact, Fosco performs a kind of “fat drag”; that is, he “does” fat in a way that sometimes defies conventions for representing fat and at other times exaggerates and thus exposes them. It is implied that
he may have taken on a fat body and a fat identity, nominally as a disguise, but functionally in order to exploit the stereotypes associated with fat and thus further his own agenda. But, it is also suggested that as he constructs his body, his body constructs him; body and “self” are mutually constitutive. Fosco thus sets up distinctions between exterior and interior, only to collapse them later in a way that questions the very grounds on which such categories are erected.

**FOSCO, THE VICTORIAN ENIGMA**

By 1860, when Collins wrote *The Women in White*, the discourse of fat that prevailed in Britain posited a body that was separate from and opposed to an interior self, which could and should exercise control over that body. Fat was considered the result of the failure of the will to regulate the body properly. As a satirist in *Chamber’s Journal* asserted, “the grand cause of obesity, is our eating and drinking more than enough.” Sander Gilman maintains that fatness was often considered as one of the “diseases of the will” in Victorian psychology. Arguments that fat was hereditary were unable to dislodge the assumption that fat people were weak willed; indeed, such assertions often reinforced the notion that fat people lacked willpower by implying that fat folk were looking for excuses to justify their failure to assert the requisite control. In 1863 physician Francis Anstie wrote, “The difficulty [of understanding why someone is fat] is got over, commonly, by saying that such a one inherited a fat or a lean body from his parents; but it is obvious that this is no real explanation of the matter, but a mere postponement of the difficulty.” A fat body thus became the outward sign of a weak-willed and defective interior “self.” Count Fosco, the “immensely fat” villain of the novel, calls this construct into question, however, through a performance that both enacts it in an exaggerated fashion and simultaneously suggests that it might be merely an act.

Fosco confused nineteenth-century readers by appearing to endorse fat stereotypes even as he challenged them. The apparent tensions and contradictions in his character are seemingly resolved when it is revealed that Fosco is “in disguise”; his fat may be a form of costume that he has donned in order to evade discovery by his political enemies. This suggests that the weak interior, the lack of the ability to manage one’s body implied by Fosco’s fat, is, in fact, an illusion, part of a calculated performance (in the theatrical sense) that has really been staged by a separate interior “self” for a specific purpose. Thus, the “real” Fosco appears to be the thin spy within, a man of iron will, who imperfectly counterfeits a stereotypical fat man. And, yet, this resolu-
faction cannot fully explain Fosco’s behavior; even his nemesis Walter Hartright never proffers it. Instead, Fosco himself champions the notion that it is the body that controls the mind rather than the other way around; for him the inner “self” is merely an effect of the body. When viewed this way, Fosco’s performance is more akin to drag, in Butler’s sense of the term; the controlling will itself is an effect of his performance. Thus, the whole idea of a separate, “true” identity controlling and directing Fosco’s actions recedes the more closely he is considered.

First, let’s look at the apparent contradictions that Victorian readers found in Fosco’s character. Nineteenth-century reviewers labeled Fosco a mystery. For example, an unsigned 1860 review in the *Times* describes Fosco as “a mystified character” and “an enigmatical personage.” The same critic goes on to compare Fosco to Harold Skimpole from Dickens’s *Bleak House*, because he raises similar questions regarding the sincerity of his performance. Likewise, an anonymous critic in the *Saturday Review* referred to Fosco as “what Mr. Wilkie Collins is so fond of—a puzzle”: “Subtract from him his eccentricities, his Italianisms and his corpulency—what is left? Simply this, that he is a very undecipherable villain.” The reviewer lumps eccentricities, Italianisms and corpulency together as nonessential, part of the mask Fosco wears, and yet he or she does not find a stable, “true” identity with which to contrast these external trappings. The reviewer concludes, however, that this is the strength of Fosco’s character: “Human nature is an enigma which the truest painter will leave unsolved and unattempted.”

