

Consuming Bodies: Fatness, Sexuality, and the Protestant Ethic

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## Consuming Bodies: Fatness, Sexuality, and the Protestant Ethic

For those readers who spent their entire lives up till today in a secluded bomb shelter or an abandoned cave in some nearby woods, allow me to share a secret with you: fat persons are stigmatized. As I will discuss, and explore, below, fatness has come to represent a slew of undesirable social identities or traits. Fatness also represents some of the rather scary and perplexing contradictions characterizing many Western, industrialized citizens. Fat people often bring to mind -- as well as print, popular discourses, and daily experience -- conceptions of non-Whiteness, class inequalities, violations of the Protestant Ethic, media-popularized beauty ideals, health, and personal freedoms. That's a lot of cultural baggage to place on the shoulders of fat folks, no matter how broad or plump they may be.

### Why fat folks are our cultural bogeypeople

Before grappling with a meaty discussion of why fat folks elicit such terror and loathing, it is perhaps best to dispose right away with the popular (and dare I say, paper-thin?) excuses cited by many as justifications for the anti-fat sentiments permeating popular culture as well as our bodies. I spoke recently with a student whose 15-year-old, diabetic, stick-thin sister is "mysteriously"[1] gaining weight. He told me about her overwhelming terror of getting fat and her resulting eating disorder, a tragic plan (enthusiastically supported by her friends, he noted in disgust) that includes starving herself back into supermodel thinness. Although this young woman still weighs below the American national average of 145 (Gregory 2001), and I do not, we share a painful, common bond: fleshy existence in a culture that devalues larger bodies, especially feminine ones. Why is fat so offensive that Americans spend billions of dollars per

year on useless diets and whittle away our healthy bodies to distance ourselves from our corporeality?

There are many popular reasons touted as justifications for not hiring fat folks, for rewarding employees for taking the stairs instead of the elevator, and for more often expressing an interest in dating or befriending thinner people. Among those reasons are: 1. The increasing economic burdens fat folks' supposed poor health or body size inflict on society in general 2. A kind of tough-love attitude to get us to exercise more and eat better "for our own good," 3. Because fat folks represent laziness and greed and are therefore demoralizing to ourselves and others, and lastly, 4. Because we are supposedly aesthetically unappealing (Cash and Roy 1999; LeBesco 2004).

My initial reaction to these claims are twofold. First, I feel compelled to advise every American to squeeze (and I do mean squeeze, since it's estimated that 55% of us are fat) (Wann 1998) into an Introduction to Sociology classroom during a discussion of the social construction of reality, especially in relation to beauty ideals. My second urge is to point out the many, many cases of other individuals and groups who supposedly hurt themselves and drive up health costs and the complete lack of cultural attention to the topic.[2] For example, I haven't heard a public outcry about the "tanning epidemic," which exposes people to harmful, potentially carcinogenic ultraviolet rays (Stearns 1997). Likewise, I have yet to see a mainstream magazine devote special issues to the dangers of driving dangerously (and living in L.A. County, I would appreciate a little more attention to the subject!); unwisely resorting to anger during tense confrontations (potentially resulting in violence and increased health care costs); or environmental racism, which results in millions of illnesses and death every year (Millman 1980; Stearns 1997). Why aren't tailgaters, people who don't shovel their icy walkways, and polluting businesses targeted

for their unhealthy choices? Why isn't there a repressed-masculinity-and-increased-risk-of-heart-complications epidemic or a war against folks who neglect to use bathmats while showering?

Furthermore, as fat activist Marilyn Wann comments, discriminating against fat persons "for their own good" seems a little contradictory and hardly altruistic (1998). As various authors have pointed out, fatness, whether addressed as disease or lifestyle choice, is discussed in punishing, condescending, and even condemning terms disproportionate to the supposed concern people have for our mental and physical well-being (Barron and Lear 1989; Mayer 1983; Stearns 1997). I can't be the first person to question how heaping blame and discrimination on folks supposedly encourages "healthier" behavior.

As for the claim that fat persons are lazy, indolent, greedy, carnal, and prisoners to our overwhelming passions, that deserves some in-depth attention. I discuss that in greater length in the following section.

