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Thin, White, and Saved:
Fat Stigma and the Fear of the Big Black Body

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

in

Sociology

by

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2012
The dissertation of Sabrina A. Strings is approved, and it is acceptable in quality and form for publication on microfilm and electronically:

Co-Chair

Co-Chair

University of California, San Diego

2012
DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to my grandmother, Alma Green, so that she might have an answer to her question.
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FIELDS OF STUDY

Sociology of Race, African American Studies, Cultural Sociology, Sociology of Gender, Intersectionality
Recent research in the social sciences reveals that anti-fat discrimination is on the rise in the U.S. Much of this literature suggests that the escalating levels of anti-fat bias have coincided with the onset of the obesity epidemic in this country, and such bias targets the sub-population experiencing the highest rates of overweight and obesity: low-income women of color. But, scholars have shown that high levels of anti-fat derision targeting this sub-population precede the obesity epidemic. Indeed, fatness was stigmatized and associated with poor, immigrant, and black women even before it was thought to be unhealthy, yet very little is known about why this might have been the case.

This dissertation explores how fatness became stigmatized and associated with low-income black and immigrant women. Historians have shown that the American mainstream aversion to fatness, as well as the attraction slenderness, developed by the early 20th century. Moreover, previous scholars have shown that scientific
understandings of the body during this era came not only from the field of medicine, but also from the natural sciences and anthropology. Thus, I analyze relevant literature from the medical, anthropological, and natural sciences, as well popular literature describing fat and thin bodies from the late 18th – early 20th centuries.

The results indicate that fatness became both stigmatized and racialized as early as the late 18th century, as it was seen as evidence of “barbarous” indulgence and associated with blackness. Thinness was simultaneously viewed as evidence of “civilized” self-discipline and associated with whiteness. Fat and thin bodies were gendered and classed during the 19th-early 20th centuries, as slimness was used by upper and middle-class white women as a sign of their “cultivation,” and thus marriageability, vis-à-vis the “coarse,” fat "racial others”. It was not until these associations were already in place that the medical establishment discovered excess fat tissue was unhealthy. This project is significant in that it exposes the legacy of anti-fat discrimination impacting poor women of color in the U.S. as more than a simple response to the adverse public health consequences of overweight and obesity; rather, fat stigma has been historically raced, gendered, and classed and used to validate social inequality.
INTRODUCTION

On May 27, 2011, the L.A.-based Annenberg Space for Photography opened its well-publicized “Beauty CULTure” exhibit. Per its promoters, the exhibit offered a space for its visitors to view conventional and unconventional notions of beauty that “challenge stereotypes of gender, race and age.” The exhibit, they claimed, further offered its visitors a space to interrogate the allure and mystique of the “cult-like glorification” of feminine beauty.

The largely laudatory reviews of the exhibit in many mass-market publications proclaimed that it had achieved at least the first of its two stated goals, noting that that exhibit presented a diverse array of beauty ideals that shattered traditional definitions of beauty in the U.S. CNN contributor Alene Dawson, for example, claimed that beauty in America today could not be defined by a particular age, gender, color, or body size, arguing, “there's been a major shift when it comes to diversity in beauty advertising and magazine beauty editorial spreads.” Highlighting a 1991 survey in Allure magazine in which the epitome of beauty was characterized as the blonde, blue-eyed, tall and thin Christie Brinkley by respondents, Dawson notes that the magazine’s 20th anniversary survey, revealed that Americans now prefer a more “hybrid look” with darker skin, fuller lips, and curvier bodies.

Yet amidst the praise of the exhibit and its purported ability to reflect America’s shifting beauty ideals, psychologist and author Vivian Diller, offers a few critical insights. Diller writes,
Having just viewed the Beauty CULTure exhibit myself, I left with a very different perspective -- struck less by diversity and more by the ever-narrowing definition of beauty not just in America, but across the globe. I wondered if Dawson noticed how little variety actually graced the magazine covers posted all over the exhibit walls? In fact, when I looked up the recent history of American Vogue Covers, I saw that only 18 percent were non-white, and the average age was just 27, a similar ethnic and age imbalance on display at the Annenberg show.

If these were the findings in terms of race and age in the exhibit, Diller’s review of Allure’s survey, intended to bolster claims that the exhibit represented the growing flexibility of U.S. aesthetic ideals in terms of these factors as well as body size, she found that although “73 percent of women said that a curvier body type is more appealing than it had been in 1991, 85 percent still said they wish their own hips were narrower.” Further, fully 97% of the women surveyed claimed they wanted to lose weight.

Diller’s analysis ultimately reminds us that despite the growing prevalence of “post-racial” rhetoric in which the argument is commonly asserted that race is no longer relevant, as it pertains to physical aesthetics, Americans have not yet become color-blind. Moreover, the women who often represent the mainstream aesthetic ideal in the U.S. are still not only overwhelmingly white, but also young, tall and slender. It is significant that this ideal not only remains entrenched in the mass media, but that study after study continues to reveal that many women, particularly middle- and upper-class white women aspire to lose weight weight in order to meet it (Boyd et al. 2011; Parker et al. 1995; Duke 2000; Lovejoy 2001).

This dissertation investigates the entrenchment of the tall, white and slender feminine aesthetic ideal in the U.S. I review first the prevailing explanations proffered for what is commonly referred to (in a de-racinated fashion) as “the slender aesthetic” in the
U.S. I show that these explanations for the slender aesthetic, many crafted during the 1980s and 1990s, failed to conceptualize the link between the many facets of the American mainstream aesthetic ideal, focusing solely on body size as a “gendered” issue. I argue that they have under-theorized the role of race and class, as the slender aesthetic has been traditionally raced “white,” and an affectation of the upper- and middle-classes.

The Slender Aesthetic as “Women’s Oppression”

The 1980s, commonly recognized as the tail end of the Second Wave Feminist Movement, nevertheless marked the beginning of renewed scholarly interest in physical aesthetic ideals for women. The 1981 release of self-proclaimed feminist Kim Chernin’s *The Obsession: Reflections on the Tyranny of Slenderness* underscored what she argued was the high valuation placed on svelte frames for women and girls in the U.S. and its necessarily debilitating consequences. Noting the psycho-social and economic impact of the “slender aesthetic” through studies of anorexia and bulimia, Chernin argued that the svelte ideal was created to oppress, as it functions to distract, disable, and physically and metaphorically diminish otherwise capable women (Chernin 1981).

The novelty of Chernin’s analysis was evidently one of the factors helping to catapult it to success. Whereas many earlier Second Wave feminists had been engaged in contestations surrounding the female body as it pertained to reproductive rights (such as Betty Friedan), and the reduction of women to sexually desirable objects via, for example the “male gaze” as realized beauty contests, Chernin sparked new conversations on the role of the size and shape of the body in women’s domination. The work of Chernin and subsequent feminist scholars of the 1980s and 1990s served as a reminder that the
aesthetic assessment of the form of the body was a political concern (Bordo 1993; Orbach 1986; Wolf 1991). Fat, as it were, had become a feminist issue (Orbach 1978; Wann 1999).

Though few feminists would disagree with the foregoing sentiment, many began questioning the extent to which fat aversion and the thin ideal were solely a “gendered” or “women’s” issue. As Chernin, Orbach, Wolf and Bordo and a host of others had articulated, the slender ideal could count most prominently amongst its followers not “women” per se, but white upper-and middle-class women (Bordo 1993; Chernin 1981; Orbach 1986; Wolf 1991). Subsequent investigations into the role of race and class in this aesthetic (predominately undertaken by scholars and feminists of color) revealed that slimness was not held as a particularly important social value for black women (Boyd et al. 2011; Parker et al. 1995; Duke 2000; Lovejoy 2001). And while Asian American women and girls have been shown to exhibit similar perceptions of slenderness as an important social value as whites (Boyd et al. 2011), Latinas have perceptions of slimness that fall in between those of whites and Asians, and those of African American women (Boyd et al. 2011). Importantly, class is a key intervening variable, as women from low socio-economic backgrounds consistently exhibit a lower concern over being thin than middle-or upper-class women of the same race (Bettie 2003; Boyd et al. 2011; Hesse-Biber 1996).

While post-Second Wave critics have underscored and questioned the “white middle-class feminist bias” (hooks 2000) in the literature on the slender aesthetic, in that it fails to highlight the differential impact of this aesthetic along race and class lines, they have still retained two critical elements of their predecessors analyses: First, the assertion
that women are unduly called upon to focus on their bodies and to maintain an “ideal” weight—be it slim, curvaceous, voluptuous or fat. In fact, new scholarship showing that black women in particular do not feel especially compelled to conform to the thin ideal, prizing rather a more voluptuous or “fat” aesthetic, has also shown that women who deviate from the more curvaceous or voluptuous ideals of the black community (and notably black men—see Thompson et. al 1996) commonly report lower self-esteem or body-satisfaction (Frisby 2004; Overstreet et al. 2010; Poran 2006). Given the negative effects of the form of the body on women, the aesthetic assessment of the form of the body remains necessarily, for feminists and many others, political.

Second, has been the focus on the contemporary. That is, much of this scholarship addresses aesthetic preferences and pressures for women along race and class lines in the late 20th-early 21st century. Few (or to my knowledge none) have undertaken an empirical study of the historical roots of these differential exigencies for feminine embodiment.

This dissertation works to address this gap in the literature. I examine: How did both slenderness and fatness become gendered, raced and classed? Specifically, how did thinness become associated with elite, white femininity, and fatness with poor, immigrant and black women?

Building on the work of historians of fat who have shown that slenderness has been a social value in the U.S. since at least the early 19th century (Schwartz 1986; Seid 1989; Stearns 1997), I show that at its inception, the slender aesthetic was not predominately about gender, but about race. Indeed, I argue that slenderness as a social value was always already racialized, and that it became gendered and classed over time
as it began to circulate as a form of embodied cultural capital (Bourdieu 1979; Goldenberg 2010) amongst middle- and upper-class white women. Fatness was simultaneously stigmatized and became associated with poor black and immigrant women, being used to justify denying them access to full participation in American society. The body was thus used to substantiate social hierarchies.

Research Method

In order to investigate the central question of this dissertation, which is how slenderness and fatness became gendered, raced and classed, I employ the comparative-historical methods of process tracing and historical narrative. I use process tracing to gather data on the increasing ideation of slenderness in the U.S. amongst well-to-do whites (esp. women) in specified geographic locations. I create an historical narrative with this data, weaving together information from a variety of sources to provide a robust depiction of how thinness became increasingly associated with elite white womanhood, and fatness with poor, black, and immigrant womanhood.

I will focus on the United States, as many authors have suggested that within the Western world, it was in this country that slimness first became a mainstream aesthetic value (Schwartz 1986; Stearns 1997). Scholars have also shown that the high valuation of slenderness and the consequent denigration of fatness, was a recognizable phenomenon among a wide swath of the population sometime between the 1890s-1920s (Bordo 1993; Schwartz 1986; Stearns 1997). However, the focus on this era, the period by which thinness was already a recognized social value, has led to the inability of prior studies to capture the emergence of slimness as a social value. Esteemed historian of bodily ideals
Peter Stearns, suggests as much in a 2004 interview on the growing exaltation of spare physiques around the turn of the century: “Dieting became a widespread national preoccupation—and no one knows quite why.”

In the interest of investigating the growth of the slim ideal as a racialized aesthetic that was increasingly gendered and classed, my project begins in the late 18th century with the racial theories coming from the premier natural scientists during the Enlightenment. As sociologist Denise da Silva (2007) has shown, theories of embodiment were central to the racial logics of this era. Moreover, the descriptions of bodies went well beyond the pale of skin color to incorporate racializations of body shape and size. Further, in the United States after the 1780s, racial classifications saw two major shifts, one in the 1840s and the other in the 1890s, both during periods of massive immigration of groups considered “undesirable aliens” (notice also that the latter period coincides with the era during which the slim aesthetic began its reign in the mainstream). Thus, in this dissertation, I have three time periods of interest: 1780s-1830s, 1840s-1880s, and 1890s-1920s. While I treat these time periods as temporal cases (Haydu 1998)—referred to henceforth as T1, T2, and T3—it is important for me to state that I recognize that the time periods selected do not represent discrete discontinuous units. Manifestations from one time period bleed into the others. Therefore, I employ the concept of “parallel history” to disrupt “the Enlightenment trope of sequential linear progress” (McClintock 1995: 9) and attend to the overlap between cases.

The materials selected for analysis were drawn from scientific, medical, and popular sources. I chose materials that were written by recognized authorities in a given

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1 See the 2004 interview with Peter Stearns: http://gazette.gmu.edu/articles/5201/
field (or authoritative journals such as JAMA, Godey’s, and Harper’s Bazaar) who made arguments about the connection between race, gender, and body size. Typically, my first line of offense in finding such materials was to peruse respected secondary source literature on the history of race-ing the bodies, stigmatizing fatness, or extolling thinness—including works by authors such as Audrey Smedley, Nell Irvin Painer, J.J. Brumberg, and Peter Stearns—and take note of who they recognized as creating the discourse on any of these topics during a particular epoch. Having created an initial inventory of “who’s who” for each of the three topics noted above, I read the landmark works by the authors on the list, both for further information about their theories, as well as to locate additional works and scholars they themselves cited or deemed influential. From this method of snowballing, I was able to construct a working list of sources by pundits and/or influential journals and magazines whose works were important to the intellectual climate and debates about fat and slender bodies during a given period.

To access many of the texts, given their age, the only available format was microfilm or micofiche. Frequently, the materials were located in special collections at UCSD libraries, other UC libraries, and libraries across the globe. Thus, many of the articles from, for example, Atlanta Constitution, and Cosmopolitan were gleaned from the archives at UCSD. Others were accessible only through Interlibrary Loan, or a trip to the Moffitt Libraries at UC Berkeley, or the New York Public Library in Manhattan.

Fortunately, however, many of the texts had been digitized, and were available though online digital archives. Thus, the articles from Harper’s Bazaar for example were available through the UCSD Historical Newspapers Database. All of the JAMA and New York Times articles were located via archival searches on the respective websites for
these organizations. Other digital archives included the Accessible Archives of Pennsylvania, WorldCat, The Making of the Modern Word, and Nineteenth Century U.S. Newspapers (latter two managed by Gale Learning Group). Finally, Google Books and Google Scholar proved indispensable sources for primary and secondary source materials, including, for example, Gobineau’s *Essai Sur L inégalité des Races Humaine*.

The Sources

The scientific literature utilized establishes how racialized forms of embodiment were constructed during each of the three time periods. It will include articles, lectures, and books by recognized scientific authorities who contributed to the field of race science (specifically as it pertained to embodiment). These pundits spanned the fields of anthropology, natural science, philosophy, and medicine, and included personalities like Carl Von Linneaus, Johann Blumenbach, and Ralph Waldo Emerson. Relevant texts include *Systemae Naturae* (Linneaus), *On the Natural Varieties of Mankind* (Blumenbach), *English Traits* (Emerson).

As it pertains to the medical texts, gender scholars have shown that the field of medicine has placed greater scrutiny upon women’s bodies since the least the 19th century (Brumberg 1984; Ehrenreich and English 1973). Moreover, much of this scrutiny has turned on identifying the “optimal” diet and body size for women. Medical texts are used herein to help explain the gendered element of the slender ideal, by showing how notions that a woman’s body “should be” heavier or leaner morphed over the years, and that these conceptions often relied explicitly on racialized understandings of healthy female bodies. Relevant medical texts include works by prominent doctors such as Edward Dixon’s
(1848) *Woman and Her Diseases* and John C. Gunn’s (1833) *Gunn’s Domestic Medicine*. They also include articles from key medical journals such as the *British Medical Journal* (1857-) and the *Journal of the American Medical Association* (1883-).

Finally, popular magazines and journals have been utilized to show how the scientific/medical racial and gender logics surrounding body size were co-opted, critiqued, and/or propagated by elite white men and women in the mass media and used as a validation of social distance between elite white women, poor white women, black women, and immigrants. Texts used include *The New York Times*, *Godey’s Lady’s Book*, *The Ladies Home Journal*, and *Harper’s Bazaar*.

**Chapter Structure**

This dissertation will have five chapters. The first chapter is titled “A Bourdieusian Approach to Race and Intersectionality.” It provides an overview of the broad analytical framework for this project. In this chapter, I review relevant historical and contemporary racial theories. With this, I aim to provide a clear indication of my contribution to the fields of sociology of race, and intersectionality.

The second chapter is titled, “Thin, White, and Saved: Fear of the Big Black Body.” It presents an analysis of the early years of the slim fetishization in the U.S. Here, using data from the three data streams described above from the late 18th – early 19th centuries, I show that slenderness was originally constructed as a “civilized Christian” enterprise in the U.S., that was raced “white.” Fatness was simultaneously constructed as “barbaric” and was associated with blackness, particularly with black womanhood.
The third chapter, “The Rise and Fall of the Voluptuous Aesthetic,” details how whiteness was fractured during the mid-19th century to apprehend “pure” and “degraded” (meaning part “negroid” or “Asiatic” to use terminology from the period) white racial groups, and shows how this related to female bodily ideals. In this chapter, I argue that scholars of aesthetics such as Lois Banner (1983) have presented an oversimplified argument that “immigrants” brought to the U.S. an “Old World” appreciation for voluptuous physiques. Rather, I argue that the racially-similar (and thus socially-acceptable) middle- and upper-class German immigrant women helped popularize the curvy ideal, but its concomitant association with the racially-othered poor Irish immigrant women aided in its demise.

The fourth chapter reviews the final period of interest, the late 19th – early 20th centuries, the period historians of fat have suggested marked the growing entrenchment of the contemporary slender ideal. In this chapter, “The Reign of the ‘American Beauty’,” I argue that a massive influx of southern and eastern Europeans, who, by this period displaced Irish as the white “other” led to a further retrenchment of the slim ideal by whites of the “cultivated classes.” Relying heavily on eugenics and other medico-scientific logic, which increasingly associated fatness with illness, middle- and upper-class whites charged the “new immigrants” with being “fat and diseased.” I show that a quintessentially American form of beauty was established, in which Nordic/Anglo-Saxon health and heritage (coded through slimness) was an important element.

The fifth and final chapter is the conclusion. In this chapter, I revisit the argument made in the introduction, reflecting on the theoretical and historical contributions of this project. I also provide a brief review of the power of the thin ideal from the early 20th
century to the present, including its role in fanning the flames of outrage within the contemporary obesity epidemic.
“Race” is a pervasive category of social organization in the post-industrial world, and yet precisely how to define the word remains a topic of debate. Pinning down exactly what we mean when we say “race” has proven elusive in part due to the fact that the term has meant different things at different times. It entered the lexicon approximately 500 years ago (Bonilla-Silva 1994; Cox 1948; Silverblatt 2004) and from that moment forward has been a commonly utilized consistently inconsistent term (Bonilla-Silva 1994; Roediger 1991, 1994). But, despite the vagaries in its usage and definition, we can identify, broadly speaking, two main ways in which the term race has been conceived in scientific and social scientific scholarship: as a bio-cultural category and as an ideological construct.

The idea that “race” describes groups of people distinguishable on the basis of biological (i.e. external physical and/or internal “blood based” or genetic traits) and cultural (i.e. language, religion, country or region of origin, etc) traits are among the oldest uses of the term. Under this conception, the races were thought to be both physiognomically and temperamentally distinct (such that some groups were physically, morally and intellectually capable of work, leadership, citizenship and a host of other socio-political rights or privileges), and, in many cases, to be inherently incompatible.

