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Does This BMI Make Me Look Fat?: Defining the bounds of "normal" weight in the U.S. and France

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update

SYMPOSIUM PREVIEW BY GRACE KYUNGWON HONG

Strange Affinities

THE SEXUAL AND GENDER POLITICS OF COMPARATIVE
RACIALIZATION

ON APRIL 23, the Center for the Study of Women will present a one-panel symposium, entitled “Strange Affinities: The Gender and Sexual Politics of Comparative Racialization,” from 3 to 5 pm in 314 Royce Hall. Roderick Ferguson, Associate Professor of American Studies at the University of Minnesota, Twin Cities, will present “The Lateral Moves of African American Studies.” Ruby Tapia, Assistant Professor of Comparative Studies at Ohio State University, will present “Volumes of ‘Transnational’ Ven-

geance: Fixing Race and Feminism on the Way to Kill Bill.” Two UCLA professors, Rafael Perez-Torres of the Department of English and Russell Robinson of the Critical Race Studies program in the School of Law, will provide comment. This event is co-sponsored by the Asian American Studies Center, the Chicano Studies Research Center, the Women’s Studies Program, the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender Studies Program, the Asian American Studies Department, UC Humanities Research Institute, and the Critical Race Studies Program in the School of Law.

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DOES THIS BMI MAKE ME LOOK FAT?

*Defining the bounds of “normal” weight in the U.S. and France**Abigail C. Saguy*

Feminists have a long-standing interest in the social pressures put upon women to conform to narrowly defined and unrealistic body expectations (see Bordo 1993; Chernin 1985; Hesse-Biber 1996; Nichter 2000; Thompson 1994; Wolf 1991). In her classic book *Unbearable Weight: Feminism, Western Culture and the Body* (1993; 130), Susan Bordo argues that “denying oneself food becomes the central micro-practice in the education of feminine restraint and containment of impulse.” The excruciating thinness of fashion models conveys a message that female beauty requires the denial of appetite, while advertisements for food

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Sciences From Below

FEMINIST AND POSTCOLONIAL STANDPOINTS

► How have recent feminist studies of modernity and tradition, along with postcolonial science and technology studies, produced new resources for thinking about gender, imperialism, and sciences?

SANDRA HARDING, with respondents FRANCOISE LIONNET (Professor, French & Francophone Studies) and SHARON TRAWEEK (Associate Professor, History)

SENIOR FACULTY FEMINIST SEMINAR SERIES: APRIL 18, 4 pm, Faculty Center

Does this BMI make me look fat?, *continued from page 1*
remind women (and men) that eating food is often a source of guilt and shame.

This literature has been extremely important in identifying body weight as a political and feminist issue. Yet, with a few notable exceptions (Schoenfelder and Wieser 1983; Millman 1980), feminist scholarship has generally not examined body size from the perspective of women who would be categorized as medically obese nor queried how those medical categories are constructed and with what implications. Instead it has focused on anorexia and bulimia and has largely taken medical definitions of unhealthy weight for granted. My work fills these holes in the literature by examining how medical science and news media define the upper and lower limits of “normal” body weight and how they discuss underweight/overweight issues, eating disorders, and obesity. The talk I will be giving at the Center for the Study of Women next month examines cross-issue and cross-national differences in how the U.S. and French news media frame eating disorders and overweight/obesity as medical issues and public health priorities.

Normal or ideal weight is increasingly being defined through a medical and public health lens, in which only 2% of the U.S. population is defined as too thin while 2/3 is defined as too fat. This has far-reaching consequences for women’s (and men’s) tendency to engage in self-surveillance and for medical and policy interventions and political priorities. Medical expertise about ideal weight has gendered implications: women are more likely than men to try to lose weight and to be advised by their doctors to lose weight (Bish et al. 2005). Strikingly, over 80% of weight-loss surgery patients in 2002 were women (Santry et al. 2005). As childhood obesity emerges as a pressing political issue, parents are often blamed. One article opined that “parents who do nothing to prevent obesity in their children are guilty of abuse, if not legally then morally” (Lovric 2005). In that women are usually held responsible for childcare responsibilities, they often bear the brunt of this blame. For instance, an “open letter to conservative Americans,” ran as a paid advertisement in several major newspapers during the summer of 2005, warned that “thirty plus years of feminist careerism created our exploding obesity-driven child and adult diabetes epidemic. With most mothers working, too few