#### Carnality and religion: Fatness meets sexuality and food

It may seem strange to combine sexuality, food, and religion in this discussion of fatness, but it is important to remember that the mind/body dichotomy characterizing Western cultures has deep roots in Judeo-Christianity, among other philosophies. This has frequently manifested in separating the body into various components: spirituality and mentality, which are connected with the divine and the afterlife (and, not incidentally, with masculinity and rationality) and carnality and emotionality, which focus folks on this world and are therefore corrupting and chaotic. As a result, anything connected to bodily or worldly pleasures -- sex, eating, laziness, greed -- becomes, at the very least and because of the lasting influences of Judeo-Christianity in Western culture, popularly suspect.[3]

I was surprised when I first began researching the topic of fatness how often I encountered discussions of sexuality. In fact, I was amazed at how many anti-fat discourses parallel those about sex and sexuality, at least according to Foucault's *History of Sexuality*. Fatness, the possibility and specter of which crouches in people's subconscious like a nighttime bogeyperson, is discussed fearfully, painfully, *almost obsessively* in popular culture. It is a taboo, horrible place to be, but discussing it, like discussing sexuality in *History of Sexuality*, becomes almost irresistible. It is reviled for its excess, for its elevation of the carnal over the spiritual. It is Otherized as the anti-bodily norm. Yet, like Victorian individuals who covered their piano legs out of a sense of decency, but only because their preoccupation with sexuality predisposed them toward such comparisons, fatness, at the same time as it is preached against and constructed in opposition to "normal and healthy," becomes a secret and terrifying fascination.

Fatness, that horribly riveting topic, is also a popular cultural spectacle, its excess and looseness explored in fleshy detail in pro-diet and -health messages. For example, I recently rented *Supersize Me*, a DVD documentary that supposedly explores the evils of combining consumption of greasy, fast foods and, interestingly enough, inactivity, as if poking French fried potatoes into one's mouth automatically results in exercise allergies. Watching the horrifying documentary, I was overwhelmed with images of fat people eating (shamelessly!) and strolling in the park, their greasy lips stretching wide, body rolls undulating, and buttocks grinding. I had to turn off the DVD after 15 minutes, uncomfortable with what felt like some kind of fat pornography.

Meanwhile, thin folks in movies and on talk shows don fat suits like some sort of modern blackface. Some thin actors -- I am reminded of Gwyneth Paltrow in *Shallow Hal*, Mike Myers in the Austin Powers movies, Julia Roberts in *America's Sweetheart*, Eddie Murphy in *The Nutty*

*Professor*, and Courtney Cox-Arquette on *Friends* -- merely don the suits for movies or commercials for its blatant entertainment value, most often for laughs. Some, however, justify their foray into corpulence by claiming to want to experience fatphobia and therefore “get in touch with” and bring awareness to the plight of fat people. Tyra Banks, for example, recently raised awareness of sizeism by donning a fat suit and going out onto the town, a journey that of course culminated with a blind date. Not surprisingly, Ms. Banks found people can be insensitive, even cruel, to fat folks. While sympathetic messages about fatness sound like a toddling step toward understanding, it occurs to me that a better way of learning about fat individuals’ experiences with fatphobia might be, well, asking *fat* individuals what it means to be ourselves in a fatphobic culture.

Once again, when I watch thin persons don fat suits, I am fascinated by the presentation of fatness. Watching them pull the bulky suit up over their diminutive frames, seeing the flesh-colored fabric slide over their bodies, I feel fatness is represented less as a stigmatized identity and more as a spectacle, a source of fleshy visual consumption (ironic, especially given the implicit messages about the dangers of overconsumption).

Kulick (2005) writes about pornography emphasizing fat women, noting that such venues almost always feature fat women and not men. He says (fetishized?) fat pornography often focuses on the act of physically consuming food, thereby blurring the boundaries between consuming and consummating. These representations, Kulick notes, move beyond pornography’s usual focus on the phallus as the supreme protagonist, shifting instead to the more subtle eroticism of consuming food.

Historical examples of such overlaps can be found in the seemingly innocent and incongruous histories of the common graham cracker and bowl of Corn Flakes™. Graham and

Kellogg, early-20<sup>th</sup>-century advocates for sexual temperance, both developed foods to keep sexual “excesses” (including the dreaded masturbation and homosexuality) in check. “Corn Flakes, for example, were designed by J. H. Kellogg as a massive anaphrodisiac to temper and eventually reduce sexual ardor in American men” (Kimmel 1996, 129). More interesting than their introduction of these healthy foods was the public’s unblinking reaction to the concept of controlling sexuality through food (Stearns 1997); I argue this is because the links between the two run deep in Western culture. An especially salient example of such linkings occurs in Aubrey’s discussion of the perceived improprieties of the contemporary Black bottom: “In the mind of the black upwardly mobile, the butt may connote a lack of self-analysis, a loose, unrestricted appetite for food, sex, dances like the Atomic Dog. It’s like having a big mouth or no table manners” (2004, 26-27).