Characters within the novel itself also depict Fosco as both impenetrable and conflicted in his identity. The heroine Marian Halcombe, for instance, comments on the “singular inconsistencies in his character” and expresses a “distrust of his unfathomable falseness”: “All the smallest characteristics of this strange man have something strikingly original and perplexingly contradictory in them.” To Marian, Fosco’s appearance suggests that he is concealing his true nature, but that “inner self” remains opaque; he has “the most unfathomable grey eyes I ever saw” and a “deadly smile that hides everything.” Fosco even describes himself in terms that emphasize his paradoxical nature: “I combine in myself the opposite characteristics of a Man of Sentiment and a Man of Business.”

Fosco’s inconsistencies include his partial embrace of the characteristics stereotypically connected with fat in the Victorian era, traits on which the stigmatization of fatness rested. Most obviously, in the nineteenth century, fat was associated with consumer excesses and overconsumption, not simply of food but also of resources, from space in the public sphere to cloth for “oversized” garments. In 1829, Dr. William Wadd concluded that fat people were
“[g]reat lovers of the table, and not easily induced to forego the pleasures of it,” and this sentiment echoed down the century. In fact, as I have argued elsewhere, the Victorians displaced their anxieties about their ability to regulate economic consumption in a capitalist culture onto fat bodies.

Fosco is a consummate consumer. Throughout the novel, he is repeatedly pictured “overeating,” most frequently indulging what other characters consider an inordinate appetite for sweets. In fact, Marian remarks that he “devours pastry as I have never yet seen it devoured by any human beings but girls at boarding-schools.” He also smokes “eternal cigarettes” and, when composing his confession, “require[s]” strong coffee for the “full possession of [his] intelligence.” His appetites are seemingly out of control, and thus his gestures cite previous representations of fat people as irresolute and unrestrained.

His immoderate consumption of sweets is persistently perceived as both juvenile and effeminate, as Marian’s comparison to boarding-school girls makes clear. It is also associated with foreignness, as Percival’s chastisements suggest: “Sugar-and-water for a man of your age!—There! mix your sickly mess. You foreigners are all alike.” Excessive and irregular appetites are often associated with foreigners, children, and women in Victorian writings. Wadd deems it an example of “morbid and extravagant” foreign appetites that “an Esquimaux may dine very daintily on a slice of whale.” Children’s literature teems with warnings aimed at curbing the runaway appetites of the young, such as Eliza Cook’s “The Mouse and the Cake,” in which a young mouse literally dies of gluttony. In The Flesh Made Word, Helena Michie discusses at length the attribution of voracious hidden appetites to women, appetites that, she feels, represented displaced sexual desires. Self-control was, as Michie and many others have argued, the signifier of British manliness in opposition to femininity, childishness, and foreignness. Michie writes that “self-sufficiency” was the emergent norm for men in the Victorian period and that it was conflated with “self-containment” and self-control. The association of fat with unregulated appetite thus meant that fat was frequently seen as disqualifying one from full participation in the community of adult, British men, as the portrayal of Jos Sedley in Thackeray’s Vanity Fair attests.

Citing characters like Jos in his actions and physical presence, Fosco performs effeminacy. Other characters note his womanliness; his co-conspirator Sir Percival Glyde, for example, often makes “the rudest remarks” on “his effeminate tastes and amusements.” His behavior is contrasted with that of Marian, a masculinized woman praised for her ability to transcend feminine weakness. Marian remarks, “[H]e is as nervously sensitive as the weakest of us. . . . He winced and shuddered yesterday, when Sir Percival beat one of the
spansiels, so that I felt ashamed of my own want of tenderness and sensibility by comparison with the Count.”

Fosco aligns himself with women, defending Laura and Marian from Percival’s hypermasculine temper and leaving the room with the ladies after dinner, rather than remaining behind as is customary for men. He is fussy and dressy; indeed, when he “pathetically” bemoans the ruin of his “pretty clean waistcoat” by a dog, Fosco recalls Jos Sedley, who is deemed “as vain as a girl” and “as vain of his person as a woman.” This lament both feminizes him and focuses the reader on his consumption of the yards of expensive cloth needed to make his gaudy and extensive waistcoats. And the womanly sensibility that Marian noted above is characterized by her as the peculiar province of fat men: “He was silent and sensitive, and ready to sigh and languish ponderously (as only fat men can sigh and languish) on the smallest provocation.” She describes him as a sort of Divine in reverse, “a fat St. Cecilia masquerading in male attire.”