European colonizers were among the first to use the term race in this fashion, and they did so to create the illusion of inherent physiognomic, temperamental and moral distinctions between colonizer, colonized, and slave—the “Self” and the “Others” that
justified exploration, expansion, colonialism, and slavery (Bonilla-Silva 2004; Jacobson 1998; Silverblatt 2004). Still, the colonizers were not alone in propagating these ideologies. The notion that races were distinct bio-cultural groupings was promulgated by some of the world’s pre-eminent intellectuals and philosophers. Carl Von Linneaus, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Johann Blumenbach, Georges Cuvier, Paul Broca, Thomas Carlyle, Arthur de Gobineau, Charles Darwin, Immanuel Kant are on the short list of luminaries to hone theories of innate physiognomic and temperamental distinctions between (and hierarchical ordering among) the “races.” This was, in fact, the prevailing usage of the term for over 300 years, a fantastic revelation given the failure of scientists upon scientist in the natural and social sciences to disaggregate the world’s teeming diversity into discrete physico-cultural groups.

The idea that race is an ideological construct is often attributed to the notorious 19th century philosopher Karl Marx. During the height of “race-thinking” (Arendt 1975) in the Western world, Marx rejected the idea that race had any sound physico-cultural basis that proved the inherent capacity of a group, and inherent incompatibility between groups. According to Marx, race was simply an ideological tool used by the ruling elite to divide and conquer the masses (Marx and Engels 1848). The idea that race did not correspond to fundamental differences between human groups but was one of the many instruments of domination deployed by the bourgeoisie state had a belated, but tremendous impact on social scientific (but not necessarily natural scientific) theories of race and race relations.

The impact of Marxist thinking on the understanding of race was two-fold. First, The notion that race could be simply ideological rather than biological, a tool or
mechanism rather than an innate imperative of social ordering removed the sex from race. Interest in racial analyses in the social sciences over the next several decades waned. Race, no longer recognized as a fundamental principle of social ordering, was relegated to the margins (as in Marx’s own writings) or neglected altogether (as in the work of Emile Durkheim). Second, when race was included in the analysis, it was considered the product of something else (usually, due in large part to the influence of Marx, to class relations born of the bourgeoisie nation-state). In this way, race became an effect of inequality, rather than one of its bases. Race and racialization were less frequently analyzed a priori. They could not explain the social order; race and racialization themselves had to be explained (Bonacich 1980; Cox 1948).

This dissertation falls within the body of recent scholarship attempting to return race to the center stage as an organizing principle. Much of this scholarship recognizes race (along with class and gender) as among the structures creating the social order since the colonial era (Bonilla-Silva 1994; Hall 1980; Hill Collins 1991).

But, though much of the new scholarship on race understands race as a structuring structure, (to borrow from Bourdieu), little of this scholarship recognizes race (like class and gender) as structured structure. That is, although scholars have now repositioned race as a fundamental to organizing principle of social relations—such that the placement of actors in various racial categories affords differential access to rights, jobs, housing and other privileges—comparatively fewer have focused on how our understanding of race itself is structured, and how the construction of a racial identity intersects with gendered and classed identities.
This dissertation will address this gap in the literature. I will attempt to move beyond existing models of race to show that race is not only a structure, but that it has been historically been structured, in large part, by perceived physical differences. The race-based groupings under which we operate today—which represent a significant revision but not a wholesale reworking of colonial era racial categories—are rooted in conceptions of bodily differences. Therefore we cannot escape the fact that the term “race” centrally implicates the body.

**Race as a Social Construct: the Lens on Minorities**

Marx set forth his theory that race was an ideological construct rather than a biological reality in the mid-19th century, but it wasn’t until the early 20th century that understandings of race as a construct received significant scholarly attention. According to Matthew Frye Jacobson (1998), this was due in large part to the post-WWII realization on the part of European powers (an indeed the whole world) that the Nazi extermination of the Jews was a horrific if not entirely unforeseeable end to the biological race-thinking that claimed the so-called races were inherently different, incompatible, and hierarchically ordered. Thus, the holocaust prompted a swift revision to the principal tenets of race-thinking.

It was in this intellectual climate that many intellectuals turned to Marx. In order to counter the belief that the races were fundamentally distinct and diametrically opposed, many scholars argued that race was simply an ideology, a form of false consciousness. In this neo-Marxist articulation, race was an artifice created to further the economic domination of the proletariat underclass (Bonacich 1972; Cox 1948). Using
class as a base and race as a “superstructure,” neo-Marxists explained racial domination in terms of class relations. As a result, for several decades in the U.S., a significant amount of interest was placed in understanding blacks and other racial minorities as an underclass (Blumer 1965; Bonacich 1972; Saxton 1990; Wilson 1987).

It is important to note here that if the neo-Marxist conception of race as a social construct often analyzed of the social position of racial minorities, these studies in and of themselves were not responsible for the lens on racial minorities. Woody Doane (2003) reminds us that there was a long tradition in the scholarship on race to focus on the position of subordinate groups. In the U.S. considerations of the “Negro problem” have proliferated since the late 19th century, and a variety of scholars (with no ties to the Marxist tradition) provided arguments that were largely cultural in nature for the second-class social position of racial minorities (Oscar Lewis’ culture of poverty argument, and Glazer and Moynihan’s argument of the black matriarch are two well-known examples).

What is perhaps striking about the social constructionist paradigm is that while it radically changed the scholarly orientation to race (shifting the view as it did from biological to socio-cultural), much of the early scholarship did not undermine myopic focus on people of color.

Indeed, much of the neo-Marxist scholarship from the 1960s-1990s participated in this form of race-thinking, as studies attempting to explain the social position of racial minorities—and African Americans in particular—proliferated. Eduardo Bonilla-Silva (1994), notes that this included scholarship on race as an institutional mechanism to keep racial minorities (especially blacks) subordinate to whites (see also Carmichael and Hamilton 1967; Chesler 1976; Knowles and Prewitt 1969). It also included scholarship
on race as a form of internal colonialism, which argues people of color have been kept politically, socially, and economically subordinate through the historical processes of colonialism (Blauner 1972; Moore 1970).

The effect was that the identities, politics, and histories of white people remained largely unexplored, and the existing scholarship on whites was relegated to the margins. And if it was the socio-historical changes wrought by the holocaust that shifted understandings of race from biological to ideological (while still keeping the focus on minorities), scholars have argued that it was the post-Civil Rights era rise of affirmative action that challenged white privilege and the conservative backlash it engendered that encouraged the focus on whites (Andersen 2003; Doane 2003). Whiteness studies blossomed into a critical field in the 1990s, with much of the early scholarship coming from feminist studies, critical legal studies and cultural studies. Some of the early landmark scholarship focused on the identity of whites and privileges of whiteness (Dyer 1997; Harris 1993; McIntosh 1988). But, significantly for the present study, some of the most heralded works in this field have been historiographies in which the social construction of whiteness is explored.

**Whiteness**

Critical investigations of whiteness are not altogether a recent invention. Examinations of white privilege have existed since at least the 19th century, as African American authors such as Frederick Douglas, Sojourner Truth, and later W.E.B. DuBois, Ralph Ellison and James Baldwin wrote unflinching exposés on the character of white supremacy in the U.S. Much of this early scholarship, as noted by Woody Doane, was
overlooked by mainstream race scholars, who saw these works not as falling within the broad field of race theorizing, but within the niche field of African American studies. These works were “rediscovered” toward the end of the 20th century, after decades of being underutilized (Doane 2003: 5).

“Whiteness studies” became recognized as a bonafide field of inquiry in the social sciences during the 1990s. The intention of many of the contemporary whiteness scholars to quote the venerable Toni Morrison, has been to “avert the critical gaze from the racial object to the racial subject” (Andersen 2003; Morrison 1992). In so doing, these scholars undermined whiteness as an “invisible norm,” the divergence from which marked the lives of racial minorities and prompted their study as aberrant (Andersen 2003; Carby 1992; McIntosh 1988; Morrison 1992).

While much of this scholarship has explored the effect of whiteness as a socially-constructed category on its bearers (Carby 1992; Cornell and Hartmann 2007; Dyer 1997; Lipsitz 1998; McIntosh 1988), a great deal of attention has also been placed on understanding how whiteness as a category has been formed. The latter type of texts generally fall under the umbrella of whiteness historiographies, which review the history of the constitution (and re-constitution) of “white” as a racial category. Whiteness historiographies generally take as a starting point the idea that not only are the privileges associated with whiteness shifting and variable, but so are notions of who should have access to whiteness.

One of the earliest and most notable texts in this vein was David Roediger’s (1991) *The Wages of Whiteness: Race and the Making of the American Working Class*. In this well-received, historically-situated linguistic analysis, Roediger explores the vagaries
in the use of the term “white,” focusing primarily on what he argues are significant shifts in its usage during the 19th century. According to Roediger, when the Irish landed on U.S. shores in unprecedented numbers during the mid-19th century, nativist self-described Anglo-Saxon Americans originally placed them outside the category of “white”. Characterized as “low-browed and savage, groveling and bestial, lazy…and simian,” the Celtic Irish were marked the “racial other” by the largely Anglo-Protestant white population (Roediger 1991: 133).

The turning point for the Irish in their ability to assimilate with the Anglo-Protestant mainstream, per the author, was their rise in the Democratic Party in the 1840s. Seeking to wrest power from the Republican Party, the Democrats recruited the Irish to their party by publically stumping for the recognition of the Irish as white. Fighting under the banner “white unity and white entitlement--of white blood”, i.e. for the rights of all white persons (or more accurately white men) and the exclusion of black slaves from said rights, the Democrats were largely responsible, Roediger claims, for the racial reinvention of the Irish as white (Roediger 1991: 140).

In a similar vein, Noel Ignatiev’s oft-referenced How the Irish Became White explores the presumably belated incorporation of the Irish into the category of “white.” Ignatiev too argues that upon arrival in the U.S. the Irish were not racially classified as white. To begin with, contends Ignatiev, the Irish were subject to racial oppression in the U.S. at the hands of Anglo-Saxon Protestants who frequently considered the “Celts” to be inferior to themselves as “Teutons.” They were subject to being called “white niggers,” “white chimpanzees” or the “missing link” between man and ape (Ignatiev 1995: 40-2; see also Curtis 1996: 57-61).
Ignatiev maintains that it was not a foregone conclusion that the Irish would become white in the U.S. But, like Roediger, Ignatiev claims Van Buren’s Democratic party was one of the important factors sealing their fate. The democratic party, he asserts, was a hodge-podge group strengthened by the notion of “white supremacy” and the recruitment of the Irish helped the Irish transition to white, and became a central factor in the party’s own success. Also reminiscent of Roediger’s argument was the assertion that the Irish Americans’ anti-black activities in (particularly as they pertained to anti-black riots and labor union blockades of black male participation) were essential in forming a link between the concepts of freedom (economic and civil) and whiteness, helping to forge a republic of “free white persons.”

In spite of their impact on the field, the arguments of Roediger and Ignatiev in two of the earliest and most influential whiteness historiographies require a bit of critical investigation. At the outset, we should interrogate the timing by which the Irish “became” white. Although each author maintains that their inclusion in the white category was completed around the time of the Civil War, there are a few facts running counter to this argument.

First is the fact that many Irish persons had already assimilated into the white mainstream well before the mid-19th century. Ignatiev for his part recognizes this, but claims that the group of Irish who assimilated were the “Scotch-Irish” or Irish Anglo-Protestants. States Ignatiev, due to their Protestant roots, this group of Irish were considered members of the “favored” race and assimilated with the Anglo-Saxon Protestants rather easily. Further, he argues that they differentiated themselves from
subsequent waves of immigrants whom they commonly derided as Catholics, or “Celts,” though many of them, too, were Protestants (Ignatiev 1995: 39). Thus, per Ignatiev, the Catholic Irish or “Celts” were not included in the white category until around the time of the Civil War, although the Scotch-Irish had assimilated decades prior (Ignatiev 1995: 39).

Still, even this conception is contradicted by the earlier work of Theodore Allen (1994). Allen indicates that the Irish, both Protestant and at that time the comparatively smaller group of Catholics, were considered “white” in the U.S. as early as the 17th century. In his two-volume compendium, *The Invention of the White Race*, Allen explains that the U.S. was consolidated as a “White Republic” during the late 1600s. According to Allen, several factors precipitated this development. First was the decline in the availability of European labor in the 17th century, coupled with the augmented accessibility of African labor (as more English ships were heading into Africa to purchase or steal persons as part of the growing transcontinental slave trade). Second was the Virginia Assembly’s realization that African slaves could serve as a self-reproducing labor force, thus they saw the potential for the institution of a new mechanism of social control that would serve not only to keep this permanent labor force from agitating for their rights, but also to enfranchise many of the Irish and other persons of European descent who had been threatening (or actually engaging in) insurrectionary measures due to their lack of rights (predicated on their lack of property). Thus, the Assembly killed two birds with one stone by defining liberties as being only accessible to “whites” as a measure of social control, keeping poor whites from mutiny while still maintaining a secure slave labor force.
In spite of the red flags Allen’s argument raises to the notion of Irish or other European immigrants “becoming white,” such studies proliferated in the 1990s and 2000s. The focus, however, shifted from the Irish to the Italians and southern and eastern Europeans (Brodkin 1999; Gestle 2002; Roediger 1994). And while the arguments of these scholars were being perpetuated in a variety of texts outside the field of whiteness studies (see for example Feagin 2000), a growing number of critics are starting to question the assumption that European immigrant groups were firmly outside the category of white, and only latterly allowed into the fold.

Indeed, it is this assumption that Thomas Guglielmo (2003) takes on in Rethinking Whiteness Historiography: The Case of Italians in Chicago, 1890-1945. Guglielmo, in a direct challenge to the arguments by Ignatiev and Roediger, argues that European immigrants did not become white in America, they were in fact “white on arrival.” This term comes from his widely read 1998 book of the same title White on Arrival: Italians, Race, Color and Power, 1890-1945 (in which many of the same arguments are made). Gugliemlo claims many whiteness historiographers have erroneously assumed that the discrimination faced by European immigrants placed them outside the category of “white.” This is, he contends, because many of these theorists have failed to see the distinction between race and color. Relying on the case of Italian immigrants to America, Guglielmo shows that Italians, like other European immigrants were often deemed “racially undesirable,” but this did not lead to a systematic attempt to classify them as non-white. Through a compelling exploration of Italians’ legal
classification, social reception, sexual behaviors, and housing opportunities, the author informs the reader that, “If Italians were racially undesirable in the eyes of many Americans, they were white just the same” (Guglielmo 2003: 50).

Guglielmo’s race/color divide leaves something to be desired, largely because the term “race” is left undefined, stating simply that “it could mean many things.” (Guglielmo 2003: 51). But into this gulf we can place the important work of fellow historian Matthew Frye Jacobson, who provides insights into how Europeans immigrants might have faced racial discrimination, and been deemed “white” at the same time.

In his seminal text *Whiteness of a Different Color*, Jacobson presents the reader with the rather cogent argument that European immigrants, including the Italians, Irish, Armenians, Greeks, Poles, Russians, Germans, were received as white from the moment they disembarked on American shores by virtue of their being European. Using, like Guglielmo, an array of documents pertaining to the rights of European immigrants in terms of voting, housing and sexual relations, Jacobson details how in practical application, the term “white” had been nearly synonymous with European. Jacobson reveals that although European immigrants were not in all cases universally accepted and unambiguously welcomed into the American fold, no group of European immigrants, regardless of country of origin, were consistently placed outside the category of white. In this way, based on prevailing socio-political and legal codes, persons (or more accurately men) of European descent were, with astonishing regularity, allowed to attain the rights and privileges of citizens. This was in stark contrast to the lack of opportunities and forestalled rights plaguing persons of African, Asian, or Native American descent. Quoting Michael Omi and Howard Winant’s telling analysis, Jacobson reminds “the
institutionalization of a racial order [drew] a color line around rather than within Europe.” (Jacobson 1998: 7).

What then can explain the fact that the Irish, Italians, Greeks and a host of other non-English arrivistes were described as the “inferior racial other”, and faced a type discrimination that looked a lot like racial discrimination? Jacobson avers, they did face racial discrimination, not as non-whites, but as lesser whites—as non-Anglo-Saxons. Though they were legally and politically “white,” nativist Americans deemed non-English immigrants to be an “inferior” band of whites with some (e.g. the Russians) being characterized as more pernicious and less civilized than others (Jacobson 1998: 46-49).

Jacobson’s persuasive analysis indicates that there were two hierarchies of race functioning in the U.S. during the 19th century: the one internal and the one external to whiteness. Those outside of the white box (African, Native Americans and Asians) were denied citizenship and its attendant rights and privileges. Still, inside the white box, Anglo-Saxons reigned supreme, and lesser whites were subject to ridicule and denigration, for by this time white supremacy turned on Anglo-Saxon superiority.

*Whiteness and the Problem of Social Construction Arguments*

The whiteness literature, and in particular the whiteness historiographies reviewed above are valuable for their “thick descriptions” of the lived experience of European immigrant (men) in the U.S. But, some of the most referenced works in the field have often, problematically, taken as a starting point the idea that whiteness as a category was constituted or (reconstituted) in the U.S as groups once firmly outside the “white”
category were latterly incorporated in a changing socio-political or economic milieu. In this way, race appears to be subordinate to “greater” social forces, like those of the economy and politics (Bonilla-Silva 1994).

One of the reasons for this is that these studies are, in many cases, rooted in the Marxist legacy of viewing race as “superstructural.” This is particularly evident with the more teleological arguments of neo-Marxists labor historian David Roediger. In some of the key whiteness historiographies, race is deployed in response to economic concerns (Roediger), or as a means of socio-political control (Allen 1994; Ignatiev 1995).

This appears to be, moreover, a problem of many of the social constructionist arguments for race that rely on the Marxist legacy of viewing race as “ideological.” Under this conception, race and whiteness in particular appear to be “circumstantial” as opposed to consequential. Thus, external factors deemed to be more consequential determine racial categorization, making racial categories seen simply responsive to other social forces.

This has obscured several important aspects of race, racial categorization and whiteness: First, they do not allow us to examine critical questions regarding the basis of racial categorizations, not even those surrounding whiteness. Second, and relatedly, focusing on the constitution of one category largely to the exclusion of others belies the reality of what Guglielmo terms “the colored races” and how they were co-constituted (Arendt 1973). That is, in order to understand the basis and re(constitution) of racial categories, we must necessarily attend to how blackness in particular (which has often been counterpoised to whiteness in the U.S.) was also constituted. Third, many of the expositions above, by making race dependent upon social factor X, obscure the stakes of
race and racial categorizations themselves. The power of race and the ability of racial
categorizations to significantly alter one’s socio-political and economic outcomes do not
(as they should) command center stage in these analyses. The focus is predominately on
“how they came to be white” and not on the significance of being white. Finally, and
importantly for the present analysis, we do not get an understanding of how race
articulates with other “axes of domination,” (Hill-Collins 1990) such as gender and class.
The overwhelming focus on white men in these texts leaves questions of intra-racial
differences, particularly along gender and class lines unanswered (or perhaps more
accurately, unasked).