These links, however, are neither simple nor unambivalent. Much like American discussions of sexuality, issues of fatness are laden with fascination, abhorrence, and contradictions. In her germinal book *Such a Pretty Face*, Marcia Millman notes how many of her interviewees liken fatness to Victorian sexuality, even calling fatness “the new sexuality” (1980). Like sex and sexuality, messages about fatness are rarely consistent or, even at their most scathing (perhaps especially then), free from secret fascination. This is perhaps most obvious in the contradictory images of fat persons as either hypersexual or asexual.

Given the very tangible and obvious links between food and sexuality, it should come as no surprise that fat folks are often considered hypersexual slaves to our bodily pleasures. Whereas Graham and Kellogg made foods to reduce sexual appetites, marketers now introduce foods to reduce or assuage physical, literal hunger; examples can be found in any grocery or health food market. Food has replaced sex as the newest cultural obsession, Wann maintains

(1998), but I think she would also agree that they are so interrelated, it is difficult to imagine talking about one without addressing the other. Fatness, popularly constructed as it is as enervating, corrupting, and intemperate, relies on the same discourses that sent Graham scurrying to the kitchen to concoct a remedy. It is therefore somewhat inevitable that fat folks, discussed as hedonists who cannot or will not “abstain” from overeating, are also portrayed and discussed as sexually ravenous. After all, those who so obviously (or so it is said) indulge in one bodily pleasure will likely surrender to another (Mansfield and McGinn 1993; Millman 1980; Wann 1998).

#### Dieting away our libidos

Since fatness and hypersexuality remain so tightly interwoven, it is no wonder that fat folks can seem scary, rapacious, uncontrolled, and uncontrollable. This is especially obvious in two examples: the term “loose” and the explosive popularity of dieting. The term “loose,” especially as applied to women, implies sexual permissiveness; not coincidentally, loose, unrestricted, culturally unbound bodies in the form of fatness are likewise seen as threatening to patriarchal power structures (Rowe 1995). Likewise, the popular myth of women burning bras during the late-1960s persists, Iris Young maintains, because of the implied lesson that loose breasts, unconfined by garments, represent unhinged and potentially dangerous sexuality (2005). Or, more concisely, loose bodies popularly translate to loose morals (Turner 1996). As Thomas Aquinas 13<sup>th</sup>-century theologian, commented, “Gluttony denotes, not any desire of eating and drinking, but an inordinate desire... leaving the order of reason, wherein the good of moral virtue consists” (as quoted in “Gluttony,” n.d.).

Another consideration is the ubiquitous term: “letting oneself go.” This is used constantly in magazines, on daytime talk shows, in warnings from friends and parents to new brides and college frosh (most often of the feminine sort, of course!). What does this mean? Explicitly, of course, it is a warning not to give in to bodily appetites, at the expense of bulking up and becoming visually unconsumable. Implicitly, however, “letting oneself go” implies gaining freedom from some kind of imprisonment. Letting oneself go seems to me to imply not only a physical and sexual “looseness” but perhaps also a rather scary escape from the dictates of oppressive beauty ideals (Hartley 2001). Is that another reason why fat persons seem so threatening: because we appear to have freed ourselves from the cutthroat rat race of striving for unachievable beauty ideals?

Fatness, representing a unique cultural tapestry of body size, sexuality, and physical and political strength, flies in the face of gender ideals of passivity (especially for White women) and invisibility (in the case of many women of color). But lest we should start celebrating fatness as a site for political and sexual looseness that carves out an equal space for women of all shapes, ethnicities, sizes, races, sexualities, and classes, it behooves us to turn to popular culture for a few moments. Watch TV for ten minutes, flip through any popular magazine, or tune into any daytime talk show, and an answer -- The Answer -- to women’s shocking looseness becomes starkly apparent: dieting.