Fosco also performatively cites other traits attributed to fat people in the nineteenth century. For example, he “cared for no exercise at all,” recalling Dickens’s slothful Fat Boy, Joe, from The Pickwick Papers. Even his closeness to his animals, while an Italian stereotype, reinforces the notion that fat people were less in control of their appetites and therefore more animalistic. Notably, Fosco does not attempt to hide these fat foibles; on the contrary, he flaunts them.

Despite such performances, Fosco presents an enigma to those who would read him simply through the lens of Victorian stereotypes. Even as he revels in some “fat” character traits, he challenges others. Thus, although he is associated with both women and animals, he also defines himself against them and asserts his “superiority” to them by dominating them. Marian says, “He looks like a man who could tame anything,” the antithesis of the weak-willed fat persona he elsewhere performs. His actions support Marian’s affirmation:

This fat, indolent, elderly man, whose nerves are so finely strung that he starts at chance noises, and winces when he sees a house-spaniel get a whipping, went into the stable-yard on the morning after his arrival, and put his hand on the head of a chained bloodhound—a beast so savage that the very groom who feeds him keeps out of his reach.

His “manly” control over women, particularly his wife, is repeatedly noted. Fosco is able to charm Marian even when she is most suspicious of him. Even after his death, women find him fascinating; at the viewing of his corpse, Walter overhears the female onlookers stating, “Ah, what a handsome man!”
The “masculine” control he exerts over others seems to conflict with the lack of control over his appetites that his fat body denotes, complicating the gendering of his performance. In addition, Fosco sometimes paradoxically exhibits an unusual degree of manly self-command. For example, he is able to keep a rein on his own emotions when the more representative British man, Percival, loses his temper. The feminine Frederick Fairlie marvels at Fosco’s extraordinary ability to maintain his composure: “Born without nerves—evidently born without nerves,” in contrast to the nervous sensibility that Marian notes in him. Even Walter admits, “Sincerely as I loathed the man, the prodigious strength of his character, even in its most trivial aspects, impressed me in spite of myself.”

Fosco’s performance also confounds other prevalent ideas about fat men. Fat men, like women, are often portrayed as passionless in Victorian writings. As Mary Poovey explains, “The model of the human body implicit in [Victorian] physiology is that of a closed system containing a fixed quantity of energy; if stimulation or expenditure occurred in one part of the system, corresponding depletion or excitation had to occur in another.” By this economy, the fat man, because he expressed all his desires through his appetites, would not often be troubled by other desires, such as sexual ones. Even though Fosco has an immense appetite, he is also capable of intense passion; when speaking of Marian, he states, “At sixty, I worshipped her with the volcanic ardour of eighteen.” He doesn’t move like a fat man: “Fat as he is and old as he is, his movements are astonishingly light and easy.” Fat men are supposed to sleep immoderately. “[K]eep the eyes open and the mouth shut” is Wadd’s advice to those who wish to lose weight. Fosco, in contrast, exerts preternatural control over his own sleep cycle. “I personally resemble Napoleon the Great,” he brags, “. . . I also resemble that immortal man in my power of commanding sleep at will.” Napoleon provides an excellent image for the paradox that Fosco presents the Victorians: masculine power fused with an insatiable appetite that is coded feminine. Marian notes the resemblance as well: “He is a most remarkable likeness, on a large scale, of the great Napoleon. His features have Napoleon’s magnificent regularity—his expression recalls the grandly calm, immovable power of the Great Soldier’s face.” He even outdoes Napoleon’s appetites in Marian’s description because he is Napoleon “on a large scale.”

DISGUISE OR PERFORMANCE?

One might be tempted to explain away Fosco’s contradictory behavior and
appearance as simply part of his disguise. At the end of the novel, Fosco is revealed to be a spy, who is on the run from a secret organization called the Brotherhood. When asked to identify Fosco, Pesca, another member of the Brotherhood, replies, “[I]f the man you pointed out at the Opera knows ME, he is so altered, or so disguised, that I do not know him.” This statement causes Walter to speculate that Fosco may have purposefully altered his appearance in order to conceal his identity: “The shaven face, which I had pointed out at the Opera, might have been covered by a beard in Pesca’s time—his dark brown hair might be a wig—his name was evidently a false one. The accident of time might have helped him as well—his immense corpulence might have come with his later years.” Although Walter never proposes that Fosco intentionally made himself fat, his musings could raise that possibility in a reader’s mind. Even if Fosco did not gain weight to aid in his disguise, he uses the stereotypes associated with fatness to further his own ends, thus making them a figurative mask for his machinations.