What is needed is a new direction in whiteness studies that can address the
abovementioned concerns. Infusing a conception of race not as a superstructure, but as a
structure, that is as something that has the ability to partially determine (rather than just
respond to) social arrangements, I argue, is a move in the right direction.

*Race as a Structure*

Understanding race as a structure, or a fundamental organizing principle since the
colonial era, was the lynchpin of Eduardo Bonilla-Silva’s (1994) critical work
“Rethinking Racism: Toward a Structural Interpretation.” In this germinal text, Bonilla-
Silva makes clear that the social constructionists (including among them prominent
whiteness scholars) often give the false impression race is “dependent upon other ‘real’”
social forces, such as the economy. Bonilla-Silva asserts, that the understanding of race
as an ideology that shifts in response to changing social order diminishes its role in
constituting the social order. That is, race is one factor structuring social relationships. Recognizing race as a structure, enables us understand, he notes, how race helps to both define and reflect social relations.

Thinking of race as a structure moves us forward on two of the key issues noted in the section above: it gives us a window into the stakes of race, and it also underscores the fact of the races being co-constructed. On the first point, we can recognize that race structures social relations in that each “race” is accorded a “place” within the social system. Significantly, (as we have already seen) these places are hierarchically ordered, such that those at the top of the racial ladder (the “superior” groups) receive greater rights, privileges and access to resources than those at the bottom (the “inferior” groups). Therefore, understanding race as a structure that orders social groups helps us to recognize the material stakes of race.

This lends insight into the second point. For race to work as a hierarchically-ordered social structure from which material rewards are (partially) determined, there must be a logic to the bestowment of privileges to one group over another. This logic must link and differentiate groups in terms of a generally accepted set of qualities or characteristics (Riggs 2008). In other words, the groups must be made “legible” (Foucault 1979).

The question it leaves unanswered is what was the basis of each groups’ legibility? Put differently, what is the basis of racial categorization? Building on the work of a variety of scholars in the field, I argue, to use a Bourdieuan term, that bodies are “the structure behind the structure.” That is, racial categorization has been, since the
colonial era, fundamentally based on understandings of supposed corporeal differences between various groups of people.

In this way, this project re-inserts the body into the purview of racial theorizing, in a way that is non-essentialist. It works to do so by showing not (as early racial essentialists have done) that bodies differ by race, but rather, following the work of a variety of scholars (Butler 1990; Fanon 1967; Riggs 2008) that the body is the premiere site on which racial difference is inscribed. This project builds on this literature by showing that race is inscribed in ways beyond the “epidermis” (Fanon 1967) or skin color, but is predicated also on the size and shape of the body. Moreover, it reminds that the bodies on which race is inscribed are also gendered and classed, and therefore we cannot speak of a race (e.g. whiteness) to the exclusion of other social structures (like gender and class) that will impact the intersectional subjectivity of people within a given racial category.

*The Structure Behind the Structure: The Use of Bodies*

Eminent French philosopher Pierre Bourdieu popularized the notion that structures were themselves structured, and that the structure of structures also required investigation in the 1970s. In his 1979 book *Distinction*, which has become a seminal text in the field of cultural sociology, Bourdieu introduces the reader to the term “habitus” or one’s internalized aesthetic dispositions. The habitus, referred to in common parlance as “tastes” or consumptive preferences was, per Bourdieu in this text, a structure in that it served as the organizing principle for many social interactions. But, the habitus was also itself structured by one’s material realities, or social class position.
Significantly for our purposes, in *Distinction* one of the most visible sites on which the habitus operated was on the body. According to Bourdieu, the aesthetic preferences of elites (also aptly termed the “tastes of freedom”) informed both their diet (which was commonly more spare and more focused on “health” than non-elites) and their efforts to keep their bodies “in shape.” Bourdieu thus argued the habitus was also embodied, and these embodied distinctions help to maintain social class hierarchies.

Bourdieu’s concept of the habitus as explained above made a considerable contribution to theorizing about the role of the body in the maintenance of social inequality. But, notice that in this text class status is positioned as “the” fundamental organizing principle (or the structure behind the structure) of social relations. Bodies, per Bourdieu in *Distinction*, are simply one site on which class (vis à vis the preferences informed by the habitus) is in evidence. This conception left much to be desired for many post-modern critics of what might be termed “economism.” Indeed, while not a Marxist, Bourdieu shared with Marx the prioritization of class at the expense of other determinants of social relations (such as race and gender), for which his theories, like those of Marx, were eventually taken to task (Lamont 1992; McCall 1992; Skeggs 2005).

In response to his critics, Bourdieu presented in his 2001 text *Masculine Domination*, a re-evaluation of the role of the body, which included a reconceptualization of the role of race and gender. Here, Bourdieu reverses the order of operations, making the body not just one site on which the habitus is in evidence, but the pre-eminent site for ideological inscription of race, gender and class. The body then comes to command center stage as the logic of the body serves as the basis for social hierarchies (or the structure behind the structure).
In his re-working of the role of the body, Bourdieu writes:

The universally applicable schemes of thought record as differences in nature, inscribed in objectivity, variations and distinctive features (of physique, for example) which they help to make exist at the same time as they “naturalize” them…the division between the sexes appears to be in the “order of things,” as people sometimes say to refer to what is normal and natural…present in both the objectified state…[and] in the habitus of the agents, functioning as systems of schemes of perception, thought and action. (Bourdieu 2001; 8).

Bourdieu’s analysis here owes much to the work of Judith Butler (1992), as he appears here to prioritize the role of the gendered logic of the body in the maintenance of social distinctions. In other segments of the text, he also highlights the role of racial logics on the body in the perpetuation of social hierarchies. But interestingly, even, in this text, class distinctions continue to be of optimal importance. Race and gender function to support class stratification in that gender underlies class relations, and race overlays them. In this way, even in this work, gender and race remain class patsies, manipulated in the interest of reinforcing the structure of capital by unevenly distributing resources amongst various social groups (McCall 2005; Skeggs 2005).

The shortcomings of this model, and its limited treatment of race do not undermine its potential to make a significant contribution to theorizing the role of the body as the structure behind the structure of a racial hierarchy. Indeed, race scholars have long recognized the body as a site where group distinctions and social hierarchies “materialize”. Stuart Hall and Franz Fanon are two notable examples of race scholars who theorize the materialization of race on the body. Fanon (1967) in his *Black Skin, White Masks* claimed famously that race is “epidermalized” such that differences
between groups are written (or inscribed) “on the skin of the other” (Fanon 1967; Hall 2000). Hall too writes that “racialised differences” are built into the body, such that the body is used to visibly mark racial difference and thus buttress racial hierarchies: “certain bodies are ascribed with power, at the expense of those bodies positioned as being without (or unable to have) power. Racialised differences are thus achieved primarily through sets of contrasts…” (Hall 2000). Damien Riggs (2008) building on the work of these theorists (as well as Judith Butler), further adds that “there is no ‘race’ prior to its materialisation on the body (Riggs 2008: 2).

Still, Bourdieu’s theory might be usefully applied here to take us two steps further than much of the existing scholarship. Beyond positing that racial logic is brought to bear on the body, and that the body is in turn used to justify racial domination, Bourdieu’s rejoinder that the body naturalizes social distinctions helps us understand their entrenchment. We learn from Bourdieu not just how the body is used, but what makes the logic of the body effective in the service of domination, and it is the pretense that we are dealing with intractable “innate” differences. This insight that the body’s ability to make social disaggregations appear natural has the potential to be a useful intervention in race studies.

Further, Bourdieu attempts what few race scholars have in his treatment of the body as a structure behind the structure (s), which is his analysis of the “intersection” of race, class, and gender in his discussion of the use of bodies. Where Bourdieu falls short, as noted by Skeggs (2005), is his treatment of race, class and gender as “tiered,” with gender underlying class and race overlaying it. In this way, race, class and gender appear
to be “additive” (in the mode of early studies of intersectionality) rather than intersecting axes of domination (Hill-Collins 1990; Davis 2008; Staunaes 2003).

In this dissertation, I expand on existing race scholarship by applying and refining this Bourdieusian mode of analysis. I make the case that the body is used to naturalize racial distinctions. Shifting the focus somewhat from that of existing race scholarship that prioritizes skin color as the key racial marker, I consider body size as a racial marker. Understanding that the corporal dimension of racial categorization is multifaceted, working in more ways than skin color, provides further insights into the entrenchment of racial categories.

Few scholars have considered body size and shape as raced. Richard Dyer (1997) in his book White is a notable exception, exploring descriptions of fatness being racialized as “non-white”. But whereas Dyer argues that white people (as the dominant group) were able to escape embodiment and thus were “not reduced to the corporeal,” (Dyer 1997: 14) I argue that body size was a persistent concern and an important feature of whiteness during the rise of the slender aesthetic.

Moreover, in this dissertation I show that race co-articulated with class and gender, to make slenderness (as a racial marker) a more important concern for elite white women. Thus, I add to the extant literature by highlighting the body as a site where not only race or gender or class operate, but how race, class and gender intersect on the body.

_Intersectionality: the Co-Articulation of Race, Class and Gender on Bodies_
Arguments that racial structures co-articulate with other structures of domination, are formally referred to in the academy as studies of “intersectionality”. Though the term intersectionality was coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw in 1989 (and thus many argue the field officially emerged at this time) black feminist scholars had argued for years prior that a new mode of analysis was needed that would bring race studies (in which questions of gender were often not posed) and gender studies (in which questions of race were not posed) into conversation in a way that would highlight the experiences of women of color (hooks 1981, 1984, 1992; Hull et. all 1982; Lorde 1984). And indeed, much of the work in the field explores women of color’s experiences of violence and marginalization resulting from the intersecting structures of race and gender (Crenshaw 1989, 1991; Essed 1991, 1997; Harding 1991).

Yet curiously enough, studies of intersectionality are becoming more common in gender (and particularly feminist) studies in which the project is to show the ways in which gender ideologies are impacted by race. Intersectional modes of analyses have made fewer in-roads in race studies, its other parent field. A related and equally important question posed by many of the field’s early critics interrogates whether race and gender are the only two salient structures of domination in the lives of women of color. Thus, subsequent scholars moved to expand the scope analyses to include class, sexuality, age, nationality, culture and myriad other social dimensions (Yuval-Davis 2006). While the proliferation of categories has led to some quibbling about which structures are the “correct” ones to include, many scholars in the field often wisely choose to analyze the impact of those structures they found to be critical to their own research program. Still, significantly for our purposes, race, gender and class are now regarded as critical
elements of analysis in many studies of intersectionality (Brah and Phoenix 2004; Knapp 1999; Skeggs 1997; Yuval-Davis 2006).

While the expanded scope of analyses has to some, aided its legitimacy, there are other significant points of critique within studies of intersectionality. First is the seeming lack of agency. That is, although the field arose from two areas of study in which the perception that individuals are agents who “perform” a given identity have been critical interventions in the past two decades, analyses within intersectionality have been overwhelmingly structural. This is addressed by Dorthe Staunæs (2003) in her article “Where have all the subjects gone?” in which she calls for a reconsideration not only of how structures inform positionality and experience, but also how individuals themselves “do” gender, race and class.

But what has been perhaps a more central concern is that few studies have addressed precisely how these structures intersect. Studies that have attempted a consideration of how structures meet have often been condemned for treating race, gender, and class as additive, in evidence in the use of terms like “triple oppression” (see Yuval Davis 2006 for a review). The three systems pile atop of one another in a layered heap of oppression (as we saw with Bourdieu in the race section above).

The history of additive models should not encourage us to shy away from critical questions about how race, class and gender logics intersect, running simultaneously in a given context in ways that undermine, support, or clash with one another. Positing as scholars such as Evelyn Nakano Glenn (1999) have, that the structures of race, class and gender are mutually constituted and the positionalities are “relational” (such that lives of women of color are interconnected with those of white women, white men, and men of
color of various classes and sexualities), are useful theoretical interventions in and of themselves. But, they do little to address crucial ontological questions regarding the process by which this mutual constitution takes places, creating related positionalities that are reified through performance (and in turn reify social hierarchies).

This dissertation attempts to address this gap in the literature. I contend that in order to understand how structures intersect, an investigation of the basis of structures—or to borrow from Bourdieu, the structure behind the structure(s), or bodies, is warranted. As explored above, logic of bodies are commonly used in the service of racial, sexualized, and classed domination. But, few scholars of intersectionality have focused on the body as the site on which social hierarchies are inscribed and performed, and thereby social structures are reified.

The rise of the slender aesthetic provides a useful case study herein. Not only does it rely heavily on racial logics (particularly the logic of whiteness as constructed in opposition to blackness) and therefore allows us to prioritize intersectionality in the domain of race studies. But, because its historical development as a physical ideal (particularly amongst elite white women) can be traced, we can learn about the process by which the logic of race, class, and gender intersected on the body, and the role of individuals as agents in its propagation (and resistance). Investigating what Foucault calls “knowledge” about the body can, I argue, help us understand how structures intersect by attending to the premiere site on which they converge.
CHAPTER TWO
Thin, White, and Saved: Fat Stigma and the Fear of the Big, Black Body

_Frail, Pale, American_

In the 19th century, it was a well-worn axiom that Americans had a weight problem. Doctors, health reformers, and self-styled beauty experts condemned the body size of the “typical” American, with lengthy lamentations that haunted the pages of numerous newspapers and magazines. Surprisingly enough to the modern reader, however, at issue was the excessive thinness of the average American.

Underweight, many argued, was enfeebling the American people. It was further coded a preventable drain on the nation’s medical resources. Exemplary of the distress engendered by this encroaching threat to public health was an article titled “Plump and Thin People: Do You Know What Makes a Difference?” The unidentified contributing writer to _The New York Times_ declaims, “There is a vast number of gaunt, pale, and thin people, manifestly under the proper size and weight. Many of them are actually emaciated…” These people were, moreover, “the ready victims of disease, and fall in multitudes before any epidemic.” (NYT, 1894).

Other pundits did more to sensationalize the apparently scandalizing problem of American thinness. Another article in _The New York Times_, for example, bore the alarmist title, “Actually Starving!” Its title was outdone only by its hyperbolic opening statement, in which the author, quoting a prominent physician, states: “Thousands of men and women in New York are starving, although they have plenty of money to buy the best food!” (NYT, 1894).
Articles from *The New York Times* and other Northern periodicals, like *Harper’s Bazaar*, decrying the meagerness of the common American abounded. But, the slim scare was not relegated to one section of the country. Southern pundits too derided the “American physique” as “insucculent” or emitting a sickly, desiccated quality (AC, “American Physique” 1870).

While many men and women of all ages were thought to be underweight, slenderness among the youth was thought to be a particularly noticeable. Moreover, slenderness among young women was considered an acute problem. Physicians and others railed against the scantiness of physique that they argued marred health and beauty. The 1877 Harper’s publication *The Bazar Book of Decorum* claims, “The pallidness of complexion and meagerness of frame, which are characteristic of our women…” were a “systematic disobedience to the laws of health.” (1877: 20-24). And, as the author of “Plump and Thin People” noted, “A woman may be thin and graceful, but not thin and beautiful.” (NYT, 1894).

What requires further examination, then, is why, at the time when slenderness was derided as unhealthy, and by many of its detractors, unattractive, did it concomitantly exist as a social value among many Americans, particularly white American women. Historians and women’s studies scholars such as J.J. Brumberg and Roberta Seid have shown that though deemed unhealthy and unattractive in the eyes of health reformers, slimness was fashionable among women of the “cultivated classes” (Brumberg 1988; Seid 1989). Medical historian Adele Clarke adds that well-to-do women were “wasting in style” (1990: 19).
What could explain why would a visible coterie of white women displayed a preference slender physiques despite medical professionals often vociferous attack of thinness as unhealthy? Brumberg (1988) and Banner (1983) have argued that slenderness was in style due largely to the influence of celebrated British novelist and poet, Lord Byron. Lord Byron, who wrote a number of belauded works between 1807-1830, was a well-recognized celebrity stateside. In addition to his artistic works, Byron was also known for his outrageous attempts to reduce his own bulk. His staple vinegar and water diet, for example, became a well-chewed piece of fat for 19th century celebophiles (Banner 1983).

And, adding further evidence to the case, Lord Byron was known to despise the sight of a woman eating. Thus, it was suggested that many fashionable women adopted his attitude to dieting and weight. The author of an 1877 article found in Harper’s Bazaar expresses this view:

Many of our over-refined dames seem to have adopted Lord Byron’s notion that eating is unbecoming to a woman. It is a marvel home some of them manage to keep body and soul together with the apparent regimen of starvation to which they subject themselves...Our delicate dames appear to have reduced themselves to the fabulous abstemiousness of the single blade of grass to which the old woman had gradually brought her cow. (Harper’s Bazaar 1877)

Still, although there is evidence that Byron influenced the popularity of slenderness, there is less evidence to suggest that Byron was the original source of this phenomenon. To suggest that he was evinces an under-appreciation of the broader historical and socio-cultural milieu in which slenderness developed as a social value.
In this chapter, I show that the rise of slenderness as a social value among middle and upper-class white women existed in spite of medical objections because by and large, the medical establishment was not the most respected source of information about diet and “proper” body size during this historical time period. Indeed, previous work investigating this topic—which has focused by and large on the literature and debates circulating during the last few decades of the 19th century—has underappreciated the role of two prominent vectors of information about diet and weight during the first few decades of the 19th century: natural science and religion. I argue that religious and natural scientific understandings of food and the body, rather than battling for primacy, melded into a “scientifico-religious” discourse about proper eating and body size that made thinness into a form of embodied cultural capital (Bourdieu 1979; Goldenberg 2010; Shilling 1991). This scientifico-religious discourse suggested that white “civilized Christians” should not overindulge in food, helping attenuated eating and slim frames become racially and religiously coded as signs of superiority. Overeating and fatness were simultaneously considered signs of the barbarous “inferior” racial “Others,” and was commonly associated with black womanhood.

In the sections that follow, I present the medical argument for women of the cultured classes being inherently frail and sickly. I then show how the religious discourse about Christian eating and the scientific narrative about white “civilized” bodies and black “savage” bodies validated thinner frames even as the medical establishment marked them as unhealthy. Finally, I show how the white civilized Christian preference for lean physiques was reproduced in the popular journals and magazines, which advocated slenderness for women.
The late 19th century marked an important moment for the development of the medical sciences as a field. Prior to this historical moment medicine was practiced of a veritable motley of persons with a mixed-bag of qualifications. Medical practitioners may or may not have received a formal education, and self-styled “healers” had in many cases as much cache as trained physicians (Starr 1982).

There were several factors contributing to the rise of medicine as a field. But, as scholars have noted, its ascent was in part predicated on the development of new tools to inspect the human body, and a growing professionalization of the discipline that placed the practice of medicine increasingly to the domain of the experts (Foucault 1979; Starr 1982). And importantly, a central location of inspection for the newly anointed medical experts, the overwhelming majority of whom were male, was the female body (Ehrenreich and English 1973).

Indeed, the female body had long been considered a curiosity worthy of examination. Theories of its “inferiority” relative to the male body, a paternalistic ideology inherited from religion, proliferated since at least the 16th century (Clarke 1990; Ehrenreich and English 1973). But, late 18th-mid 19th century advances in science and medicine led medical and natural scientists to assert (with newfound authority) that women’s bodies were not only inferior to men’s, they were inherently different and prone to illness. The locus of women’s innate difference (and damnation) was their reproductive organs.