Dieting is popularly cast as a way to take back control and be in charge; keep in mind this relies on the mind/body assumption that somehow “we” (meaning our minds, which are privileged in such discussions) are always at war with our out-of-control bodies. Unraveling this metaphor (if, indeed, as I would argue, the mind also represents masculine, Christian, and White ideals), we see that femininity and non-Whites, symbolized by the body, are devalued are

sublimated beneath the hard, dominant masculine intellect. After all, “hunger [as a symbol of control over the body] has always been a cultural metaphor for female sexuality, desire, and power” (Stukator 2001, 199). I interpret this to mean women and people of color gain social power and approval through dieting and thereby taming the wildness, the uncontrollability of our bodies. In short, diets are thinly-veiled attempts to control people’s sexuality (Turner 1996).

If fatness symbolizes our womanly looseness, a reminder of our capacity for sexual consumption, a symbol of the political and social space we demand, then the solution becomes clear: present small bodies as a cultural marker of success and beauty, thereby making dieting a divisive and gendered cultural obsession. This is especially true for middle- and upper-class, White women, but is sadly and increasingly true for women of all classes, races, and ethnicities.

It has become a cultural maxim that beauty ideals represent ideals about gender, class, racial, and body presentations. The awkward, blatantly artificial constructedness of beauty ideals provides one more way to subordinate women and persons of color. The White beauty ideals exclude most dark-skinned or non-European-featured folks,[4] and White women can only compete by emphasizing their European, “non-ethnic” features (LeBesco 2004). Even White women and European-featured or exoticized women of color struggle to look thinner, more toned, poreless, and innocently sexual (rather like huge-eyed, perpetually smiling, smooth-genitaled, huge-breasted, and nippleless Barbies) (Urla and Swedlund 2000).

Most women cannot control our phenotypical features; one thing we can control, at least in theory, is our weight. As a result of American values of self-determination and -control, dieting is popularly discussed as one of the few accessible avenues to accessing beauty ideals. Dieting promises women (and some men) everything by equating it with nothingness (Schwartz 1986). It is a struggle to define oneself by what one is not. Dieting is power through self-denial

and by submission to harmful ideals (Halprin 1995). It is also a Sisyphusian curse: seeking social approval and a positive sense of self through the self-defeating task of losing weight, especially when 90-95% of folks who lose weight through dieting gain it back within five years (Wann 1998).

Dieting, that sexual and physical cage that is contrarily marketed as a gateway to true beauty, is one more quagmire in which to slow women's progress toward greater political and social gains. The problem is, since beauty ideals are unattainable, they loom as a monolithic social hurdle potentially stymieing women's struggle for political, legal, economic, and cultural equalities. Schwartz's statement above about dieting allowing us to have everything by having nothing could not be more accurate, since women's increasing worth is tied so intimately to our diminishing physical presence (and therefore political, cultural, and social influence). It cannot be a coincidence that as women have gained greater legal rights and freedoms, body ideals have become increasingly young, diminutive, and vulnerable (Hartley 2001; *Tough Guise* 1995).

There is something disturbing about a culture in which women are supposed to find satisfaction, even pleasure, in denying ourselves adequate fuel for our bodies (Miles 1994). Is it so surprising that when we worship women saints, it is often for their denial of worldly pleasures, including any foods beyond the Communion wafer (Gëmzoe 2005)? Through denying ourselves nourishment, we are symbolically minimizing our sexual appetites and our political weightiness. Our frenzied pursuit of self-denial provides a perverse kind of pleasure itself.

No wonder the links among food, sex, and physicality are so complicated!

Dieting is certainly gendered feminine in the U.S., but as I hope I have illustrated, it also has strong class and racial implications. Diets and eating disorders are popularly and statistically tied to middle- or upper-class, White girls and women (Dittrich n.d.a.; Hornbacher 1998).

However, it is horrifying to realize girls and women of color are catching up with their White counterparts in developing body dissatisfaction and eating disorders (Dittrich n.d.a.; Williams 2004). Also, saying affluent White women suffer from dieting and eating disorders more than poor folks and women of color does not mean they are more oppressed as a group. While eating disorders are harmful, too-often deadly afflictions, I argue that one of the many complex reasons White women suffer disproportionately from them is because of the association of fatness with poor persons and persons of color. Fatness, tied to the body as it is, already clings discursively to women as a sex, but those who have the additional oppressive identities of non-Whiteness and sub-middle-class are doubly or triply damned. Affluent White women's obsessive dieting can be seen as attempts to distance themselves not only from their unruly, chaotic bodies but these bodies' associations with other subordinated, non-White, sub-middle-classed groups.