Fosco exploits fat stereotypes as part of his disguise. When he wishes to appear harmless, for example, he can play the effeminate, comic, ineffectual fat man. “It is hard,” he complains, “to be laughed at in my moments of sentiment, as if my soul was like myself, old and overgrown.” Marian’s remarks show the effectiveness of this performance: “But it was impossible to resist the comical distress of so very large a man at the loss of so very small a mouse. We laughed in spite of ourselves.” When Fosco accompanies Marian in order to spy upon her, he plays up his fatness as a sign of harmlessness and, possibly, passionlessness: “Even so fat an old man as Fosco is surely better than no escort at all?” Likewise, he highlights his fondness for sweets in order to bond with the ladies: “‘A taste for sweets,’ he said in his softest tones and his tenderest manner, ‘is the innocent taste of women and children. I love to share it with them—it is another bond, dear ladies, between you and me.’”

By performing the characteristics associated with fat, Fosco can effectively hide his villainy. The disguise works so well because, as Marian states, fatness and ill-nature are supposedly at odds. She explains,

Before this time I have always especially disliked corpulent humanity. I have always maintained that the popular notion of connecting excessive grossness of size and excessive good-humour as inseparable allies was equivalent to declaring, either that no people but amiable people ever get fat, or that the accidental addition of so many pounds of flesh has a directly favourable influence over the disposition of the person on whose body they accumulate. I have invariably combated both these absurd assertions by quoting
examples of fat people who were as mean, vicious, and cruel as the leanest and the worst of their neighbours.\footnote{73}

According to conventional wisdom, fat men were not villains. This stereotype was, at least partly, based on literary fat men, such as Mr. Pickwick, created by Collins’s mentor Charles Dickens. William Aytoun, commenting in 1864 on Julius Caesar’s longing to surround himself with men “that are fat,” remarks that “Antony, who was somewhat pudding-headed, and whom a liberal diet of quails and venison had lulled into a chronic habit of good-nature, felt no suspicion, and even tried to vindicate the leanest villain of the age.”\footnote{76} Marian’s remarks suggest that fat is the best disguise for a criminal mastermind because a fat man is assumed to be a good-natured and comic figure. Fosco readily exploits this characterization so that a less suspicious mind than Marian’s would be fooled.

The text endorses Marian’s notion that a fat exterior makes a good disguise for a scheming mind. The lawyer Mr. Gilmore echoes Marian’s statement in remarking, “There are many varieties of sharp practitioners in this world, but I think the hardest of all to deal with are the men who overreach you under the disguise of inveterate good-humour. A fat, well fed, smiling, friendly man of business is of all parties to a bargain the most hopeless to deal with.”\footnote{77} Fosco associates disguise itself with fat: “I say what other people only think, and when all the rest of the world is in a conspiracy to accept the mask for the true face, mine is the rash hand that tears off the plump pasteboard, and shows the bare bones beneath.”\footnote{78} The mask is plump, the “self,” bare bones. Fosco draws on the metaphor that figures fat as external to the body and the self. In 1863 self-proclaimed diet guru William Banting famously described fat as a “parasite” attached to, but not belonging to, the body.\footnote{79} Fat is assumed to be worn like clothing, even as the person’s essence or “true” self is imagined as the thin body within or beneath the fat. Fosco thus implies that inside a fat man is a thin self, waiting to get out.