The Trouble with “Women”: The Rise of the Medical Sciences

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Physicians argued that women suffered because of their reproductive organs, which saddled them with several constitutional deficiencies. The number of deficiencies thought to have originated with the uterus were staggering, and too numerous to be listed here. But, listed among the many uterine disorders were the propensity to being frailer, smaller, nervous and more delicate (Smith-Rosenberg 1984; Leavitt 1984).

On this point, the work of Dr. Jean (alternatively “John”) Astruc is illustrative. Astruc was the famed physician to French King Augustus II. Best known for his work on venereal diseases, Astruc also wrote several treatises on “women’s” diseases, and became one of the earliest doctors to theorize on the centrality of the uterus in women’s (mal)function. Writing near the tail-end of the Enlightenment era, Astruc asserted, “No body has yet thought of founding the theory on the true fructure (sic) of the uterus and the mechanism of the functions proper to that part” (1762: ix). He thus himself endeavored such a task in his 1762 Treatise on the Diseases of Women, in which one of his central arguments is that the problems associated with the uterus was the root cause of “delicacy” in some women (1762: xi).

Astruc was one of the first physicians to suggest that women’s delicacy was owing to problems associated with the uterus, but the expansion and dissemination of such ideas can be attributed to a later generation of physicians. Alexander Hamilton, a British physician and Professor of Midwifery, is a notable example of this subsequent wave of physicians. Hamilton wrote in 1785 that the “uterine system”, was underlying factor in many of the diseases to which women were subject, including their common tendency to delicacy. Hamilton, moreover, advanced the theories of Astruc on the topic by drawing a direct link between the internal reproductive organs and the digestive tract.
Suggesting that the former was part of the “lower belly” and the latter part of the “upper belly” Hamilton saw an interaction between the two systems nestled in the abdomen, “[The uterine system] is connected at the upper part with the bladder and at the back part with the ftrait (sic) gut; fo any diforders in one will be readily communicated to the other” (1785: 41).

The tendency, then, of some women to frailty and delicacy had to do with the connection between the disordered uterus, and the digestive tract. While he doesn’t necessarily give primacy to the uterus as the cause of all digestive disorders, he does suggest that the uterus, prone to disruption, could impact both digestion and appetite.

The works of Hamilton and Astruc on uterine diseases were foundational. And, although they were writing in Europe, their ideas and the ideas of other prominent continental doctors had a noticeable impact on American physicians, many of whom studied at the feet of English and French doctors between the late 18th-early 19th centuries (Haller 1981; Nissenbaum 1980). And notably, while they claimed the uterus was the main culprit in women’s delicacy and smallness of frame, it was not the only factor in women’s frailty. Two additional important factors, the types of food consumed and amount of exercise taken, each related to one’s level of “civilization,” also contributed to the feebleness of the female form.

Indeed, this consideration helped a variety of doctors (including Hamilton and Astruc) explain why it was that some women were slight and delicate. Here, Hamilton’s 1813 Treatise on the Management of Female Complaints is instructive, as Hamilton spells out for the reader who were the frail small women: “Women in the higher ranks of life…are subject to sickness...Those of the lower rank, inured to exercise and labor, and
strangers to those refinements which debilitate the system are seldom observed to suffer…” (1813: 24)

In the U.S., doctors such as Dr. John D. Vaughn similarly wrote in 1803 that the housebound domestic “female of civilized nations” engaged in irregular exercise, which contributed to her diseased position (Haller 1981: 51). Other physicians, including the famed Charles D. Meigs in his widely-read text, *Females and Their Diseases* would later write that the “capricious appetite, fretfulness…and changes in the position of the uterus” were “common distresses of the civilized woman” (quoted in Haller 1981: 51).

Doctors’ assertions of the role of “refinements” in the ill-health of “women’s” bodies helps us understand an important point. The overwhelming concern of doctors in descriptions of “women’s” bodies and “women’s” diseases, were the ailments of well-to-do European women. In this way, there was a palpable class and race bias existing in the medical literature. Doctors commonly used the blanket term “women’s diseases” while fully aware that they were describing the ailments specific to white ladies suffering from “the dissipations of high life” (Hamilton 1813: 250).

It is important here to note that while the dissipations caused jointly by the female reproductive organs and cultivation were thought to plague “civilized” nations in Europe as well as the U.S., the U.S. was thought to be the premiere site for pale, thin, sickly looking women. While a number of medical historians (and writers contemporary to the period such as Catharine Beecher) noted the impoverishment of the “typical” American female frame, few theorized about its specific cultural factors (Apple 1990, Verbrugge 1988). Indeed, the argument by American physicians of the time Dr. Edward H. Dixon (1848) and Dr. John Gunn (1833) that the chill of northern climes (as opposed to the
“southern climes” of the colonies and parts of Europe) contributed to the fragile constitution and poor appetite of civilized women could not sufficiently explain why in England “some” women were frail, while in America it was fast becoming the norm.

In the U.S., the 19th century was marked by the growing alarm on the part of medical practitioners like Dr. Lionel Weatherly of the unhealthful state of vast numbers of “colourless, pale-complexioned…and sickly-looking” young women of the cultured classes (Weatherly 1882: 31). And significantly, just as doctors were devising dietary plans and prescribing pills for their physical improvement, these young women were boldly, defiantly in many cases, refusing to approximate a state of “rude health” (Banner 1983). Feminine frailty might have been considered a sign of ill-health affected by civilization. But, it was I argue, ironically its very association with civilization, specifically the scientifisco-religious discourse of white Christian personhood, that turned slimness into a form of capital.

*Between God and Food*

Since many medical doctors feared the “average” American woman was frail, pale, and slight with a deranged appetite, their prescription was typically for women to eat more. Yet, doctors wanted young women to be more selective in the types of food and drink they consumed. Many lamented the fact that these young women of capricious appetite ate too little and too infrequently overall, but were prone ingest too much of the wrong types of food and drink when they did eat. Spicy foods, sugary confections and caffeinated drinks were considered young women’s indulgence of choice, and these items
were thought to over-stimulate the system and trouble the digestive tract (Dixon 1848; Mitchell 1882).

But, despite the growing alarm issuing from the mainstream medical establishment, women did not unilaterally heed their calls. This was due largely to the fact that although the medicine as a field was becoming professionalized, and thus gaining a measure of authoritative clout, physicians still faced a great deal of skepticism. For one, the “heroic” disease treatments employed by many doctors, that commonly involved bloodletting, were as likely to cause harm as good--understandably bathing the growing field with the taint of mistrust. For another, doctors like many intellectuals, were commonly regarded with cynicism. Writes James Whorton, their “book-larnin” was regarded as affectation that in many cases served to undermine, rather than bolster, their credibility (Whorton 1982: 36).

As a result, between the late 18th-mid-19th centuries women of means were no more likely to seek treatment from medical practitioners than from self-appointed health reformers. These health reformers made a name for themselves during the health reform movement that began in the 18th century, and spread as the Enlightenment gave bourgeois citizens a newfound faith in the ability of science to “instruct citizens in the natural (emphasis mine) laws of health” (Whorton 1982: 15). How Americans were to uncover

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2 While the earliest inklings of the health reform movement were visible in the late 18th century, it wasn’t until the first few decades of the 19th century that it started to gain momentum. It became part and parcel of the broader movement for social reform sparked by evangelical Protestants, and was closely aligned with the coeval Temperance Movement both in its ideology of restraint and in terms of its leadership. Indeed, famed family of teetotalers, the Beechers, headed by patriarch and minister Lyman Beecher, were frontline activists in the temperance and health reform movements, as well and other social reform movements. Daughter to Lyman and sister to Harriet Beecher-Stowe, Catherine Beecher, was, for instance, renown not only for her work in the women’s suffrage and anti-slavery movements, but also in the temperance and health reform movements. In terms of her work in health reform, she wrote several widely-read books on how weak and delicate dames of the cultured classes should eat for better health, including *A Treatise on*
these laws was (perhaps unsurprisingly) to consult the reigning source of information for all things related to the natural world: The Holy Bible.

It was with a bit of irony, then, that the Enlightenment, as a scientific revolution, opened the door for the expansion of religious messages about the body. Engaging in a discourse that merged science and religion, referred to as “Christian Science” or “Christian Physiology,” the health reformers, many of whom were ministers or other devout Christians, lectured about “sins” against the natural laws of health. Their message, aptly described by historian James Whorton as “hygienic evangelism,” became a key source for information about achieving and maintaining a healthy body for a number of Americans (Griffith 2004; Nissenbaum 1980; Whorton 1982).

There were, as to be expected, points of overlap between the traditional and Christian physiologists. Each group, for example, decried the over-use of “stimulating” foods and their role in the debilitated physiques of the “average” American woman during the time period. Part of the reason for this convergence was that many of the health reformers were both trained physicians and devout Christian (Nissenbaum 1980; Whorton 1982).

But, their differences were truly the tale of the tape. Traditional physicians, as we have seen, commonly believed that women’s reproductive systems played a heavy hand in disease. Uterine disorders, they argued, were often a source of appetitive or digestive disruptions, leading women to eat too little overall. Thus, many doctors wanted women to

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*Domestic Economy* (1842). And, significantly for the present examination, she was also a co-founder of the *Society for the Suppression of Eating*, a group whose main goal was to inform churchgoers that a person might, though overindulgence, equally “eateth [as] drinketh damnation unto himself” (see: “Hints Towards the Formation of a Society for the Suppression of Eating”. *The New-England magazine. /Volume 2, Issue 4, April 1832. Found online at http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/r?ammem/ncps*).
develop a “true appetite” with an emphasis on increasing their overall food intake (Dixon 1848).

Health reformers, conversely, often outright rejected the notion of women being constitutionally diseased. Indeed, while it was not uncommon for health reformers—like many of believers and non-believers at this historical moment—to view women’s bodies as inferior to men’s, this did not imply for the great mass of reformers that women were thus naturally ill. To suggest women’s bodies (esp. reproductive organs) were an inherent source of disease would have provided an opening for questioning the omnipotent creator’s design, an unacceptable gaffe.

Rather than encouraging such heretical thinking, health reformers contended that though women were more prone to delicacy than men, there was no direct corollary between this and digestive illness. Reversing the order of operations used by many trained physicians, health reformers claimed the deranged or “sinful” appetite was the root cause (not the effect) of their digestive illnesses. Accordingly, health reformers placed an emphasis not on increasing the appetite as a corrective, but on reducing the appetite for “sinful” foods (Whorton 1982: 15).

The work health reformer Dr. William Alcott provides an excellent case in point. Arguing “woman is designed, no doubt, to have greater nervous susceptibility than man” (1855: 28), Alcott conjectured that the lion’s share of women’s debility was nevertheless owing to a culture that encouraged bad eating habits. Per Alcott, “a whole generation of women [were] trained as a whole to tenderness, delicacy, nervousness, feebleness of muscle, want of appetite and imperfect digestion” (1855: 37). Though this poor training might have been directly attributable to “our” American ancestors, or “those who were
diseased before us,” such an ability to spoil God’s creation was, at its source according to Alcott, the handiwork of the devil.

To Alcott, Americans had for generations allowed the devil to dictate their orientation to food: “Satan holds sway in this world, by virtue of those dark and depressing passions and depraved appetites.” The problem, quite simply, was that Americans were overindulgent, gluttonous even. Therefore, Alcott constructed a four-fold path to alimentary righteousness, the final two points of which were aimed at reducing food intake. The third rule, which he thought specifically applied to women of the means, was to curtail the indulgence in sugary confections that served as stimulants and thus violated “Christian law.” With the fourth rule, Alcott explicitly condemned gluttony in all its forms: “fourth rule in regard to eating is not to eat too much” (1855: 82). Following his four-fold path to Christian eating would lead to “proportion as the whole body, soul and spirit, as Paul calls them…just in the same proportion will you be happy” (1855: 20).

Alcott, as a health-reforming physician, was among the more prominent figures of the movement. But, he was by no means the originator of these ideas. They formed part of the intellectual miasma since at least the late 18th century, when Benjamin Rush, noted, “intemperance in [either] eating or drinking” was to blame for the regrettable physiques of most Americans (Nissenbaum 1980). Nor was Alcott the most famous of the “physiological missionaries…[spreading] the gospel to the gluttonous and indolent heathen of the world” (Whorton 1982: 7-8). Such an honor belonged to the Reverend Sylvester Graham.
A minister by trade, and a nervous and spindly man most of his life, Graham took to the pulpits to preach against “wrong” eating in the early 1830s. In terms of his lectures on food, 20th century scholars have focused overwhelmingly on Graham’s interest in vegetarianism, and in his instructions to mothers to feed their families with wholesome, home-baked bread (Nissenbaum 1980; Griffith 2004; Whorton 1982). An underappreciated thrust of Graham’s extemporizing was his continuous reference to the ills of “intemperance” in the face of food. Overeating, for Graham, as for other reformers was a sin. He found such indulgence a sufficiently important topic as to publish the following tract (capitalization original),

EVERY INDIVIDUAL SHOULD, AS A GENERAL RULE, RESTRAIN HIMSELF TO THE SMALLEST QUANTITY, WHICH HE FINDS FROM CAREFUL INVESTIGATION AND ENLIGHTENED EXPERIENCE AND OBSERVATION, WILL FULLY MEET THE ALIMENTARY WANTS OF THE VITAL ECONOMY OF HIS SYSTEM—KNOWING THAT WHATSOEVER MORE THAN THIS IS EVIL.\(^3\)

The ungodly appetitive indulgence that by Graham’s account ran amok during the early-to-mid 19th century was (along with sexual excitement) a lynchpin of disease. The appetite of the healthy individual was moderate, whereas the “despotic, vehement, and impatient” appetite of the dietetic philanderer laid the path to physical and spiritual ruin.

Graham’s influence in the health reform movement cannot be overstated. His eponymous publications, including the *Graham Journal of Health and Longevity* and *Graham’s Magazine* were oft-referenced sources for advice on diet and nutrition by the 19th century bourgeoisie (Nissenbaum 1980). Given that he was a minister, his dietetic ideas, known as “Grahamism” were equated with “Bibleism,” giving his dietary advice

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the full weight of Christian authority (Whorton 1982). And, followers of Grahamism, “the Grahamites,” opened their own dietary and water-cure clinics, and delivered lectures on slightly modified versions of his ideas throughout much of the northeast.

It is important to note here that many of Graham’s disciples—and indeed, many of the most prominent figures in the efforts to reform the health and wellness of American women—were themselves women. Mary Gove Nichols was one of the most recognizable and influential of the Grahamites. A lady of the cultivated classes with her own water-cure clinic in New York, Nichols joined the health reform movement in the 1830s, upon remarking that American women were succumbing to disease at scandalous rates.

Nichols argued that “women’s” illnesses were due primarily to two bad habits: corseting and poor diet. In terms of corseting, she, like many of her contemporaries—including the Catherine Beecher—would argue that the works of fiction by Lord Byron and others were “sickly tales that make clay wasps of their heroines.” They contributed to the delicacy and debility of cultured women by “foster[ing] the false taste of the community” (1846: 88-89). But to Nichols, a far more pressing concern was the dietary liberties taken by these very same women. Nichols’, much like Alcott and Graham, conceived of eating as a moral enterprise. She was thus undone by the number of erstwhile Christian women who ate with a sense of abandon. This, Nichols declaimed, was a contravention of God’s divine law:

The Creator has given us hunger and thirst as watchful monitors to inform us when we need food to repair the waste of the body. The intention of taking food is to support the body, to supply the waste induced by action. We should eat in order to live. But how few do this. How many live to eat, instead of eating to live. Sensual gratification in eating, in drinking, in
every thing, seems to be the ruling motive with very many in our perverted and depraved world (1846: 99).

Proper eating thusly described involved not only eating nutritious foods, but eating only as needed. Exercising temperance in the face of food, was, we find, a central tenet for many of the most prominent, and prodigious, health reformers, and a cornerstone of the health reform movement.

To the modern reader, there appears to be an inherent contradiction to the notion that healthy, minimalistic eating could combat the illnesses “women” suffered that rendered them frail and feeble. How could health reformers lament the frail and slight form of the “typical” American woman, and constantly advise women to be mindful not to eat too much? Some, including Nichols herself, suggested that plying oneself full of all the “wrong” foods was the basis of both illness and slight, delicate frames because the stomach would become so overloaded with food that it simply did not have the capacity to digest much of anything any longer. Nichols writes, “I have seen a pale, sickly child indulged with fruit and confectionery, and then suffered to sleep directly, when its stomach was in such a state that all its energies were imperatively demanded…the child awoke with a degree of fever, and languor, and restless anguish, which no language can express” (1846: 107). The child became, according to Nichols, diseased and undersized, because sufficient flesh-building alimentation had not been introduced to her system. She should have avoided sugar and limited her meat consumption, subsisting instead on whole breads, fresh fruits and vegetables, which Nichols claimed were healthy, “flesh-firming” foods that could help a person achieve a healthy weight (1846: 245-6).
Alcott had made similar pronouncements. In his *Vegetable Diet, Defended* Alcott claimed that the healthiest most “vigorous” races of man subsisted primarily on a wholesome vegetable diet. “In the first place, [vegetable eating] forms better bones and more solid muscles and consequently gives to the frame greater solidity and strength. Compare, in evidence of the truth of this statement, the vegetable-eating millions of middle and Southern Europe.” He adds, “In short, go where you will and institute a fair comparison and the results will be, without a single exception, in favour of a diet exclusively vegetable” (1844: 3-4). Meat-eaters, (remembering that meat, like sugar and spices, was thought to be a “stimulant” and therefore ill-suited for the human body) were among the “puny races” (see also Whorton 1982: 89).

That was at least the theory. In practice, as we would expect, this did not lead many of the dietary prosthelytizers or their disciples to build “firm” flesh. In fact, many of those who lived by the health reform ideologies stayed slim or became slimmer. This did not go unnoticed by their contemporaries, particularly those who were critical of their Spartan program. A writer for the *New York Review* in a pithy treatise titled “Dietetic Charlantry; or The New Ethics of Eating” condemned the “lean-visaged cadaverous disciples…[the] gaunt, wry-faced, lantern-jawed, ghostly-looking invalids,” of the movement for apparently contributing to the national problem. Further, according to the author, the women who took to the program in particular were thought to resemble “mummies preserved in saffron” (1837: 339, 341—quoted in Whorton 1982: 58). Indeed, the Christian physiologists struck the non-believers—including the traditional physiologists such as Dr. James Johnson—as contributing to the “narrow chests, and lank
limbs, and flabby muscles, and tottering steps that meet us at every corner” (Whorton 1982: 28).

It was in the responses of the health reformers to these critics that we begin to understand what made slenderness a social value at the time. For while many condemned a frailty borne of the immoral habit of filling oneself to the brim with stimulating foods, they nevertheless touted a healthy firm leanness. The line, seemingly invisible to onlookers, was evident to those following the regime.

In fact, whereas physicians like Edward Dixon and S. Weir Mitchell advocated heavy diets that could pack on pounds (Dixon 1842; Mitchell 1882), health reformers’ common disdain for overindulgence contributed to their disgust of corpulence, which was presumably achieved by people who ate too much but whose digestive tracts were not inhibited by it. Alcott was known to disdain meat-eaters as alternately among the “puny races” as well as “those who wish to become corpulent (1841; quoted in Whorton 1982: 72). Grahamites too referred to meat-eating men as “portly gentlemen with forms that might have shamed Jack Falstaff, and visages which would provoke the envy of a turkey-cock,” (1837, Graham J of Heal and Longev).