Diets and their accoutrements, from cosmetic surgery to weight loss pills to a subscription to *Weight Watchers*<sup>TM</sup> magazine, allow dieters to consume images of affluence and Whiteness. For non-American women (and, increasingly, men), this includes identifying with high-income, globally Northern countries by consuming their diet literature, technology, and discourses (Kulick and Machado-Borges 2005). This merging of dieting with beauty and technology can represent one way for women of all races and ethnicities to achieve "liberation" from their raced, poor, and/or fat "ugliness" by consuming Western and masculinized technologies (Adams 1997; Markula 2001).

So, in short, dieting represents more than merely whittling our unruly bodies down to size. It also involves discourses about unruly feminine sexuality, political gains, White supremacy, colonialism, and submission to the medical industry and consumerism. Dieting is obviously much more than an imperative for women (and, more and more, for men) to strive for

unachievable beauty ideals; it is, among many other things, a means for us to subdue the threat of our physicality and sexuality. Diets are intended to tame women's looseness.

Once again, it becomes important to remember that discourses about the body are never consistent, clear, and uniform. While fat folks are linked to our bodies and frequently accused of rapacious sexuality, we are often simultaneously painted as sexually unappealing, even asexual. Constructed as the anti-norm against which "normal" bodies take shape, fat bodies are almost never discussed as objects of beauty, desire, and healthy sexuality (Braziel 2001). This, of course, conflicts with the messages above, but to paraphrase and distort Shakespeare, when has the course of discourses ever run smoothly? As I've discussed before, discourses on sexuality and fatness, while certainly not identical, do demonstrate a tendency to parallel one another in many ways, which is why they are both regarded simultaneously or alternately as repulsive, alluring, sinful, and pleasurable.

So, in short, fat persons are both hypersexual and asexual, both slaves to our all-consuming passions and sexually unattractive (Braziel 2001; Millman 1980). These messages obviously contradict one another; the common message in both, however, is that we are associated with our bodies, with hunger and consumption and their consequences. We are symbolic products of our capitalistic culture, meaning we are portrayed as avid consumers, while also feared and labeled "ugly" because of the very physical proof of this selfsame pattern of consumption.

Another link between fatness and sexuality, one that ties together fat and queer politics, is the potential for anyone to become "infected" with the taint of fatness. Part of the terror of fatness, as well as queerness, includes the deep-seated terror that one might "let oneself go" and find oneself an unhappy member of our club. Unlike the racial and ethnic categories into which

one is usually born, queerness and fatness loom as potentially infectious, or, to use Douglas' term, "polluting" stigmas (1994). This fear of fatness as a morally contagious affliction (Sontag 1990) manifests in terror and avoidance of fat folks for, although fatness is often talked about as a disease that challenges the boundaries between nature and culture (Turner 1996), it is never fully embraced as one (Stearns 1997). Therefore, fat folks are never quite exonerated for our pollution. Even more terrifying, *anyone* can become queer or fat, which of course makes it even more important to separate fat from thin, saved from damned.

#### The Protestant Ethic and the spirit of fatphobia

According to Shanker, fat folks, and especially women, earn the contempt of others because we don't deny ourselves food. A secret pact to deny oneself bodily pleasures exists between women, she posits, and fat women violate it by neglecting to forego pleasure (2004). I am not certain I agree with the actuality, but I do agree that many popular discourses represent fat persons as eating whatever we want whenever we want, culture of impossibly thin beauty ideals be damned. After all, if this conception did not exist, the diet industry and its nearly universal ethics of temperance and self-denial (limit food; eat low-fat, low-carb, and often low-taste foods; and engage in punishing levels of exercise) could not exist, let alone thrive.

As I addressed at length in the previous sections, fatness is frequently associated with consumption, whether literal, economic, or sexual. Fat folks are popularly constructed as slaves to passion, as individuals who just cannot be bothered to delay our gratifications. According to Judeo-Christian doctrines, including the infamous seven-deadly sins, gluttony is itself a sin against the body, a blatant elevation of the body's appetites above spirituality and godliness. In fact, authors suggest that the ambivalence between the physical necessity and the carnal appetite

for food manifests in stories of Eve and her oh-so-tempting fruit in the Garden of Eden (Falk 1994; McBride 1989). While, as I mentioned, it is not historically or evangelically uncommon to connect eating and sexuality (Gemzöe 2005), the religious strictures against “gluttony”[5] have connotations of immorality all their own (“Sins” n.d.).