Rather than endorsing this dichotomized view of the self, the text suggests that Fosco’s “inner spy” may be read as merely an effect of his performance. In his confession, Fosco draws attention to his own performance as performance (in the theatrical sense), causing the reader to reread all he has done in the past as “part of the act” and to project a “real” controlling inner essence into the past. Butler’s theory of performativity allows us to question the existence of that inner core and thus opens up a more complex reading of Fosco’s fat than one that figures it as simply a disguise. The core itself is, in fact, created through the reiterated performances. Butler explains that
acts, gestures, and desire produce the effect of an internal core or substance, 
but produce this on the surface of the body, through the play of signifying 
absences that suggest, but never reveal, the organizing principle of identity as 
a cause. Such acts, gestures, enactments, generally construed, are performa-
tive in the sense that the essence or identity that they otherwise purport to 
express are fabrications manufactured and sustained through corporeal signs 
and other discursive means.80

According to Butler, “If gender attributes . . . are not expressive but performat-
ive, then these attributes effectively constitute the identity they are said to 
express or reveal.”81 Accordingly, Fosco is not expressing the inner, masu-
cline, controlled, slender identity, but constructing it performatively. Indeed, 
he inhabits fat stereotypes in so theatrical a manner that his exterior is per-
ceived as a facade; he thus encourages the reader to imagine a controlling 
interior self that stages his assumed act. His outer, stereotypical “fat self” 
thus serves to support the fabrication of the inner, strong-willed, masculine 
spy, who deliberately puts on the fat identity.

The production of this inner self is facilitated by the fact that Fosco’s per-
formance is so exaggerated that it is perceived as an act by other characters 
long before it is revealed as such, which in turn causes them to posit an inte-
rior different from his external persona. For several characters, Fosco’s looks 
and behavior signify “disguise”; these individuals refer to him with terms 
such as “mountebank”82 and “quack.”83 Marian states, “The man’s slightest 
actions had a purpose of some kind at the bottom of every one of them.”84 
Concealment is his watchword; for example, the “rod of iron with which he rules [Madame Fosco] never appears in company—it is a private rod, and is 
always kept upstairs.”85 It would not be difficult for a reader to presume that 
the phallic “private rod” with which he rules Madame Fosco is the key to 
his character, the “true” masculine self hidden within the seemingly feminine 
exterior.

Just as he makes use of stereotypes associated with fat, Fosco is able to 
exploit the assumption that he must have a powerful inner self he is hiding. 
He can thus threaten Marian with the notion of power held back: “Do not, 
I implore you, force me into action—ME, the Man of Action—when it is 
the cherished object of my ambition to be passive, to restrict the vast reach 
of my energies and my combinations for your sake.”86 Even as he plays into 
Marian’s assumption that his fat masks a secret self capable of taming any-
thing, he mocks the very idea of it with his sarcastic aside (“ME, the Man of 
Action”). Because Marian is never quite sure where the “real” Fosco lies, he
is able to construct for himself a subject position from which he can appear either innocuous or extremely dangerous as the need arises.

The binary between a supposed inner and outer self is ultimately collapsed because Fosco’s theatrical excesses in performing fat transcend any purely functional role they may serve in his performance as a spy. In fact, in performing in excess of what his role requires, he cites the trope of “fat as excess.” That is, Fosco seems to indulge in his taste for performance for its own sake rather than for any utilitarian value, and in that, as the wording suggests, Fosco calls attention to his own excessive appetites, in this case for theatricality rather than food. The appetite for power that leads him to create the fat persona seems so immoderate as to suggest that out of control appetites, such as those normally ascribed to fat people, drive his desire to spy.

Indeed, at times, rather than concealing an interior self, Fosco’s exterior seems to reveal it. When Fosco believes that his true identity has been discovered by Pesca, Walter comments, “There was no mistaking the change that passed over the villain’s face. The leaden hue that altered his yellow complexion in a moment, the sudden rigidity of all his features, the furtive scrutiny of his cold grey eyes, the motionless stillness of him from head to foot told their own tale.” Here, Fosco’s body speaks in spite of him, belying any simplistic attribution of a separate controlling self to him. Likewise, when performing the role of spy, a supposed slip of the mask to let the “true” self show, he is still metaphorically primarily a consumer: “he drank in greedily every word that fell from my lips.” In this passage, consuming represents Fosco’s skill as a spy rather than being the signifier of a weakness that is opposed to it. In one of Marian’s descriptions, Fosco’s appearance and his “real” feeling are collapsed: “the aspect under which the Count appeared was, on the other hand, entirely new in my experience of him. He permitted me, this evening, to make his acquaintance, for the first time, in the character of a Man of Sentiment—of sentiment, as I believe, really felt, not assumed for the occasion.” Rather than an opposing false exterior and true interior, Fosco’s exterior and interior seem to be in accord. That is, one can perform one’s true self, a formulation that mystifies those who believe in an underlying essential self that is beyond the realm of artifice and performativity. No wonder reviewers found him a puzzle.