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adults and children eat balanced, nutritious, portion-controlled home cooked meals.” Discussions of overweight and obesity as a disease or a self-induced health risk may increase the stigma and blame associated with heavier bodies, worsening the weight-based discrimination that women face (Conley and Glauber 2005; Schwartz, Chambliss, Brownell, and Billington 2003; Puhl and Brownell 2001). Additionally, since African-American and Mexican-American women and the poor tend to be heavier, these discussions may also reinforce and justify existing ethnic and class inequalities. For all these reasons, current discussions of weight in the news media are an important object of scholarly inquiry.

The United States and France provide an especially fruitful comparison among large Western, industrialized democracies. While rates of obesity in France lag behind those of the United States, these rates have increased dramatically in the past few decades, especially among children. French public officials and the French news media increasingly discuss obesity as a major public health crisis. As in the United States, eating disorders are also a problem in France (Darmon 2003).

Previous comparative work on social problem construction suggests that how national presses frame social problems is informed by several factors including dominant cultural repertoires (Benson and Saguy 2005). In both of these countries, thinness has been regarded as a sign of prestige, virtue, and health since the early twentieth century (Stearns 1997). This is expected to lead journalists in both countries to consider overweight/obesity

more of a concern than underweight. Yet, historian Peter Stearns (1997) has shown that body weight is more moralized in the United States than in France, which might lead to more individual blame for obesity in the United States compared to France. In that France has stronger political traditions of socialism, it may be more likely to blame obesity on systemic social factors. In that it has a stronger state, the French news is expected to be more likely to stress state responsibility for the “obesity crisis.”

Despite the greater global power of the United States, France is commonly regarded as the most consistent and forceful First-World voice of resistance to American political and cultural hegemony, expressing concerns about American imperialism and unchecked capitalism that many other Western and non-Western nations share less vocally. Moreover, many French and Americans alike consider France (and Europe more generally) to be culturally superior to the United States and look to France as a model for artistic (including culinary) and intellectual innovation (Lamont 1987; Clark 1987). Given the relative position of the United States and France in a “global field of nation states” (Benson and Saguy 2005; Bourdieu 1998:41), the French press is expected to be more likely to refer to the United States in its discussions of obesity than vice versa, and also to use this issue to discuss larger concerns regarding American cultural imperialism and the decline of French values and culture. Thus the French press is expected to use the U.S. as “other” (“look at how fat they are!”) and as a cautionary glimpse of France’s future (“if we don’t change course, we will soon be as fat as they!”). In contrast, based on comparative research on moral boundaries (Lamont 2000), racial and ethnic boundaries are expected to be evoked more frequently by the U.S. press. For the findings of this research and a discussion of their implications, attend the CSW talk on May 15 at 4 pm in Royce 314!

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Abigail C. Saguy (Ph.D., Princeton 2000; doctorat, l’EHESS, Paris, 1999) is an Assistant Professor of Sociology at UCLA. She has a longstanding interest in social problem construction and how subordinate groups are sometimes able to redefine cultural

meaning in ways that increase their control. Her book *What is Sexual Harassment? From Capitol Hill to the Sorbonne* (2003), studied how and why sexual harassment has been defined very differently in the United States and France and across national institutions. She is currently studying scientific and news framing of body weight in the United States and in France. Saguy has published her work in the *American Sociological Review*, *Law and Society Review*, *European Journal of Women’s Studies*, and the *Journal for Health Politics, Policy and Law*, among other journals. She recently received a Faculty Development Grant from the Center for the Study of Women.