The religious connections between the excess of hungers are apparent, but fatness is also reviled on its own merits by forms of Judaism and Christianity (for a brilliant discussion of how Jewish folks have been historically linked to fatness and diabetes, see Gilman 2004), but perhaps most noticeably Protestantism (LeBesco 2004). Even removing sexuality from the equation (in theory, anyway), “gluttony” is also interwoven with several other deadly sins, most noticeably sloth, or excessive avoidance of work and physical effort, and greed, or unchecked desire for something/one. Fat individuals are not only intemperate when it comes to physical hungers, but we are also constructed, religiously and popularly, as lazy, indolent, and idle in the face of industriousness. This is another one of those rather paradoxical discourses about fatness, since it seems people are unsure whether fat folks are driven to consume and assuage our ravenous hungers or too passionless to do much of anything.

Max Weber, a key figure in classical sociological theory, wrote a book in 1920 that touches on a number of these issues. His classic book, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, traces one of the threads of the diligent work ethic characterizing high capitalism. Oddly enough, he notes that the emergence of Protestantism coincided and coexisted quite snugly with early capitalism. I shall devote an unfortunately brief discussion to his enormously influential theory, paying special attention to how examining the Protestant Ethic illuminates some of the deep-seated roots of fatphobia in Western culture, most specifically in the United States.

Weber traces the Western reverence of independence back to Protestantism, paying special attention to Calvinism and its notion of predestination. According to Calvinists and several other Protestant sects, God had chosen only a limited number of persons -- 144,000, to be precise -- as His total number of elect, or heaven-bound. The blasphemous idea that individuals had any control over their electness challenged God's omniscience as well as His filing system; therefore, Calvinists accepted the rather grim notion that out of the millions, and now billions, of people who have ever lived, only a tiny fraction will ever wander into Paradise.

The question then arises: Why bother to exercise self-control and live a moral life when one's salvation is predestined? In response, an ethic emerged in Protestantism of proving one's electness by living a life dedicated not to worldly (read: bodily) pleasures but to God alone. Unlike Catholicism, which allowed the purging of sin through confession, Calvinists' sins accumulated throughout their lives; in order to prove one's elect status, Calvinists and other Protestant sects preached living from one sin-free moment to the next. As a result, one's level of asceticism in life also served as her or his test of righteousness.

From this individualization of salvation arose an emphasis on measuring personal behavior (read: eschewing worldly pleasures) to determine one's degree of holiness. Indulging in such worldly delights as laziness, greed, and gluttony represented the height of immorality, leading to an "attitude toward the sin of one's neighbor, not of sympathetic understanding... but of hatred and contempt of [her or] him as an enemy of God bearing the signs of eternal damnation" (Weber 1958, 122).

Clearly, the Protestant Ethic did not confine itself to religious institutions. Weber's Protestant Ethic and its teachings of moderation and hard work pervade the U.S. in such forms as the late-19<sup>th</sup>-century and early-20<sup>th</sup> century temperance movement, the recent "war on drugs,"

and the cult of “healthism” that has emerged within the last twenty-five years (Edgley and Brissett 1990). Fat persons as supposed representatives of “overindulgence and lassitude,” then, violate many Americans’, 91 million of whom identify as Protestant (Kendall 2006), deeply-rooted values of hard work and self-sacrifice.

The theories of American individuality; the Protestant Ethic’s condemnation of hedonism and materialism; and the belief that fat persons, as seeking gratification in ungodly places and things, combine together to form a coherent picture of sizeism built on the foundations of U.S. individualism and asceticism. This is why, as LeBesco notes, Protestants are especially intolerant of fatness, tied as it is in popular discourse to notions of laziness and overindulgence (2004). However, this concept of fat folks as embarrassingly lazy and greedy is not confined to Christians. As Weber so brilliantly demonstrates, the Protestant Ethic contributed to the work-hard-now-delay-gratification-till-later ethos still buttressing capitalism. While its roots lie mostly in Protestantism, I would argue that the notion of working hard to get ahead in this land of endless opportunities is quintessentially capitalistic and American. It is no longer, in other words, confined to teachings from the pulpit. This explains why studies rank Americans as highest among industrialized nations’ citizens in our negative views of fat persons (Grogan 1999) and why some authors link fatphobia’s vehemence and persistence to Western notions of freedom and individuality (Popenoe 2005).

I do sincerely believe the Protestant Ethic is more than a quaint concept from a bygone era; I think it still thrives today in the forms of sin taxes, laws against vagrancy, twelve-step programs, and condemnation of people regarded as slackers and carnal indulgers. This revulsion can expand to include anyone but is consistently applied to fat folks, many peoples of color, and, perhaps most obviously, poor people.