Thus, Fosco’s “inner self” neither equals his exterior nor opposes it. Instead, for Fosco, the “inner” and “outer” personae he performs are mutually constitutive. He thus achieves an effect similar to that of the type of radical drag Butler examines. Butler proposes that drag “subverts the distinction between inner and outer psychic space and effectively mocks both the expressive model of gender and the notion of a true gender identity.” Butler
quotes Esther Newton, saying that drag implies “my ‘outside’ appearance is feminine, but my essence ‘inside’ [the body] is masculine,” while at the same time it suggests, “my appearance ‘outside’ [my body, my gender] is masculine but my essence ‘inside’ [myself] is feminine.” Similarly, Fosco subverts the notion that he is expressing a “true” fat or thin identity. His outside (his body) is fat, but his inside (the spy playing the role of fat man) is thin, at the same time that, by the end of the novel, his outside (the now exposed spy persona) is thin, but his inside (the out-of-control appetite for power and the excesses of his performance) is (stereotypically) fat.

Fosco himself views identity as performance; according to his “philosophy,” individuals are no more than “puppets in a show-box.” He questions the idea of the “truth,” whether of identity or anything else, and instead espouses a relativist view of the world:

I am a citizen of the world, and I have met, in my time, with so many different sorts of virtue, that I am puzzled, in my old age, to say which is the right sort and which is the wrong. Here, in England, there is one virtue. And there, in China, there is another virtue. And John Englishman says my virtue is the genuine virtue. And John Chinaman says my virtue is the genuine virtue. And I say Yes to one, or No to the other, and am just as much bewildered about it in the case of John with the top-boots as I am in the case of John with the pigtail.

Furthermore, he subverts the whole idea of a controlling interior self, by supporting the supremacy of body over mind and asserting the mind’s vulnerability to external control via the body:

Mind, they say, rules the world. But what rules the mind? The body (follow me closely here) lies at the mercy of the most omnipotent of all potentates—the Chemist. Give me—Fosco—chemistry; and when Shakespeare has conceived Hamlet, and sits down to execute the conception—with a few grains of powder dropped into his daily food, I will reduce his mind, by the action of his body, till his pen pours out the most abject drivel that has ever degraded paper. Under similar circumstances, revive me the illustrious Newton. I guarantee that when he sees the apple fall he shall eat it, instead of discovering the principle of gravitation.

For Fosco, the mind is, at least in part, the creation of the body. Moreover, the mind is controlled through the body’s consumption. This proposition raises interesting questions regarding Fosco’s own consuming practices; it
confounds the simplistic attribution of an iron-willed inner self to Fosco by challenging the notion that an inner self could ever be protected from the effects of consuming mountains of pastries and suggests the possibility that Fosco’s addiction to sweets may be as “genuine” as any other interiority one might wish to project upon him. Fosco thus remains “undecipherable” with no stable and solid self against which one can contrast his performance.

Collins’s portrayal of Fosco’s fat drag reveals the constructed nature of the identities projected upon fat bodies in the nineteenth century. The identity that the fat person is supposed to possess—weak-willed, out of control—is attributed to the fat individual simply on the grounds of that person having a fat body. The fat body is presumed to be a legible body; ontology implies etiology. According to Michael Moon, when spectators view a fat body, they claim “a privileged narrative understanding of her will (she’s addicted), her history (she’s frustrated), her perception (she can’t see herself as she really looks), her prognosis (she’s killing herself).”

Moon exposes the institutionalization of this privileged gaze in the nineteenth century by tracing it through Dickens’s characters and noting the role of the medical community in providing it with authority. Fosco, however, disrupts this gaze through his mixture of performances that confirm and challenge fat stereotypes, while any “true self” imposed upon him ultimately escapes one’s grasp. To paraphrase Butler, in imitating the fat personality, “Fosco implicitly reveals the imitative structure” of that personality itself—“as well as its contingency.”