If it seems to be a contradiction that those who ate too much could be either slight (if digestion was deranged) or corpulent, (presumably if digestion was not), this apparent flip-flopping did not go unremarked by those outside the movement. Mark Twain a contemporary and critic of the movement, at one time wrote of Christian physiology, “It seems to be inconsistent” (Whorton 1982: 44). But, its lack of internal cohesion, while worthy of note, is of less concern here than highlighting one of its central tenets regarding how to be a healthy Christian: thou shalt not overeat.
The Enlightenment and the Perfectibility of the (White) Race

Interdictions against overindulgence in food were not, of course, borne of new biblical interpretations dreamt up by Christian physiologists of the early 19th century. Gluttony had been considered one of the Cardinal Sins—an act that would certainly put one on the pathway to damnation—since early Christianity. Indeed, there are many illustrations of overeating leading to ruin in the bible; even in the infamous story of Sodom and Gomorrah, a moralizing tale about the “ills” of homosexuality, “fulness (sic) of bread” was also listed among the deadly sins committed by the city’s purportedly hedonistic residents.⁴

What was new to the early-to-mid 19th century was the newfound militancy against overfeeding. Eating beyond that which was deemed necessary to sustain life was, during the health reform movement a form of “intemperance” which, like excessive drinking, was adjudged a base form of indulgence in sensual passions that was ill-suited to right-thinking, “civilized” Christians of the post-Enlightenment era. That is, if (as noted above) the Enlightenment opened the door for religious arguments about the body to re-surface in a newly conceptualized form, it was because the philosophers of the Enlightenment succeeded only in questioning the authority of the church, not in undermining the validity of Christianity.

Rather, the central precepts of the Enlightenment, in which the “progress” of humanity could be rendered through the use of reason, was well-suited to the Protestant

⁴ See Ezekiel 16:49, King James Version: “Behold, this was the iniquity of thy sister Sodom, pride, fulness of bread, and abundance of idleness was in her and in her daughters, neither did she strengthen the hand of the poor and needy.”
spirit of rationality. In this way, a scientific revolution purportedly based on the rejection of religious authority, ironically contributed to an overwhelming “romantic religious faith” that “changed an Enlightenment doctrine of progress into a dynamic principle of reform” (Thomas 1965: 659).

The symbiosis between the ideals of the Enlightenment ideals and those of 19th century Christian scientists’ ran deeper than the simple idea of progress. The underlying basis of progress for Christian physiologists and many Enlightenment philosophers was the same. For each, the reformation of the individual human body through the assertion of an ascetic self-discipline over bodily passions was the critical first step towards in the advancement of “the race.”

The term “the race” carried with it a curious double-meaning. On the one hand, Enlightenment philosophers and Christian scientists were centrally concerned with the possibility of human perfectibility, of, as John Thomas notes, the “notion of the individual as a ‘reservoir’ of possibilities—[which] fosters a revolutionary assurance...[of] Progress” (Thomas 1965: 656). On the other—as we witnessed with descriptions of “women’s diseases” that were upon further inspection about white upper- and middle-class women—Enlightenment descriptions of the race, while masquerading as a value free representation of humanity, were necessarily about the white race.

The near conflation of the white race with the human race in discussions of Progress was born of conflicting ideologies within Enlightenment science. That is, as Sociologist Denise da Silva explains, the moment at which scientists and philosophers began to articulate the existence of a “transparent I”—a subject with natural rights capable of exercising rational thought for the benefit of themselves and others—was the
very same moment in which understandings of a multiplicity of races with their own abilities and temperaments proliferated. The result was a philosophy of natural rights that existed alongside a (contradictorily) growing racialized order of privileges based on “capacities.” Thus was achieved a global order in which entire continents of people were deemed incapable of the higher rational thought or self-discipline, and denied the subjectivity and natural rights accorded Europeans (da Silva 2007; Fredrickson 1971).

The implications of this racial order for understandings of perfectibility were clear. Europeans, as the rational racial group were capable of self-mastery and therefore could aspire to perfection. Non-European racial “Others,” were incapable of reason and self-mastery, and therefore of could not aspire to such improvements. They remained in an “uncivilized” primitive, pre-rational state of nature in which higher reasoning was a skill they neither had nor could cultivate (Jordan 1968; Fredrickson 1971).

That understandings of racial difference were expanded (but not originated) by Enlightenment scientists, and that non-white racial Others were thought to live moment-to-moment by the whim of their sensual passions is important to an understanding of the value of abstemiousness and “firm” slenderness as a form of physical capital. For during the same historical period that Christian physiologists began to lecture on overeating as a “sin” in which either sickly frailty or fatness would be its inevitable abhorrent result, key players in the Enlightenment reminded white Europeans that self-control exercised in all things (including eating) were evidence of civilization and elevated (white) racial character, and contributed to the advancement of “the race” (doubly signified).

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5 Conceptions of racial difference have existed since at least the 14th century (Silverblatt 2004).
Enlightenment science, then, lent further credibility to the value of abstemiousness as evincing a “civilized white” orientation to the table. It offered the full weight of scientific authority, which unlike much of the medical advice was both in harmony with Christian values (not the least reason for which was that many Enlightenment philosophers were themselves Christians), and quite simply more influential in producing understandings of sound body than the as of yet still relatively formless medical establishment of the late 18th–early 19th centuries (Starr 1982).

Proof of this comes from some of the most influential Enlightenment thinkers. No less a figure than Carl Von Linneaus, father of the modern classification system, added to conceptions of racial differences in rationality and self-control. In the first edition of his famed Systemae Naturae, the Swedish natural scientist and devout Christian argued that there were four varieties of human: Europaeus, Americanus, Asaticus and Africanus. According to Linneaus, all of these groups were of the same species. (Indeed, by the 10th edition of his famous Systemae Naturae written in 1758, he had taken to calling humans “homo sapiens.”) Yet, relying largely on data acquired from a hodge-podge of travelogues, writings, and anthropological studies undertaken by explorers, traders, and missionaries (Smedley 1993), Linnaeus also posited that each variety had specific physical and behavioral characteristics. He described the characteristics of each as follows:

Americanus: reddish, choleric, erect; hair black, straight, thick wide nostrils, scanty beard; obstinate, merry, free; regulated by customs
Asiaticus: sallow, melancholy, stiff; hair black, dark eyes, severe, haughty avaricious; ruled by opinions

Africanus: black phlegmatic, relaxed; hair black, frizzled; skin silky, nose flat, lips tumid; women without shame, they lactate profusely, crafty, indolent, negligent; governed by caprice

Europeanus: white, sanguine, muscular; hair long, flowing; eyes blue; gentle, acute, inventive; covers himself with close vestments; governed by laws.

There are a couple of important things to note with Linneaus’ description of racial characteristics. For starters, Europeans were described as “governed by laws” and in that sense rational. Every other racial group was described as lacking such a quality: Americanus is described as “free” and “regulated by customs”, Asiaticus as “avaricious” and ruled by opinion, and Africanus as “indolent” and “governed by caprice.” And, while his description of non-Europeans is, on the whole, derogatory, his description of Africanus as “indolent” and capricious is the most radically different from Europeanus, as they can be readily understood as meaning capitulation to the immediate sensory desires.

Also worthy of note is the fact that the Africanus category is the only one to explicitly reference women. Why, should Linneaus focus such attention on black women? Previous scholars have noted that black women commanded a great deal of the attention of late 18th-early 19th century race scientists. Their exploration of historical documents revealed that much of what was written by Enlightenment and post-
Enlightenment race scientists used deleterious depictions of not just black people, but black women specifically (Smedley 1993).

Indeed, if Africans were the group most often used as a racial mirror in the Lacanian sense, as a radical divergence from the Self—largely as a rationale for the continuation of slavery—black women were commonly marshaled to the task of representing the savagery of the group writ large (Banton 1987; Fausto-Sterling 1995; Fields 1991; Smedley 1993). This has been undertheorized in the work of Foucault and subsequent scholars who have suggested that the individual body during this period represented the social body. Indeed, the gendered element of this has not been fully appreciated, as it was typically the collective female body and its reproductive potential that was used to represent the health or illness of the social body (Mayer 2000).

Still, much of what previous scholars have explored were depictions of black women as “libidinous” (Fausto-Sterling 1995; Walvin 1973). What has been underexamined is black women’s representation as indulging in all sensory desires, meaning typically the sensual appetites both sexual and oral. Thus, while black people were commonly used as the “anti-subject,” the “uncivilized” foil for white, civilized, self-controlled persons, black women were typically the explicit sub-population marked as “lacking in moral restraint” and “given to excess” in such comparisons (Smedley 1993).

The idea that Africans were “governed by caprice,” and its implied demand for instant, continuous sensory gratification as opposed to restrained, rational action of Europeans did not originate with Linnaeus. Rather, they were in evidence from the earliest days of the colonial era. In the 1500s, for example, Venetian botanist Prospero
Alpini lamented that “vice of the flesh” was widespread among Africans, and specifically lamented their seeming need for immediate gratification in copious amounts of food (Forth 2012). Nevertheless, as the creator of one of the earliest scientific racial schematics, Linnaeus was an important figure in the propagation of such ideas. Subsequent race scientists, picking up on and expanding his racial outline, would use similar representations of black people (and typically black women as their synecdotes).

This form of racial theorizing did not remain cloistered strictly within the realm of “science”; other late 18th-mid 19th century intellectuals, particularly those living and working in the colonies, crafted related depictions of black people. Although they were not officially “scientists” they were nevertheless important contributors to race science during the period, and are oft-referenced by contemporary scholars of race (Jordan 1968; Smedley 1993; Walvin 1973). Edward Long, for example, author of widely-circulated The History of Jamaica (1774), would claim outright that “blacks were given to excesses” (quoted in Smedley 1993: 183). Thomas Carlyle, a far more recognizable figure, was referenced repeatedly for his ideas about black people—and the “black Irish” as explored in the next chapter—(Horsman 1976). In the 19th century, Carlyle expounded with derision that black people routinely roam about “rum bottle in hand...no breeches on his body, pumpkin at discretion, and the fruitfullest region of the earth going back to the jungle around him…” (quoted in Walvin 1973: 164-5).

By the early 19th century, the idea that black people were capricious, indolent, and indulgent was such a recognized racial ideology that even abolitionists felt the need to

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6 Some authors would use “Ethiopians” as a proxy for Africans. This was the case for Prospero Alpini, quoted here, as well as Johann Blumenbach.
address it. In 1836, a colonizationist (abolitionists who wanted to send black Americans “back to Africa”) by the name of Frederick Freeman of Pennsylvania wrote, “Africans are as capable of appreciating and enjoying the endearing relations and blessings of life; as capable of self-government...piety and respectability.” Freeman added, “the supposed indolence of contemporary inhabitants of Africa was due entirely to a natural abundance that made work unnecessary; where Negroes lived in a harsh environment, as in Senegal, they were as industrious as any people on earth” (quoted in Fredrickson 1971: 15).

Notably, while “scientific” ideas of diet, containment (or explosion) of the sensual appetite, and Progress often fit nicely with those of Christian physiologists, race scientists, particularly those of the 19th century, had more conviction about the relationship between food and fat. That is, whereas Christian physiologists claimed both dessicated leanness and portliness were, somehow, signs of overeating, race scientists were more likely to make the link between abundant eating and fatness. This was partly due to the fact that while Christian physiologists were primarily concerned with the practice of overfeeding (thereby wavering on its presumed physical result), race science at the time was necessarily about making connections between behavioral and external physical characteristics (Banton 1987; Spencer 1996). Another, arguably more important reason for the greater likelihood of race scientists linking hearty appetite and hefty physique was the intensification of reports coming back from the colonies beginning in the early 19th century linking food and fat. These reports, again culled from a veritable motley of sources with questionable reliability, frequently described the so-called “art of overfeeding” in Africa that was intended to produce a heralded corpulency (Forth 2012).
The accounts of Scottish explorer Mungo Park provide a useful illustration. Traveling among the Moors of western Africa in the 1790s, Park expressed alarm at the plentiful portions of camel’s milk and couscous young women were fed in order to meet the “prevalent taste for unwieldiness of bulk” that made for a fine figure (quoted in Forth 2012: 8).

The work of John Hanning Speke, a colonial British army officer, is also instructive here. Speke made several expeditions to India and Africa between 1844 and 1864. Like many of his contemporaries, Speke kept a travelogue detailing his observations on the presumed physical and temperamental characteristics of the people in the cities to which he traveled. Original manuscripts prove elusive, but his “findings” were reproduced in the work of Henry T. Finck, American cultural pundit and author of the 1923 book *Girth Control*. Finck recounts Speke’s findings as follows: “To please men, African women eat enormous quantities of bananas and drink milk by the gallon.” He adds that this produced extremely fat women, including “one of the much-admired dusky wonders of obesity, who was unable to stand except on all fours” (Finck 1923: 2-3).

The utility of the foregoing accounts is manifold. First, they throw relief on the growing connection made between excessive eating, fatness, and blackness, particularly black womanhood. Although these reports suggest that these women were encouraged to eat such proportions to please men, there is no indication of their resistance or modesty, as it were, belying their presumed complicity (and perhaps attraction) to such overindulgence. Second, they suggest that this form of “excess” in body size was “savage.” Speke’s writing in particular achieves this conflation, as which he suggests that
some of the black women apparently “stand on all fours” like some form of lower species. Third, and significantly for the present paper, they indicate that “excess fat” was a social value only of the savage.

The latter point was driven home by French explorers Jean-Baptiste Durand and René Caillié. Jean-Baptiste Durand traveling among the Moors in 1780s would similarly claim “all the charms which delight our eyes, are of no attraction to them. They must have women particularly fat; they only appreciate corpulence” (quoted in Forth 2012: 9). His countryman René Caillié, traveling through Mauritania in the 1820s, corroborated these reports, adding that that “what is a defect for us is an attraction for them” (quoted in Forth 2012: 9).

But the quintessential figure in creating a link between a socially-valued fatness, and blackness in the Western imagination was an African woman by the name as Saartje Baartman. Baartman was a woman of the Khoisan or “Hottentot” tribe. She was taken to London in 1810 a placed on display in a variety of fairs and expositions. Baartman was deemed an oddity due to her “steatopygia” or protruding buttocks, as well as the size and shape of her labia each of which were thought to be the primitive counter-example to the European physique. And, another draw of Baartman, that has been under-appreciated in the scholarly literature, was the copious amount of fat on her body. Indeed, more so than her steatopygia, it was her fatness that made her a “Hottentot Venus,” with the term “Venus” being used to denote a classical model of beauty for the Hottentot peoples.

The specter of her “primitive” physique titillated the European fair-going voyeur, making her a living, breathing counterpoint to mainstream white, “civilized” aesthetic values. And, her prominence in the European imagination and her importance to
European racial schemas only grew with her death in 1815. At that time, famed naturalist Georges Cuvier acquired her remains, performing a biopsy on her corpse that would “advance” understandings of racial difference.

Cuvier, as Linneaus and a host of other scientists like Johann Blumenbach (who invented the term “Caucasians” and argued that they were scientifically the most beautiful of the races—see Painter 2010) created a racial system in which he placed whites at the top and blacks at the bottom. There were several alleged reasons for this hierarchical ordering of the races, one of which was that “Negroes were sunken in slavery the pleasures of the senses…” and that these “differences in culture and mental quality” coincided with “differences in physique” (Banton 1987; Fausto-Sterling 1995).

With his understanding of the races as his starting point, his biopsy of Baartman, could only confirm the “inferiority” of black people. His findings were made public in a speech delivered to the Museum of Natural History, in which Cuvier devoted a full fifth of his speech to a description of Baartman’s proportions. Describing her as “only 4 ½ feet tall…with enormous hips and buttocks,” he expressed open disgust for her fleshiness (Fausto-Sterling 1995).

Cuvier then, with this well-publicized speech, contributed to the devastating compilation of data about “uncivilized” black, fat bodies, which were by all measures, out of bounds. While black, fat, particularly female, bodies were the common foil for white, “civilized” bodies, it is worth mentioning that Arab and Asian racial “Others” too were described as abhorrently fat on occasion (Forth 2012). Still, given the racial fault lines of the U.S. during the period, it is perhaps not surprising that much of literature about fat, racial “Others” in this country homed in on descriptions of blacks, landing in
the popular press at the height of the health reform movement for the perfectibility of “the race.”

Thin, White, and Saved: American Aesthetic Values

If uncivilized bodies were fat and black, it did not necessarily follow that civilized bodies were uniformly white and thin. Throughout much of Europe, a woman was supposed to be neither too fat nor too thin. Appropriate “embonpoint” or the right amount of flesh was commonly revered in the Western world (as explored in the next chapter), and remained an aesthetic value for many in the United States, despite the growing fashion of “wasting in style” (Clarke 1990).

What then, aided in making thinness a growing aesthetic ideal in the U.S.? Part of the reason slenderness became a form of embodied cultural capital, I argue, is that popular theories of race and human difference suggested that whites in the United States had a predisposition to slimness. That is, the same coterie of Enlightenment and post-Enlightenment scientists who explained differences between whites, blacks, Asians and Native Americans in terms of the then popular climate-based account of human variation, claimed whites in Europe and whites in America had different, climate-influenced physical tendencies. While, for example, the English were thought to be prone to voluptuousness, Americans were thought to be prone to slenderness.

Anthropologist and Presbyterian minister Samuel Stanhope Smith explored this supposed phenomenon in his text, Essay on the Causes of Variety of Complexion and Figure in the Human Species (1787). In the 2nd edition of this text, Smith remarked, “In general, the habit of the Anglo-Americans is more slender than that of the natives of
Great Britain or Ireland from whom the greater part of our population is descended” (1810: 45). The “Yankee” type of slenderness that was adjudged peculiar to North America, and in particular New England, was believed to be induced in part by the cold climate that was not amenable to sitting lazily in the sun and enjoying the fruit of the land (Smith 1787, 1810).

Even if white Americans were deemed on average slimmer than their European counterparts, there is no way to verify that this was truly the case. Just as reports of the obesity and obesophilia of Africans were typically exaggerated, unsubstantiated and even outright contradicted (Forth 2012), it is possible the white Americans were not, on the whole leaner than other Western Europeans. But, the important issue for the present purposes is not the extent to which the claims represented reality, but to the way in which they served in the co-construction of the racial and national identity of white Americans.

And, for Americans, this racial and national identity was affected by more than just the climatic theories of human variation. Indeed what was under-theorized by race theorists of the time (ironically, given many of their spiritual profiles) was the role of the synergistic link between the racial and religious theories of diet, body and identity. My contention is that this synergy between religious and race-based scientific ideologies about diet and (un)desirable physiques circulating between the late 18th-mid 19th centuries created a scientifco-religious discourse about food and body that inspired the social value of slimness (as a form of capital) for white women of the cultivated classes. Per this discourse, conceptions of Christian abstemiousness became embedded with those of whiteness and civilization.
This was achieved with the help of the popular press, which played the critical function of disseminating information from scientific and Christian temperance sources to the reading public. These ideas were often circulated via the same magazines and journals, and were made widely available to the rising population of literate women of the cultivated classes.