I have a suspicion, bolstered by my discussions with my media-savvy students, that many people, when asked to describe fat persons, would use words like “slovenly,” “dumb,” “pathetic,” “lonely,” “working class,” “lazy,” and “loud” (Brown and Rothblum 1989, agree). Many of these adjectives correspond quite neatly with current and past media representations of fat folks, including television shows like *Roseanne*, *The Drew Carey Show*, *The Family Guy*, *Friends*, and *The Simpsons*, as well as such movies as *Shallow Hal*, *Death Becomes Her*, *Just Friends*, and *The Truth about Cats and Dogs*.<sup>[6]</sup> It is interesting to note that many of these adjectives also apply to representations and conceptions of working class or poor persons.

Like fat folks, working class and poor people in general are frequently represented in popular discourse as unable to delay their gratification and simply work hard enough to achieve everything promised to hardworking individuals. Just as fat folks are responsible for our own misery because we are lazy slaves to our passions (I’m struck again by the contradiction), so are poor persons frequently constructed as living in destitution as a result of poor choices, physical addictions, or a simple unwillingness to delay gratification long enough to attend college or build a nest egg (Mantsios 2001). Poor people, much like fat people, are often seen as deserving of their conditions. If these conditions include a little bit of economic discrimination and interpersonal condemnation, well, perhaps they should have thought about that before eating that cookie/skipping college/smoking that cigarette/not working hard enough/giving in to temptations.

Sub-middle-class and fat folks have long been associated with one another. Not only do our popular origin stories share many of the same elements, but in reality, fat persons do tend to be poorer than non-fat ones. Whether this is due to the foods or lifestyle of poverty contributing to fatness or, more likely, economic discrimination landing more fat persons in poverty, the fact

remains that we are disproportionately poor (Richards 2004). Also, whether one wishes to cite the influence of the Protestant Ethic or other religious or philosophical divisions between the mind and the body, like fat folks, White women, and people of color, lower classed persons are also popularly linked to their bodies (Skeggs 2005). This is evident in the middle class origins of temperance movements; the middle class ethic of self-denial as proof of hard work; and popular associations of cigarettes, beer, fatty foods, and other intemperate forms of consumption with the sub-middle classes.

#### Late capitalism's consuming bodies

Weber wrote about the early stages of capitalism, a time in which asceticism and industriousness served the common interests of both Protestantism and capitalism. Since the early-20<sup>th</sup>-century, however, American businesses have boomed and, with the aid of early assembly lines and later outsourcing, begun producing mass quantities of goods. As a result, advertising emerged to shift the emphasis from producing and abstaining to proving one's wealth (and worth!) through conspicuous consumption of goods and services (*The Ad and the Ego* 1997). However, the work ethic that had aided capitalism for so long did not simply curl up its toes and disappear; instead, these two mandates coexist in an uneasy relationship.

After World War II, which not coincidentally coincided with the expansion of media in the West in general but specifically in the U.S., a new emphasis on achieving standards of physical attractiveness emerged. Consumerism emerged as a potential means to correct bodily and identity "deficits"; this could mean, for example, applying creams and cosmetics to hide physical "blemishes" or using credit cards to buy clothing and household items that blurred class boundaries (Featherstone 1991). This new emphasis on consumerism and on individual

perfection resulted in a connection of a person's worth to her or his level of physical attractiveness. Negative appearances or those that somehow deviated from the ideals discussed above, became associated with personal, "moral laxitude" (Featherstone 1991, 178). We consume goods not for themselves but for their symbolic meaning and how they will alter our presentation of self and therefore the symbol of our identities (Jagger 2000). Therefore, we invest in activities and goods that experts label "healthy" not to improve ourselves as such but to increase our status (Baudrillard 2005).

This is not to say everyone has equal access to goods and services (Lury, as discussed in Jagger 2000). Not everyone has the time or money (or inclination, I hope) to purchase thigh-firming creams and liposuction. Also, Susan Bordo warns us not to get too caught up in postmodernists' vision of the body as a funhouse mirror capable of reflecting a variety of identities. After all, beauty and body ideals represent social inequalities, and people's attempts to pursue them often result in dangerous, even deadly, consequences. Bordo suggests we regard the body as a gendered and raced battleground rather than a postmodern playground (2001).