Collins provides little help for the reader seeking to know the reason why Fosco is so fat. Given the shifting nature of Fosco’s complex and contradictory performance of fat identity, it is impossible to determine whether Fosco’s fat originates with his “true” nature, either as a hereditary physical trait or as the expression of a stereotypically self-indulgent character, or with his disguise, either as a deliberately assumed “costume” or as the consequence of acting a role that requires him to eat lots of sweets in order to associate himself with seemingly harmless women and children. Indeed, as I have shown, Fosco’s performance confuses these very distinctions and thus confounds a reader interested in categorizing fat people as either guilty architects of their own conditions or innocent victims. Many Victorian characters were so labeled. In Nicholas Nickleby, for example, Dickens describes guilty Young Wackford Squeers as “a miracle of high feeding,” whereas in Oliver Twist, he is careful to inform us that innocent Dr. Losberne has “grown fat, more from good-humor than from good living.” Instead of being caught up in a quest for origins that seeks to assign or deflect blame, Woman in White focuses our attention on Fosco’s active negotiation of fat identity and his ability to use various ideologies of fatness to his own advantage.
Although Fosco could easily be said to “do fat” in a manner that disrupts dominant narratives of fatness and although he does reappropriate these discourses and deploy them to serve his own purposes, Fosco ultimately stops short of redefining fat identity in a way that might meet the needs of fat activists today. He is, after all, a villain, albeit a charming and engaging one, and he subverts notions of essential fatness to further a nefarious plan to enrich himself at the expense of an innocent heiress. Fat activists might use the historical awareness gained from reading Woman in White to a different end. What if a performative notion of fat identity informed our collective struggle for human rights? Indeed, the recent works of scholars like Kathleen LeBesco advocate such a vision. The tools that Butler suggests—drag, parody, incorrect and irreverent citation—open up new possibilities for doing fat differently. With them, the opportunity arises for us to move away from questions of essential innocence and guilt toward negotiations of fat identity beyond the search for origins.

NOTES

1. I would like to thank the students in my English 607 and English 667 graduate seminars in spring and fall 2007 at Ball State University for giving me feedback on my notions regarding Butler and fat.


4. Ibid., 2.


15. Ibid., 10.

16. I argue this in greater detail in Huff, “A ‘Horror.’”


20. Ibid., 271.


30. Ibid., 331.

31. Ibid., 222.

32. Ibid., 221.

33. Ibid., 561.

34. Ibid., 623.


36. For further discussion, see Huff, “Freaklore: The Dissemination, Fragmentation and Reinvention of the Legend of Daniel Lambert, King of Fat Men,” in *Victorian Freaks*, ed. Marlene Tromp (Columbus: The Ohio State University Press, 2008).


38. Ibid., 232.

39. Ibid., 607.

40. Ibid., 329.


47. Ibid., 222.

48. Ibid., 318.


50. Thackeray, *Vanity Fair*, 27.

51. Ibid., 728.


53. Ibid., 230. Divine, a fat drag performer in the films of John Waters, is discussed in Sedgwick and Moon, “Divinity.”

54. Ibid., 289.


56. Italian boys were stereotypically associated with the display of white mice, birds, and other small animals.


58. Ibid., 223.

59. Ibid., 640.

60. Ibid., 252.

61. Ibid., 361.

62. Ibid., 608.


65. Ibid., 222.


68. Ibid., 221.

69. Ibid., 592.

70. Ibid., 593.

71. Ibid., 292.

72. Ibid., 240.

73. Ibid., 275.

74. Ibid., 294.

75. Ibid., 220.


4: Fosco’s Fat Drag

78. Ibid., 239.
80. Butler, Gender, 136.
82. Collins, Woman in White, 561.
83. Ibid., 372.
84. Ibid., 314.
85. Ibid., 225.
86. Ibid., 457–58.
87. Ibid., 585.
88. Ibid., 243.
89. Ibid., 291.
90. Butler, Gender, 137.
91. Ibid. Brackets in original.
92. Collins, Woman in White, 615.
93. Ibid., 237.
94. Ibid., 618.
96. Butler, Gender, 137.