None other than *Godey’s Lady’s Book*, the first successful women’s magazine in the U.S., promoted the tenets of hygienic evangelism and race science. *Godey’s* began publication in 1830, and for nearly 50 years could lay claim to being one of the most popular journals in America. Its wild popularity was due in no small measure to its editors’ ability to connect with readers. Employing the inclusive language of “we,” and having pretensions of speaking to and for the “typical” (which as we have seen frequently meant elite) American woman, the magazine was simultaneously able to create and instruct an “imagined community” (Anderson 1991).

Part of the reason for the magazine’s heavy trafficking in Christian physiology was that its editors were often themselves health reformers. *Godey’s* editors, therefore, routinely published on the topic of women being naturally delicate, and the importance of not overloading their systems with food they couldn’t digest. In an 1831 *Godey’s* article titled “On the Female Form,” for example, the unidentified author fears the “baneful effects of a protracted and abundant repast,” lamenting the fact that gentlewomen often “overeat,” lose their figures, and then tight-lace to create the illusion of a more slender and proportionate physique. All of this, the author claims, “ravages health.” The solution to this vicious cycle is bluntly stated: “temperance: a well-timed use of the table, and so moderate a pursuit...” (*Godey’s* 1831). In another article from the same year, an unknown
author decries the overindulgent tendencies of women of fashion, claiming the ladies of
to-day eat more than their constitutions can reasonably support: “Their breakfasts not
only set forth tea and coffee, but chocolate, and hot bread and butter. Both of these latter
articles, when taken constantly, are hostile to health and female delicacy.” What is
advocated instead is temperance: “Temperance includes moderation at table, and in the
enjoyment of what the world calls pleasure” (Godey’s, “Mirror of the Graces,” 1831).

But, what made Godey’s and other secular magazines a compelling advocate for
slender physiques was that it tied together the discourse of temperance with the rhetoric
of race science. While this was could have been achieved by the sheer practice of
publishing these two related ideas of human perfectibility in the same periodical, Godey’s
editors did the intellectual heavy lifting for the reader, melding these two ideas into a
scientifco-religious discourse that explicitly stated that Christian temperance was
necessary to advance the race.

Godey’s editor Sarah Josepha Hale, its longest running editor, arguably also did
the most to advance this cause. Hale, author of the nursery rhyme Mary Had a Little
Lamb was a well-known writer and editor before she came to Godey’s. A Christian health
reformer, Hale wrote,

there is great danger of excess in all indulgences of the appetites, and even
when a present benefit may be obtained, this danger should never be
forgotten. The tendency in our country has been to excess in animal food.
The advocates of the vegetable diet system had good cause for denouncing
this excess…Christians should be scrupulous in this respect (Godey’s
“Domestic Economy,” Feb 1840).
Hale continued, that Americans should be concerned with limiting the amount of food eaten because this would lead to “the greatest improvement of the race” (Godey’s “Domestic Economy,” Feb 1840).

Hale was not the only Godey’s contributor to promote such linkages. Another contributing writer, Leigh Hunt, reminded readers that Christian temperance was not only about being saved, it was also about being a civilized Anglo-Saxon. Leigh writes that, “the pleasure of even eating and drinking, to those who enjoy it with temperance, may be traced beyond the palate.” Hunt then reminds that to not exercise Christian temperance was to not just to transgress against the laws of God, it was also to transgress against the aesthetic standards demanded by civilized tastes. Eating and drinking to the heart’s content produced the corpulent “savage” physiques heralded by blacks. Hunt writes, “In some parts of Africa, no lady can be charming under twenty-one stone.” (For those unfamiliar with this system of measurement, 21 stone is nearly 350 pounds.) Hunt here, adds to increasingly popular position in the mainstream press that being white and civilized, thin and saved were interconnected (Godey’s, “Chapter on Female Features,” April 1836).

Godey’s played a germinal role in the dispersal of these ideas textually and visually. While many men and women in Europe (and America, since this ideal was then, as it is today, contested) aspired to the classical Greek standard of beauty immortalized in the Venus de Medici or Venus de Milo Godey’s editors actively advocated for the ultra-attentuated waifish aesthetic ideal. This ideal of the ethereal “angelic”—and note here its Christian connotations—dame (which has subsequently come to be referred to as the “steel-engraving lady,” a name that describes the lithographic process used to make the
image) was promoted in *Godey’s*. The reason being that this model was more appropriate for the race, and Christian sensibility.

The Greek standard, they argued could not accurately represent the “natural” tendencies of form for Americans, which was to be tall and slender. Intoned by one editor (presumably by Sarah Josepha Hale, although the author is not listed) in the “Editor’s Table,”

*We make it our particular aim to show, in our Fashion Plate, the better as well as more beautiful effect, of giving the natural forms of our female figures, in that perfect development which nature shows in her best models among us… That these forms are not precisely what is termed classic--that is short and full as the Medicean Venus--is the fault, if fault it be, of nature...The Anglo-Saxon race of women are taller and slenderer than were the Grecian females; and if we may credit history, far more lovely (Godey’s, “Editor’s Table,” 1843).*

The editors of *Godey’s* then, and notably many of them were well-to-do white women, aided in the propagation of a scientifc-religious discourse about thin bodies. Borrowing from Christian physiology and race science, they derided fatness as “black” and primitive, and slenderness an appropriately white, civilized, and Christian. The editor here, goes so far as to suggest that this American Anglo-Saxon aesthetic ideal bests the Greek ideal, describing the Greeks as “immoral” and “wholly given up to the empire of the senses” (Godey’s, “Editor’s Table,” 1843).

*Conclusion*

In this Chapter, I suggest that the under-examined link between the ideals of the Christian temperance movement, and racialized aesthetics, created a scientifc-religious
discourse about thin, white “civilized” bodies that made slenderness a form of capital. This provided a rationale for slenderness as a health and beauty ideal, even as medical doctors lamented the excessive thinness of American women as unhealthy. While the editors of *Godey’s* did create originate either type of discourse, they processed these ideas about civilized white Christian women for their readers in a way highlighted the connection between Christian and (race) scientific ideas about health, beauty and human perfectibility.
Prior to the mid-19th century, there were two notable elements to the high valuation of thinness in the U.S. First, slenderness was thought to be evidence of refinement. As explored in the previous chapter, a number of influential figures in science, religion, and popular culture claimed that “temperance” or self-discipline in the face of food was an affectation of the civilized. In this way slenderness, as evidence of the abstemiousness of the cultivated, became associated with the only then recognized civilized group: white people. Fatness, set up as the polar opposite of slenderness both aesthetically and morally, was thought to be evidence of the “indulgent” nature of “savages.” People of African descent were positioned as the key representatives of such indulgent savagery. Their purported insatiability (a double signifier) and fondness of “largess” were used as evidence of degeneracy. Thus, fatness and slenderness were racially coded, turning on supposedly fundamental physical, aesthetic and moral differences between whites and blacks.

And while this pertained to both men and women, women’s social position rendered their physical appearance, or “body capital” a highly significant feature of their experience (Bourdieu 1979; Goldenberg 2010). Therefore, the racially-coded aesthetic was commonly gendered female. Thus, black women were constructed as key representatives of a “degenerate” form of fatness. White American women conversely, for whom slenderness was a significant way in which they were judged—and indeed
judged themselves—became some of the most visible representatives and proponents of the slender aesthetic.

Second, until the middle of the 19th century, thinness as a social value amongst whites (and particularly white women) seemingly permeated all levels of the nascent class structure. We have already seen that Sara Josepha Hale, editor of the popular women’s magazine *Godey's Lady's Book* attempted to create an “imagined community” of women with similar aesthetic values that was arguably “class-blind.” Scholar of aesthetics Lois Banner also explores the similarity of aesthetic values across varying levels of wealth. She quotes novelist and socialite James Fenimore Cooper, who in 1822 noted with astonishment that the “fair, graceful creatures” in the U.S. were as likely to be women of wealth as women of more moderate means. Per Cooper, many of the delicate, frail and angelic women he encountered were the “daughters and wives of mechanics and tradesmen” (Banner 1983: 45-6).

Cooper (and by proxy Banner) are making a key point about aesthetic distinctions—namely that they were not yet routinely made along class lines. This, perhaps, should be expected, given the relative fluidity of the early 19th century class structure in the U.S. As historians have shown, differences in wealth and occupation amongst American citizens, while visible, were comparatively small prior to the mid-19th century. Indeed, the class structure as it is broadly conceived today (with low, middle, upper classes) did not emerge until the middle decades of the 19th century (Blumin 1989; Freidel 1976; LaFeber 1986). It would not be surprising then, that rigid social distinctions made on the basis of economic class would not have been a hallmark of U.S. society prior to the 1840s or 1850s.
The mid-19th century ushered in a significant revision on each of these two points. A number of socio-political and scientific changes between the early and mid-19th century led to the fracturing of whiteness. Therefore, aesthetic and moral divisions among whites became increasingly common. Moreover, the growing wealth and influence of a small coterie of American families made aesthetic distinction along class lines more common. As a result, slenderness slowly became associated with elite (in terms of race and class) white femininity.

But the story would be less interesting if it were so uncomplicated as this. The complications were thus: there was massive immigration of Irish and German peoples during the same 10-year span in the middle of the 19th century. Physically, in terms of body size, Irish and German women were both seen as prone to corpulence and (in the case of the Germans in particular) admirers of corpulence. Indeed, they both seemed to affect an “Old World” aesthetic. But the aforementioned parsing of whiteness meant that the Germans were (like the English) deemed racially similar to “true” white Americans, while the Irish were othered, and deemed racially inferior.

Hence we arrive at the rise (and subsequent fall) of “the voluptuous aesthetic” in the U.S. (Banner 1983). Previous scholars, like Banner, have argued that “immigrants” helped popularize this aesthetic, and that its fall was due to its association with “vice” and “low-class status,” without principally identifying which immigrants helped in its rise and again which low-class associations led to its downfall. I argue that intra-white racial distinctions and class were central considerations in the rise and fall of the voluptuous aesthetic. That is, while established, well-off German American and German immigrants families (and to a lesser extent, British actors and immigrants) effectively challenged the
slender aesthetic with their “Old World” ideals, its common association with the poor and racially “inferior” Irish ultimately worked to discredit such a form of feminine embodiment as an ideal.

Below, I review the rupturing of whiteness and the immigration of Irish and German peoples to the U.S., before arriving at a description of their differential positionality, reception, and influence on aesthetic ideals.

**Whiteness Ruptured**

Recall that “race,” a term that had been used since at least the 16th century to delineate cultural, national or regional affiliation, shifted to the body in the 17th century (Smedley 1993; Silverblatt 2004). At that time, with the worldwide expansion of the colonial enterprise, theories of race, promulgated by colonists, naturalists, and occasionally even priests (Silverblatt 2004) posited that there were major divisions of mankind, and that each race could be easily identified through physical differences. Not surprisingly then, given the context, the earliest appearance-based racial categorizations used skin color as a synecdoche for race. Hence, the racial schematic in many of the colonies included the categories “white,” “brown,” and “black,” which, as Silverblatt reminds, corresponded to “colonizer,” “colonized,” and “slave” (2004: 115). While academics have been hard pressed to find an enduring similarity of racial classification over time or space, scholars have shown that given the growing transcontinental intellectual and material exchange, the white/black/brown color trio was commonly used in North America, Latin America and the West Indies (Allen 1994; Smedley 1993).
Recall also that it was during the 18th century due, some argue, to persistent challenges to the color-scheme posed by the growing mixed-race populations in many colonies (Silverblatt 2004), race became, in the words of historian Marvin Harris “biologized” (quoted in Smedley 1993: 187-188). That is, differences between the races were thought not only to be about the external body, but also the internal in that they were (among other things) “blood based” (Jacobson 1998; Smedley 1993). This new, much more comprehensive version of race made it such that both the seen and unseen elements of the body became evidence of racial affiliation and racial (in)compatibility. Thus, in many colonies, particularly in the U.S., when the requisite skin color was absent, evidence that one had African ancestors was enough to mark one as “black” (Jacobson 1998; Smedley 1993).

But given the difficulty of ascertaining ancestry in many cases, the external had to serve as a proxy for the internal. In Foucauldian terms, the external body had to be made “legible” in terms of racial categories, and thus there was a proliferation of ideas about which external physical features “corresponded” to which races. A variety of traits such as skin color, hair texture, eye color, and significantly for the present analysis, height and weight, were marshaled to the task.

Though imagined “racial differences” were originally used as a form of social control in the colonies, by the 19th century, in the midst of a variety of social upheavals in Europe, it was increasingly used to make claims in intra-European conflicts. Indeed, the growing use of race as a comprehensive rationale for social organization amongst Western intellectuals precipitated, in the tumultuous revolutionary environment, the parsing of the white race (Jacobson 1998; Smedley 1993). Concocted racial differences
among “pure races” of Europeans (often thought to be identifiable through physical characteristics) became a common scientific enterprise.

With whiteness ruptured, the question of who sat atop the heap was answered in the same way in Europe as in the colonies: the wealthiest and most powerful. In this, the English had a leg up. Not only were they taking the mantle of hegemonic European power from Spain vis à vis their international presence, but they had in place a centuries-old theory of their cultural superiority that only required a bit of biologizing as window dressing to make it fit contemporary times. I am referring here to the notions of Anglo-Saxon supremacy. Such theories were largely proffered by the English until the early 19th century when their American “brothers” also entered the fray, making similar claims.

Anglo-Saxon Supremacy

The English had been honing theories of Anglo-Saxon superiority since the 16th century (Gossett 1965; Horsman 1976; Smedley 1993). The growth and popularity of such theories during that historical epoch are often attributed to Henry VIII and his contemporaries, who had their own imminently political motivations for propagating such beliefs. Henry VIII, in his bid to secede from the Norman Papacy, argued that the original English people were from a pre-Norman Germanic tribe known as “Anglo-Saxons.” The Anglo-Saxons were a “freedom-loving” people who had “originated civilizations, free institutions, and equitable laws” (Smedley 1993: 189). As is evident from this quote, during this era the so-called “superiority” of the Anglo-Saxons was coded in cultural, not racial terms.
Cultural or environmental arguments for the supposed superiority of the Anglo-Saxons reigned for nearly 100 years in Britain. But, near the tail end of the 18th century, when differences between peoples became increasingly described in terms of that which was inherent and fixed, notions of Anglo-Saxons superiority were also biologized. Differences between Anglo-Saxons and non-Anglos were described in terms of inherent physical and temperamental qualities, which were often deemed to be permanent or immutable (Smedley 1993: 189).

Given the aforementioned dialectic between the science and politics of race during the height of colonialism and imperialism, it should come as no surprise that the late 18th and mid-19th centuries marked a turning point in British empire and thus British identity. The British had just been defeated by the Americans in the Revolutionary War. The loss of North America, one of its largest colonial holdings, signaled the end of the “First British empire,” (around 1783) and ushered in its reincarnation as the “Second British empire” (around 1815). From them on, Britain dedicated much more of its time and energy to expanding its colonial holdings in Asia and particularly in Africa (Ferguson 2004; Hyam 2002). At the same time, England’s long-standing antagonism with Ireland reached a crescendo. Near the turn of the 19th century Ireland instituted its own parliament and began pushing for territorial emancipation (Allen 1994; Curtis 1968). The result was the heightened need for a rationale for the domination of both people of color (especially the growing African slave population), and an entire nation of white people.

It is with more than a hint of irony then that the Anglo-Saxonism that started out as a means of “safeguarding” the liberties of “free citizens” was eventually used as a
“doctrine of elitism, and exclusivist ethnocentrism” in which supposedly innately inferior peoples were deserving of domination and its attendant restrictions on liberty. (Curtis 1968: 96; Higham 1966: 9). Between 1815-1850, myths of Anglo-Saxonism that attributed their purported greatness to innate characteristics, and the “degeneracy” first of non-whites (often with an explicit focus on blacks) and non-Anglo-Saxons (with the Celts serving as a common foil) mushroomed (Gossett 1965; Horsman 1976). Thus in Europe, although the earlier canon of race (which relied on arguments about culture and environment) was largely proffered by French and German theorists, the new, biologized racial charge was led by the worlds growing imperial powers: the British, and to a lesser extent the Americans. Indeed, Britain became a major site for the crafting of high-profile racial theories that presented arguments for the inherent (in)capacities of the various races (Gossett 1965; Horsman 1976).

The increased focus on intra-white distinctions and Anglo-Saxon “superiority” was not realized overnight. During much of the early 19th century, it was still quite common to speak of whites or Europeans as a group, counterpoised to blacks or other non-whites. James Cowles Prichard, an Englishman that whiteness scholar Reginald Horsman has labeled, “the most influential British ethnologist of the era,” (Horsman 1976: 52) provides us with a fantastic case study of the era’s transition in race-thinking. His widely-read *Researches into the Physical History of Mankind* was originally released in 1813, and saw several updated editions. Of interest to the present study are the 1813, 1836 and 1841 versions of the text. In the 1813 edition, he begins the book with a dedication to “the venerable and universally celebrated Professor Blumenbach,” providing a compass for his own intellectual alignment. In this version as well as the
updated 1836 text, Prichard made explicit distinctions based on the supposed appearance and “psychic” abilities of Europeans and six other non-European races, including “Negroes,” “Mongolians,” and “Australians” amongst others. He argued, “Africa produces some very small races” (1836: 359) height-wise compared to Europe. He further argued that some African tribes are “the most degraded” and “ugliest” of persons,” (1836: 248) but that West Indian “Negroes…figures strike Europeans as remarkably beautiful,” (1836: 248) making differentiations among blacks that were quite rare. Still, most of the book presents the typical rhetoric of European superiority.

But, by the 1830s, Prichard was beginning to display his engagement in the parsing of whiteness that was becoming increasingly common. In his 1831 text *The Eastern Origins of the Celtic Nations* (1831), he suggests that there is a racial link between the Celts and “Asiatic” peoples through a supposed linguistic homology. This is significant, as much of the hysteria surrounding “white others” was their presumed hybridity. That is, part of the fear surrounding “the Celts,” “the Slavs,” “the Normans” and other non-Anglo-Saxons was the growing fear that they may have the “blood” of one of the colored races, and therefore that their whiteness was not “pure” (Gossett 1965; Poliakov 1974).

As might be expected then, by the 1841 edition of his *Researches*, Prichard had substantially more to say about the differences within the white race than in previous editions. In this updated version of the text, he devotes multiple chapters to detailing the “Germanic” physical and temperamental qualities of the Anglo-Saxon English, and the “Celtic” qualities and origin of the Irish. In a section bearing the title, “Physical Character of the German Nations,” Prichard claims, “It is well known that the German nations are
universally described by the ancients as a people of tall stature, robust form, with fair complexion, red hair, and blue eyes” (1841: 391). And this characterization by the ancients, he does not attempt to undermine. Characterization of the Celts, he suggests, have been less consistent, for whereas, the ancients described the Celts tall, fair, blue-eyed were (much like the “Germanic nations”), he argues that this characterization would not match the way Celts would be described in the 19th century. In the 1800s, Celts “universally” had “dark hair, dark eyes, swarthy complexions, small stature” (1841: 189).

His explanation, going back on his 1836 conception of the races as “permanent varieties” (1836: 109), was that much had changed in Celtic physical form over the past fifteen centuries (1841: 196).