On one hand, we are expected to "get ahead" and "pull ourselves up by our bootstraps" through hard work and determination, which often means delaying gratifications and putting selfishness and pleasure on hold. On the other hand, Americans are expected to prove our status, as well as achieve personal satisfaction and pleasure, through consuming items and services (Jagger 2000). Clearly, the two contradict one another and yet, Americans have uncomfortably juggled this contradiction for nearly a century.

Fat people bring this contradiction into the light. We are regarded as overconsumers, as hedonists who take full advantage of the variety of goods and services (in the form of food items and restaurants) without bothering to hide it. We are one side of the capitalist coin, the seeming

evidence of gross consumerism and capitalist excess that mocks the other side of the coin, the Protestant Ethic and its teachings of hard work, disciplined capitalism, and overall self-denial. As Shanker says, fat people in general, and women in particular, are reviled because we cheat. We indulge our bodily pleasures, or at least are talked about as if we do, and seemingly turn our backs on the vicious, destructive, pervasive competition for (so-called) physical perfection (2004). We represent consumerism at its greediest, and just as many Americans feel ambivalent about the tension between consuming and the hard work “necessary” or “required” to deserve such consumption, so do they feel resentful of the naked pleasure in which fat folks indulge without taking corrective measures to hide such shameful gratifications.

Or, as Stearns more concisely expresses it, fatness represents the dark side of consumer culture (1997).

Once again to muddy the waters, however, I must point out that I have been referring to fat folks’ consumption in its most literal form, meaning things we stick in our mouths. However, when discussing popular cultural discussions of consumption, I have used the more metaphoric definition as participating in capitalism by buying goods and services. Keeping this metaphoric use in mind, it is more apparent that fatness is not quite as simple as gross overconsumption. After all, I can assure people that as a fat woman, I find many of my consumer choices limited. Buying clothing, “economy seat” airplane tickets, bus fares, movie theater tickets, and gym memberships are all restricted, sometimes by corporate policy and sometimes by my own self-consciousness. My supposed literal overconsumption, ironically, sometimes prevents me from economically consuming more; or, as Moon and Sedgwick say, fatness is often loathed because it interferes with “economic circulation” (2005).

## Conclusion

It may seem somewhat inconsistent or disconcerting to combine discussions of body size, sexuality, dieting, beauty ideals, religion, class, and consumption in one paper. However, the connecting fiber is the Protestant Ethic, whose values of self-sacrifice, temperance, and industriousness bind these categories together. It is also important to note, however, that the Protestant Ethic is neither monolithic nor unchallenged in American culture. As I am fond of repeating, it is important to chart contradictory discourses, and both religious and capitalist discourses are rife with them.

It should be clear by now that the relationship between fat folks and our late capitalist economy is anything but clear-cut. It's almost enough to make one long for the good old days when anti-fat feelings were less complicated.

## Notes

1. This is actually not so mysterious, since weight gain is a common side effect of diabetes.
2. I want to point out that I am not debating the controversial topic of whether fat equals unfit; I am instead charting popular discourses about the subject. Those who are interested in reading more about the Health at Every Size (HAES) movement, which seeks to break the perceived link between body size and fitness, see Campos' *The Obesity Myth* (2004), Thomas' *Taking Up Space* (2005), and Gaesser's *Big, Fat Lies* (2002).
3. Skeptics might spend a moment contemplating the similar roots of "consume" and "consummate" (Falk 1994).
4. This is not always true, of course. Those women and men of color who look less White, when they *do* appear in media, are often portrayed as exotic and animalized.
5. This is defined as "an inordinate desire to consume more than that which one requires." Note the definition does *not* mention consuming only food.
6. I am suddenly quite dismayed to realize how few fat female TV characters, compared to fat male characters, I can come up with. I am also irritated to realize many of the movies I brought up include actors in fat suits rather than real, live fat actors (equally disturbing is that in my final example, Janeane Garofalo is supposed to represent a fat woman!). Of course, glorious and inspirational counter-examples do exist in the forms of characters played by Kathy Bates, John Goodman, Sammo Hung, James Earl Jones, Camryn Manheim, and, of course, the late and great Divine.

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Brief biography for Lesleigh J. Owen

I am a fifth-year graduate student in the Sociology Department at UC Santa Cruz. I am currently researching and writing my dissertation on social experiences of fatness, especially including how self-identified fat women and men interact with media messages about fatness and cope with our stigmatized identities.

I am a 31-year-old graduate student and sociology instructor at two community colleges located in the Los Angeles area.