Prichard’s exposition points us to two additional important findings. First, though being tall, fair, and blue-eyed were constructed as superior traits (relying on ancient depictions of Germanic tribes), and thus appropriated by Anglo-Saxons, there was a disconnect between the rhetoric of “fixity” and the reality of both change and diversity. In terms of the Celts, not only had they supposedly changed over time, but there was (of course) tremendous diversity in the conception of Celts at the time of his writing. Thus, even some theorists contemporary to Prichard himself argued that the Celts were tall, fair and blue-eyed indicating the inability to pin down their “true” nature—indeed it is on this debate in which Prichard intervenes (1841: 189-191).

Second is the high valuation of “robustness.” Though these descriptions were largely of men, it was not uncommon for British Anglo-Saxonists to find being tall, robust, and “fair” physical traits and aesthetic values of women, as they were thought to be evidence of health and Germanic character. This was not always (or even often) the
case for American Anglo-Saxonists (explored in greater detail below). As explored in the previous chapter, White Americans had long been considered a slender people who prized thinness, particularly in women. While it was not uncommon for the Americans to praise robust men, women were preferred in many cases to be tall and “graceful” (the latter term often being a code word for “slim”). Thus, we find even within Anglo-Saxonism, differences idealized physical form by nationality.

The British theorist who best highlights this divergence is Robert Knox. Like many Anglo-Saxonists, central to Knox’s approach was to first call out the “differences” between whites and non-whites, then Anglo-Saxons and Celts, and finally differences among Anglo-Saxons. A contemporary of Frenchman Arthur de Gobineau (who was appalled by the 1848 revolution in his own country, and churned out racial theories on the superiority of the French “Aryan” aristocratic class that would prove to be much more impactful in the long run than those of Knox), Knox would too deem the Irish a cut above non-whites, but among whites, he regarded the Irish as the lowest form of “what is called civilized man” (1850: 218). According to Knox, the Celts were a race apart because they possessed a “love of war and disorder; a hatred for order and patient industry, no accumulative habits” and were “restless, treacherous and uncertain…” The Saxon by contrast was “nature’s democrat” and “thoughtful, plodding and industrious” (quoted in Curtis 1968: 70).

But, the Scot also valorized sturdy builds as “characteristic” of the British, and openly derided the “typical” slight form of the American. In the 2nd edition of his book *Races of Men*, written in 1862, Knox asserted: “Already the United States man differs in appearance from the European; ladies early lose their teeth; in both sexes the adipose
cellular cushion interposed between the skin and the aponeuroses...and muscles disappears, or, at least, loses its adipose portion...symptoms of premature decay manifest themselves.” (quoted in Painter 2010: 172). “Adipose” was a commonly used term for “fat” or “fatty tissue,” and it is quite clear from this depiction that per Knox a goodly portion of fat was needed to guard against the type of boniness that one might read as evidence of a deathly corporeality.

Before entering a comparison with the rhetoric of an American, Ralph Waldo Emerson, I’ll briefly stress an important point. Height and a healthy girth were prized by the Brits as “Anglo-Saxon” but this was not be confused with the “short,” “thickset” features of the denigrated Celts. John Beddoe, a British physician and ethnologist, reminds in his 1885 text *The Races of Britain* that “Broca...[applied the term Celt] to the race of men that predominates in the old Celtic Gaul, from Breteigne to Savoy, whose short thick-set figures and large broad heads and faces are entirely different from the characteristics (italics mine) of the people in question” (1885: 18). The “people in question” in this quote being the British. Anglo-Saxons, on the other hand were typically “large comely and fair” (265) with "regular features, elliptic head and face...complexion fair...iris seldom large, of a beautiful clear blue…” (283). While Beddoe does allow that regionally (e.g. by county), such embodiment varies, he nevertheless argues that the small, stout Celt is the most common, as is the tall, robust and “fair” Anglo-Saxon (1885: 272).

Notably for the present purposes, Beddoe conjectured that Celts had a measure of “negroid blood,” as he writes of Celthood, “While Ireland is apparently its present centre, most of its lineaments are such as lead us to think of Africa as its possible birthplace; and
it may be well provisionally to call it Africanoid, applying the name...to the widely
diffused Ibero-Berber race-type...” (1885: 11). Thus, again, we find part of the fear
surrounding Celts was the possibility that their blood was not “purely” white, and that
this is in evidence in their physical features.

Beddoe, focusing only on Britain, did not trouble himself with the consideration
of intercontinental differences among Anglo-Saxons the way Robert Knox had. American
Ralph Waldo Emerson, however, did. Born in Boston, Massachusetts, Emerson was early
a fan of the theories of the notorious British theorist Thomas Carlyle. Thomas Carlyle,
discussed in the previous chapter for his invidious descriptions of Africans as “indulgent”
and lazy, in his infamous “Occasional Discourse on the Nigger Question,” (1849) had
actually written an anti-Celtic treatise one-year prior, after traveling through the famine-
ravaged country in 1846 (Painter 2010). Carlyle, following the format of the reigning
racial convention, first set forth that white people were the “born lords” of people of
color, before unleashing his objurgations on a group of “inferior” whites, the Celts. In his
essay, he suggests that Celtic racial character was to blame for the Great Famine of 1845-
52 in Ireland. Celtic character “deficiencies” (which are not here enumerated) and diet,
which he describes as “potatophagi” or heavily-potato based, were the cause of their
“poverty and violence. (Curtis 1996: 50-53). For Carlyle, who tellingly uses the term
Irish here interchangeably with “the poor,” the English solution to the “Irish Question,”
which refers both to their desire for independence and the potato famine (which was
caused by the taxing British export requirements), was simple. The Irish, he argued
should be “blacked-leaded” (or “blacked-up”) and sent to the colonies to labor under the
“taskmasters” the Anglo-Saxons, as “the best way of settling the Irish question,” and “the
only rightful and proper remedy to the political and social evils of England” (Carlyle 1848; Curtis 1996; Hall, C. 2000).

Emerson’s admiration of Carlyle’s work did not mean he simply reproduced Carlyle’s work. In fact, the two inspired one another. In 1833, Emerson visited with Carlyle in England, and the two like-minded “Saxons” began delivering speeches that “outlined a transatlantic realm of Saxondom” (Painter 2010: 161). After his visit, Carlyle wrote Emerson a letter stating “that we and you are not two countries...but only two parishes of one country...” (Painter 2010: 161). Emerson felt similarly. In 1835, he delivered a lecture in the U.S. titled, “Permanent Traits of the English National Genius,” in which he stated “The inhabitants of the United States, especially the Northern portion (italics mine), are descended from the people of England and have inherited the traits of their national character” (Painter 2010: 160).

Emerson argued that the Celts were of “ Asiatic origin,” and did not go to great lengths to challenge or confirm Carlyle’s theories of them (Painter 2010: 165). Like Knox, Emerson took great interest in the “clear divergence” in the physical form of Anglo-Saxons in the U.S. and England. The irony is that Emerson was a tall and thin man, just like his idol-turned-colleague, Thomas Carlyle, the “reedy, stooped six-footer” (Painter 2010: 154). But, he still believed the British and the Americans had very different builds.

Indeed, relying on the old trope of the slight American, Emerson wrote in his journal in 1852: “Englishmen are pastureoaks; ours are pine saplings; large men here do not look architectural...but slight, ill-woven...” An entry from the following year expresses similar sentiments about his sense of inferiority while in England “I felt the
extreme poverty of American culture beside English. A mere bag of bones, was the one, sticking out in forlorn angularity; the other was fat and unctuous, shining and cheerful” (Painter 2010: 172-173).

But significantly for our purposes, American theorists, like Emerson, who condemned slenderness and extolled stout frames, did so as it pertained to men. In his famous 1856 text English Traits, Emerson had the following to say about English women, “It is the fault of their forms that they grow stocky, and the women have that disadvantage…few tall, slender figures of flowing shape, but stunted and thickset persons” (1856: 42). Even of the English men, whose frames he admired, he thought them prone to a bit too much flesh on occasion, “in the English race it is of the best breed, a wealthy, juicy, broad-chested creature, steeped in ale and good cheer and a little overloaded by his flesh” (1856: 45).

Pointedly, the focus of discussion when comparing Anglo-Saxon embodiment was almost always “Brits” and “Americans”. While the term “Saxon” applies to person of Dutch, German or English descent, and latter-day Germans could have been considered Anglo-Saxons, most often Germans were simply referred to as “German”. Given the origins of the myth (as a form of elite British self-promotion) this makes sense. But importantly, the Germans were considered to be linked by blood, and were (when racialized) commonly referred to as part of the broader family of “Teutons” or “Aryans” (Gobineau 1915).

The point I want to make here is that there was something deemed peculiarly American (and increasingly feminine where many established Americans were concerned) about slenderness. Emerson was not alone in this conception, as he is building
on ideas that had been in circulation for at least a century. As we saw in the previous chapter, it was common for European and American theorists to construct the Americans as prone to thinness. Recall that in 1787 (and restated in the 1810 2nd edition), American Samuel Stanhope Smith wrote, “In general, the habit of the Anglo-Americans is more slender than that of the natives of Great Britain or Ireland from whom the greater part of our population is descended” (1810: 45). What marks Emerson and other mid-19th century theorists as different was the orientation to slenderness. Whereas previously it might have been accepted as a fact of life, or even embraced (particularly amongst American women) as a social value, during this historical period, “stoutness” or more accurately being tall and of strong build, became an obvious social value for men on both sides of the Atlantic. And although “plumpness” was also a growing aesthetic value for women in Europe, in the U.S., for women, plumpness embraced by some, but it was too important an indicator of class, race, and propriety amongst elite women to be entirely trumped (as we shall see below).

The Irish and German Onslaught

With this as a racial backdrop, we turn now to the immigration of German and Irish people to the U.S. during the middle of the 19th century. It is worth noting here that the Irish constituted the clear majority of immigrants arriving in the U.S. since at least the 1820s, according to a report published in 1913 by the U.S. Immigration Commission. In 1825 for example, 4,888 arrived from Ireland, while 1,002 came from England, making them first and second place respectively on the list of immigrant-sending countries (United States Immigration Commission 1913).
Significantly, prior to the 1840s, many of the Irish landing in the U.S. were Protestant Anglo-Irish or “Scotch-Irish” (Ignatiev 1995: 39). The Anglo-Irish often migrated voluntarily, and arrived with a modicum (or more) of their own financial resources (Ignatiev 1995: 38-39). The 1840s witnessed a dramatic change in the character and composition of Irish immigration to the U.S. During and after The Great Famine of 1845-1852 in Ireland, droves of poor, Catholic Irish abandoned their homeland. With their options for migration within Europe limited, the Catholic Irish boarded ships headed for the New World (Foster 1988).

By 1846, just one year into the famine, the number of Irish disembarking in the U.S. skyrocketed to just over 51,000; that year, England sent mere a 2,854 persons. But, it is important to note that Ireland took second on the list of immigrant-sending countries that year, falling behind Germany, which sent over 57,000 persons to U.S. shores. By 1849, as the famine continued to ravage Ireland, Irish immigrants to the U.S. numbered nearly 160,000; during the same year, which was just one year after the failed 1848 revolution in Germany, the country claimed a distant second, as its numbers just managed to top 60,000. During the early 1850s, Germany and Ireland constantly traded the scepter, with the result that between 1853-1855, 300,000 Irish and 450,000 new Germans came to call America home (United States Immigration Commission 1913).

Between 1845-1855 1,343,423 Irish and 1,011,066 Germans fled to the U.S. (Painter 2010: 138). The Irish, many of whom were Catholic and financially strapped, remained in the eastern seaboard where they landed and sought work in the Northern cities. Many of the German immigrants, unlike the Catholic Irish, had sufficient financial resources to blend with middle-class Americans. Further, while a fair number were
Roman Catholic, there was also strong showing of Protestants among the immigrants. And, while the Germans maintained a few large settlements in the Northeast in places like New York City and Baltimore, a healthy number of them chose to leave the Northern cities and settle in Midwestern centers like St. Louis and Cincinnati.

Significantly for the present paper, scholars have also indicated that there were substantial differences in the gender composition of the two groups. Although official statistics for each group were, regrettably, not tabulated by the U.S. Immigration Commission prior to 1869, Lois Banner has shown that at least through 1839, many of the Irish immigrants were women who emigrated singly (1983: 25). Hasia Diner, in her stellar review of Irish immigrant women’s lives in the U.S. corroborates, adding that during the course of the entire 19th century, “Irish movement to the United States” was strongly “young, unmarried, and female” (Diner 1983: 31). Indeed, Diner informs, “more than half of [the Irish] immigrants were women, [and] the migration constituted basically a mass female movement…No other major group of immigrants in American history contained so many women” (Diner 1983: 30-31). The statistics Diner culls from a variety of sources indicate that women, accounted for nearly 53 percent of all Irish immigrants during the 19th century.

This was not the case with the Germans. German migration was largely male. Only 41 percent of German immigrants during the 19th century were women (Diner 1983: 31). Rather than emigrating singly, the Germans tended to emigrate as a family unit (Banner 1983: 58). It is worth noting that to a certain extent, the gender differences in German and Irish immigration lessened from 1847-1854. During the Famine in Ireland, married couples with children were more likely to make the trek to America than during
the rest of the 19th century. Thus single women comprised a smaller proportion of persons emigrating during that period. Nevertheless, these 8 years represent a clear aberration in Irish immigration trends; during the decades of interest (1840s-80s) single Irish women outnumbered Irish men and children coming to the U.S. (Diner 1983: 31).

These distinctions between the Irish and the German immigrants help to provide a better context for understanding the strong negative response visited upon the Irish immigrants, and particularly Irish immigrant women, by Americans nativists during the middle-to-late 19th century. By contrast, response to the German immigrants was much less vicious. Many of the existing accounts of anti-Irish nativism have focused on anti-Catholic sentiment and a generalized xenophobia, particularly against men as workers and voters (Higham 1966; Ignatiev 1995; Roediger 1991). But, as I will show throughout the rest of this chapter, the role of the race, class, and gender composition of the Irish immigrants (as well as the location of their settlements) in anti-Irish nativism have been underappreciated and undertheorized. Below, I argue that the race, class, and gender composition of Irish immigrants led to their derision as “stout.” The more respectable German (and British) immigrant women were at the same time lauded as “plump,” successfully elevating an “Old World” aesthetic to a prominence that temporarily eclipsed that of the thin ideal. But, I argue, the slippage between the conceptions of plump and stout, and the pre-existing bias against fatness as a base quality of the “uncivilized other” ultimately contributed to the demise of the voluptuous aesthetic.

German Americans and the Voluptuous Aesthetic

During the 19th century, established German-American families and German
immigrants had a tremendous impact on American society and American aesthetic ideals. The synergy between the two groups in terms of “womanly” ideals was impressive. Established German Americans families had incredible wealth and influence in what was increasingly referred to in the mid-to-late 19th century as “high society.” Like their less opulent (if nevertheless typically financially secure) immigrant counterparts, many rejected the slender ideal as represented by the steel-engraving lady. They preferred, per Banner, a more vigorous, hearty model of beauty (1983).

Far and away, the most influential German American family in terms of high society and aesthetic ideals during the 19th century was the Astor family. John Jacob Astor was the first in the family to arrive in America. Born in Waldorf Germany, he came to the United States and settled in New York City in 1784. On the strength of the fur trading business he began in New York (which many recognize as thriving due in part to exploitative double-dealings with Native American tribes), he became, by the early 19th century, America’s first millionaire (Madsen 2001). But, his fur sales ultimately only contributed the capital for what would be his greatest business venture: investing in Manhattan real estate. He bought huge swaths of land in Manhattan, and by 1848, he was the richest man in America, with a net worth of over $20 million (Haeger 1991; Madsen 2001; Patterson 2000).

The Astor family’s virtual control over the physical terrain of New York City, not to mention their fantastic wealth, nearly guaranteed them tremendous political and social influence. Indeed, it is not unfair to suggest that at the time during which American society was just starting to see the emergence of palpable class differences, the Astors sat atop a new socio-economic hierarchy. And while the Astor males hob-nobbed with the
likes of Thomas Jefferson’s Vice President Aaron Burr (from whom John Jacob Astor bought his first tracks of land in New York) the Astor women set about popularizing styles of interior decorating, dress, and physical appearance that would come to hold enormous sway in high society (Banner 1983: 25). Though the Astor women were recognized as having set aesthetic trends since the early 19th century, in two generations their influence would be crystallized in ways never before seen in the U.S.

Caroline Astor, wife of John Jacob Astor’s grandson, William Backhouse Astor Jr, was born into an elite family of Dutch ancestry in New York, but soon came to rely on the German- and French-inspired aesthetic ideals that were current in European high-society, and among her own in-laws. Caroline’s great social coup was the inauguration of a series of invitation-only balls that were accessible exclusively to America’s 400 wealthiest and more powerful families. Termed alternately the “New York 400” or “Mrs. Astor’s 400” (Banner 1983; Patterson 2000), her reign over elite society through these balls virtually ensured that “Mrs. Astor [would be] acknowledged by all to be the grandest, most-respected, most-authoritative” of all the powerful society ladies (Patterson 2000: 12).

To state it bluntly, Caroline Astor and friends were fashion in New York high society in the mid-to-late 19th century. Her interventions were visible primarily in etiquette and aesthetics, and while in etiquette she believed in elaborate rituals that owed much to her Dutch background (Patterson 2000: 11), her aesthetic sensibilities owed much to the influences of France and Germany. Her balls always contained an element of German cotillion (Patterson 2000: 27), while her salon was bedecked with work of French painters (Patterson 2000: 46-47).
The influence of the French salon on Astor’s sensibilities was not unimportant as it pertains to physical aesthetics. During the late 18th – 19th centuries, a neo-classical movement swept through Europe, and had a particularly firm hold in France, where many neo-classical artists were becoming well known in elite circles. Two of the foremost French painters of the time, Jean Auguste Dominique Ingres and Adolphe William Bouguereau, were renowned for painting fleshy, voluptuous women (Banner 1983: 111). Bouguereau was in fact, one of the French artists Caroline Astor adored. The Astor family’s salon and drawing room were decorated with some of Bouguereau’s most famous works, as well as the work of other prominent French artists who painted similar nudes (Banner 1983: 109; Patterson 2000: 47).

Astor’s ideals of feminine beauty were reflected not only in her art collection, but also in the pride that bordered on self-righteousness in her own physique. Throughout her adult life, Caroline Astor had been a voluptuous woman. Frank Crowninshield, late 19th century editor of Vanity Fair magazine, described her, not without a small amount of derision, as “tall” and “heavy” (Patterson 2000: 62). Indeed, the few circulating images of her from the era show her to be what contemporary observers deem “tall, [and] stout, with heavy jowls” (Patterson 2000: 62). Astor did not aspire to emulate the fashion of feminine frailty. To the contrary, Caroline Astor appeared to associate both efforts to lose weight and leanness itself with poverty, as she was known to condemn exercise regimes that many women used to lose weight (or build lean muscle mass) as “vulgar” (Banner 1983: 142). And, if her condemnation of exercise, her paintings, and her own physique weren’t enough to show her belief that women of means should glory in their curvy largess, the highly-ritualized multi-course meals at her balls were another indication that
she associated good feeding and plumpness with refinement (Banner 1983; Patterson 2000).

The aesthetics of Caroline Astor did not simply circulate in high society. Mrs. Astor’s 400, and centrally Caroline herself were in the 1860s-1880s, “New York’s last word in European culture,” and by extension, American *haute couture* (Banner 1983: 142). Those wanting “in” to the 400 needed not only the money, but also the aesthetic sensibilities to prove their worthiness for admission.

If the Caroline Astor’s aesthetic ideals and valorization of round physiques descended upon American high society, reflecting a heady mix of German, Dutch and French influences, the relationship between voluptuousness and, principally, German heritage, simultaneously descended on middle-class Americans. By the early 1840s, Americans were already receiving tales of the beauty of German women, with their “broad and strong’…bodies that seemed ‘ready to burst with plumpness.’” (Banner 1983: 58). In the next decade, they were to experience this idealized German physique up close and personal, as the 1848/49 revolution led many who had the means to flee the revolutionary environment. Many German women immigrated to the U.S., and as previously noted, they often had children and husband in tow.

German families’ relative financial security and their willingness to live outside the urban centers (often as farmers in the Midwest) meant a degree of autonomy. They were, unlike the Irish immigrants of the same era in many cases, able to resist assimilating to American ideals. In fact, in terms of aesthetics, German immigrants were often thought to have brought their aesthetic ideals to bear on American standards. Thus, in the mid-to-late 19th century, German immigrants were creating what prominent British
doctor George Beard called a “Germanicization” of the United States,” (Banner 1983: 58). Dr. Beard, himself an admirer of the German form, was overjoyed by this turn of events, as evidenced in the following quote, “the nervousness of American life is gradually yielding somewhat to the influences of close German contact…There has been a very decided improvement in American physique (italics original) of late years, and American women are gaining fat, which Dr. Beard thinks to be the one need for the perfection of their beauty.” (Chicago Tribune, “American and English Traits,” 1879)

Such encomium was common, as one self-styled beauty expert in the New York Times writes, “German girls are often charmingly pretty, with dazzling complexion…the sound, healthy well-developed woman…of such women the Fatherland has few specimens to show. The ‘pale unripened beauties of the North’ do not ripen; they fade” (NYT, “Beauty of German Women,” 1876). Rarely, there was in evidence the occasional fear (also expressed by Ralph Waldo Emerson) that these women might become, with age, “overloaded with fat.” This fear was particularly acute in New York, where slenderness was increasingly used as a sign of cultivation. Interestingly, in the very same New York Times article quoted above, the author writes, “the full gracious figure…[becomes] all too soon hopelessly fat from persistent idleness and luxury” (NYT, “Beauty of German Women,” 1876). Still, the general reception of the “German form” as expressed in popular periodicals was overwhelming positive. German immigrants and well-to-do German families thus helped to popularize a more voluptuous feminine ideal that contrasted with the sylphlike steel-engraving lady.

The mechanism through which this was achieved was more than their simple presence in the U.S. Their financial resources enabled them to engage in new
entrepreneurial activities, including opening German-language theatres that catered to the growing German-American population. Writes Historian La Vern Rippley “German immigrants who arrived in the second half of the nineteenth century were quick to start amateur theatre activities” (Rippley 1976: 130).

Their shows were peppered with German women actors, and a common theme was the “joy of life,” a sentiment that challenged prevailing Anglo-Saxon attitudes. On their success, many German-American theater owners would, towards the end of the century, also open English-language theatres. The theater thus became, per historians, a recognizable site in which plump women were visible and extolled (Banner 1983).

German American women had a strong presence on the stage, but by no means a monopoly over it. The rounded physiques displayed on stage that were considered at the time both healthful and titillating were thought to have been part of German immigrant sub-culture, but not necessarily to have arisen solely from it (Banner 1983: 112). It is perhaps more accurate to postulate that Germans could readily present their “Old World” aesthetics on stage because the theater world had already been primed for such. The theatre was a key site for the counter-hegemonic representation of sensuality and “opulent curves” (Banner 1983: 113). Indeed, many British actors and dancers were welcomed in the U.S., and were praised for their loveliness and sensuality. The famed chorus girls known as the “British Blondes” were considered curvaceous and buxom. Their well-rounded bodies were the subject of much approbation in the theatre world (Banner 1983: 123). Like the German actresses, their beauty and sensuality turned a wide-swath of the American public into regular theatergoers.

Thus we see that in the upper- and middle-classes, the German influence on
American aesthetic ideals was enormous. The voluptuous aesthetic prized by influential established German Americans families and German immigrants left its imprint on feminine ideals in the mid-to-late 19th century. What ultimately undermined the voluptuous woman, as explored above, was her relationship not only with the “vice” of the theater, but with lower-class “racial others” like the Irish.

“Stout” Irish

The Irish came to the U.S. in numbers mirroring the German’s in the mid-19th century. But, as previously noted there were three key elements to German integration: first, the Germans often came to the U.S. with financial means; second, the majority of German women coming to the U.S. came in family units; third, they often chose to live outside eastern city centers.

None of these were the case for Irish immigrants during the 19th century. As Hasia Diner eloquently illustrates, over the course of the 19th century, the majority of Irish immigrants were women. While many of them were escaping poverty plain and simple, others were fleeing what Diner calls the circumscribed opportunities for women (Diner 1983: 33). In Ireland, women since at least 1800 through the end of the century, had few employment opportunities outside of the large cities like Belfast and Dublin. Moreover, few of them, given that land ownership was a prerequisite for men to get married, could expect to find marriageable men, as after the Famine it became harder to find men who owned land. Hence, Diner notes that in 1840 before the Famine, marriage rates in Ireland were similar to those throughout the rest of Europe. By 1890, the marriage rates per thousand residents fell by 50% (Diner 1983: 9). Given the lack of incentives for staying
in Ireland, and the restrictions on Irish or “Celtic” immigration to other parts of Europe, particularly to England, single women had little to lose in coming to the U.S., one of the handful of countries willing to accept them. Thus, Irish women, unlike German women, came singly, they came without money, and they often settled in the northeastern city centers where they could expect to find employment (Diner 1983).

In the U.S., Irish immigrant women of course, did not have their pick of the litter when it came to jobs but they could often choose among occupations as teachers, seamstresses, factory workers, and domestic servants. By far, “domestic work was the Irish female immigrant’s preferred job” (Diner 1983: 74). The number of Irish immigrant women choosing domestic work was so high that it was typical for a domestic to be referred to in ways that were explicitly racialized, as a “Bridget” or a “Norah”, names deemed typically Irish (Diner 1983: 85).

The co-dependent relationship of nativist Anglo-Saxon Americans and their Irish servants was one fraught with tension. The mistress of the house generally wanted to distance herself from “the help” whom she saw (and the irony of this characterization should be duly noted) as unclean, clumsy, lazy and, because poor, untrustworthy. This was the crux of the so-called “servant problem.” On the one hand, the wealthy argued that they needed servants, but they also lived in perpetual fear of the servant as “other.” This much is articulated by Olive Logan, whose servant was an Irishwoman, in an 1877 Harper’s magazine article: “In such a state of affairs, it is only a marvel that we get along with as little disaster as we do, and instead of being only insulted, vilified, tortured with badly cooked food, and occasionally robbed, we are not murdered outright by these irresponsible members of the ‘dangerous classes’” (Harper’s 1877, “About Servants”).
The nativist Americans’ attempt to distance themselves from the necessarily intimate relationship they had with their domestic servants was realized not only in terms of the rhetoric surrounding the behavior of the so-called “dangerous classes,” but also in terms of the characterizations of their appearance. Historians have noted that the single women coming to the U.S., unlike the married women, often hoped to assimilate mainstream American standards of beauty in style and dress, not infrequently because they hoped to attract a husband (Banner 1983; Diner 1983; Wehner 2002). For single Irish women, this trend was clearly in evidence. Social arbiter Francis Grund wrote in her book *Aristocracy in America* “The same aristocratic feeling which pervades our fashionable women operates on girls in lower walks of life.” According to Grund, young Irish women appeared to virtually hop off the boats in fashionable dress (quoted in Banner 1983: 25). Grund’s matter-of-fact tone in regards to the matter was not representative. More commonly, Anglo-Saxons decried the tendency of “Bridgets” to “ape” the styles and mannerism of their mistresses, as found in another Harper’s article from 1870. The author compares the English, French, and American orientation to the servant class: “Mrs. Bull and Madame Crapeau allow to their dependents no emulation with themselves in dress. Bridget...is clothed in a garb and crowned with a head-gear common to her class...Mrs. Democracy, however, entertains the opinion that all of this is tyrannical and savors of caste.” The author laments both the occasional nativist American orientation to the servant class as faux-equals, and “Bridget’s” own desire mimic the dress of the madam, when that money should be saved toward a home of her own. Servants are, in her view, regrettably wasteful in their futile aspirations to upper-classness (Harper’s 1870, “A Wail from the Kitchen”).
And though a servant’s attempt to “ape” the styles of the madam (the use of the term “ape” here being potentially racially-coded double entendre, given the common representation of the Irish as “apes”) rankled, a common way of putting Irish domestics in their place, so to speak, was the constant reference to the Irish servant derisively as “stout” or “plump.” This was used quite clearly as a device to distance Anglo-Saxon women (commonly coded as slender) from Irish women. Thus, article upon article in Harper’s magazine from the mid-to-late 19th century describes “plump Irish women” (Harper’s Aug. 1894. “Vignettes of Manhattan”) who are “stout and grizzled” (Harper’s Dec. 1892, “Editor’s Drawer”). Others refer to a “portly Irish woman of the most savage mien.” (Harper’s Nov.1894, “People We Pass.”).

Clearly at issue was the fact that despite their attempts to assimilate, they lacked, apparently, the self-restraint in the face of food that Anglo-Saxon Americans long touted. They were, as to be expected perhaps, constantly deemed “overindulgent”, as in the following anecdote, “We once had a robust servant-woman in our family who was subject to headaches, and sought relief from them. The hint that less indulgence with the knife and fork might relieve her fullness of blood did not suit her taste, and rather roused her wrath...” (Harper’s May 1860, “Editor’s Table”). The limited capacity for self-control that would have given them the lean physiques of their mistresses was owing partially to the fact of their racial “otherness.”

As whiteness scholars have explored, constructions of the Irish as lacking self-control were often used to deny them full socio-political integration (Jacobson 1998; Roediger 1991). But it is important to reiterate here that some of the fear underlying the Irish racial “otherness” were concerns that they might be closer related to those from non-
white races, or more to the point that they might have “negroid blood.” Hence, during the same time period, jokes in Harper’s circulated wherein even Irish women themselves could not tell the difference between an Irish man and a black man—as if to suggest racial kinship (Harper’s Mar 1891, “Editor’s Drawer”).

In rare cases, it was thought that the Anglo-Saxon self-discipline and manner of self-presentation could be learned. One patron of high society writes of her Irish servant that she had the “Hibernian physiognomy, with all the obtuseness and awkwardness which usually accompany it, before it has received a little Anglo-Saxon modification and cultivation” (The Ladies' Repository 1861, “Down Hill”). But, in the vast majority of cases the conventional wisdom that the Irish were hopelessly prone to indulgence and corpulence, while nativist Anglo-Saxon women were abstemious and affected a refined slenderness, prevailed.

The interpenetration of the raced/classed/gendered characterizations of the poor racially “othered” Irish women, tells us something about why the temporary rise of voluptuousness as a mainstream aesthetic ideal in America was not made to last. While it was being popularized by racially-similar German (and in lower numbers English) socialites, immigrants, and ingénues, it was being simultaneously undermined by its association with the lower-classes, and particularly with Irish domestics. At the height of influence for the Astor 400, popular magazines, such as Harper’s, continued to associate corpulence with poverty and racial otherness. Beyond magazines and journals, this association was evident in many popular novels. Haunted Hearts by New-England born Maria Susanna Cummins provides an excellent example, as one of the characters explains to her niece, who she complains is becoming “vulgarly robust”, “Who wishes to see such
a rude state of health as hers? It may do for a washerwoman, but not for Ruth Penway” (quoted in Banner 1983: 56).

Concomitantly, slimness was for many of the cultured classes an Anglo-Saxon affectation, and therefore a social and aesthetic value. Such is articulated in an 1843 Harper’s article: “The Anglo-Saxon race of women are taller and slenderer than were the Grecian females; and if we may credit history, far more lovely.” (Godey’s, “Editor’s Table,” May 1843). Moreover, during the middle decades of the 19th century, it was increasingly seen as a peculiar trait of the “native” Anglo-Saxon American woman:

Europeans generally concede that our American women are handsome…they particularly remark the tendency of our women to grow thin with years, while we remark the tendency of theirs to the accumulation of flesh as soon as they have passed their youth and often before that period… While we must allow that our women are, for the most part, lacking in roundness, there are few of us we imagine, who would not infinitely prefer the New-World slenderness to the Old-World stoutness (Harper’s Bazaar 1877, “Our Women Growing Plump”)

The racial (and classed) ambiguity of the voluptuous aesthetic helped to ensure that its appeal would be far less than universal, and its popularity would be short lived. Eventually, vociferous attacks on its sensuality and relation to “lower-class subcultures” worked against its appeal (Banner 1983: 153). But, ultimately, a more consistent and coherent rationale was needed to attack fatness on a broad scale. It wasn’t until near the turn of the 20th century, when medical doctors started to make more direct links between obesity, ill health, and womanhood, that anti-fat dictates for women were given their most powerful rationale yet.
CHAPTER FOUR
The Reign of the “American Beauty”

If the rise of the voluptuous ideal in the U.S. was enabled, to a great degree, by competing aesthetic ideals engendered by the rupturing of whiteness, the link between slenderness and a cultivated femininity was bolstered by the re-alignment of whiteness at the close of the 19th century. At that time, a new tri-partite racial classificatory system was devised, under which Anglo-Saxons were united with other white people of northern and western European descent and referred to as “Nordics” or “Teutons.” As a consequence of this new system, social status of the Celtic Irish improved. Indeed, by the end of the 19th century, they came to occupy a liminal or intermediary status, sometimes being grouped with the Nordic/Teutons and at others occupying the rung reserved just below for “Alpines.” In either case, the Celtics routinely remained a notch above the newly denigrated, presumably part-black southern and eastern European, alternately categorized as “Alpines,” “Slavs,” or “Mediterraneans.”

While the socio-political factors (such as immigration) contributing to this reconstitution of racial groupings were similar, this new racial paradigm was given a wholly new significance by the eugenics movement. The bastard child of the rising field of genetics, eugenics expanded the basis of the potential terror of the surrounding the racial Other. No longer simply being about social intercourse, the fear animating early 20th century discussions of the racial Other hinged on the notion of “racial heredity” (Painter 2010) or that racial characteristics of “inferiors”—including their “fat” or “fleshy” tendencies—could be inherited.
In this chapter, I tell a story about the theories of racial heredity that has heretofore been unexplored. Whereas most scholarly examinations race and eugenics, particularly as it pertains to their impact on the lives of American women, have focused on “negative” eugenics programs targeting reproductive capacity (e.g. forced sterilization), I examine the interplay of “negative” and “positive” eugenics in the U.S. near the turn of the 20th century. Herein, I argue that ideologies of racial heredity were used not just as a way of breeding out of existence racial inferiors thought to be “fat” and “diseased”—recruiting rather than rejecting during this epoch, the language of the medical establishment—but also to encourage the breeding into existence a race of superwomen. These superwomen were supposed to be of Nordic or Teuton heritage, tall, pale skinned, and possessing a healthy, lean physique. These Nordic “superwomen” were described as “American Beauties,” (following the rhetoric of American exceptionalism) and were intended to be evidence the Progress of humanity made possible on American soil.

The Partial Rehabilitation of the Celts

The lives of Irish Catholics, per many whiteness scholars, changed dramatically after the American Civil War. According to Noel Ignatiev (1995) and David Roediger (1991), the pro-slavery stance taken by a significant number of Catholic Irish during the run up to the Civil War helped them to re-establish the racial distance between themselves and African Americans, while simultaneously affirming that they were politically simpatico with Anglo-Saxons. The historiographers further note that by the last few decades of the 19th century, many Catholic Irish had attained middle-class status.
Their combined political and economic clout meant that by the end of the 19th century they could circulate fluidly in the “white” mainstream (Ignatiev 1995; Roediger 1991).

This makes for a compelling story about the re-incorporation of the Celtic Irish into the mainstream of American life that it is not my aim to completely undermine. But, I will argue that the historical neatness of their narrative which re-places the Celtic Irish more or less as firmly within the seemingly monolithic category of “whiteness” in the United States in the post-bellum period, is belied by the historical evidence. What Roediger and Ignatiev, and indeed many whiteness historiographers (with the notable exception of Jacobson 1998), have under-appreciated was the role of the scientific rhetoric surrounding race in the tenuous re-incorporation of the Celts within the category of “white” in late 19th century America. Indeed, their reflections on whiteness evince a curious lack of appreciation for racial theorizing.

If, as explored previously, the early-to-mid 19th century scientific discourse of race was marked by both its growing biologization and the concomitant rupturing of whiteness, which placed the Celts on lower footing than Anglo-Saxons, the scientific discourse of race was revised near the turn of the 20th century. Under the new schematic, the place of the Celtic Irish was decidedly less clear. This was due to the fact that the concern over historical origins (popular in earlier theories of Anglo-Saxon supremacy) was blended with a host of other concerns, including the starting place of a group’s language, as well as more proximate concerns of current regional location and recent lineage. In other words, by the 1890s, there was a growing concern not just over ancestry, but recent ancestors, language, and current geography, a frothy basis for racial categorization that Nell Irvin Painter deems “racial heredity” (2010: 311).
The seeds of the late 19th century theories of racial heredity germinated in the 1850s with the work of Arthur de Gobineau. Gobineau devised a three-part system of the “colored races” (Jacobson 1998) in which he segregated the world’s peoples into black, white, and yellow groups. Gobineau placed the white group atop the racial hierarchy in terms of rationality, intellect, and beauty. Reminiscent of the theories of Linnaeus, Blumenbach, and Cuvier, of the “grotesque” qualities of the lower races and blacks in particular, Gobineau argued,

The negroid variety is the lowest, and it stands at the foot of the ladder. The animal character appears in the shape of the pelvis...Many of his senses, especially taste and smell, are developed to an extent unknown to the other two races. The very strength of his sensations is the most striking proof of his inferiority. *All food is good in his eyes, nothing disgusts or repels him. What he desires is to eat, to eat furiously and to excess*... (emphasis mine—1915: 205).

According to the Frenchman, the “yellow races” were a step above the black, but he wrote curiously, that “[The yellow races commit] none of the strange excesses so common among the negroes...A rare glutton by nature, he shows far more discrimination in his choice of food.” While nevertheless making the typical claim that as a racial Other, the “yellow races” exhibited “a general proneness to obesity...” (206).

Of equal importance for the present examination, Gobineau’s disgust for the “gluttonous” and “obese” racial Other, was overshadowed by his internal turmoil over the state of the white race. He believed, “all [high] civilizations derive from the white race,” (210) and was thus dismayed by the fact that through intercourse with the non-white races, the white race was “degenerating.” A French aristocrat, he despaired that from

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7 Quote taken from the 1915 English translation of this text, originally written in French in 1853.
Paris to London, “the lower classes will give us examples of all kinds, from the
prognathous head of the negro to the triangular face and slanting eyes of the Chinaman;
for, especially since the Roman Empire, the most remote and divergent races have
contributed to the look of the inhabitants of our great cities.” The base, miscegenated
lower classes foretold the end of the white civilization, whose greatness derived
overwhelmingly from the pure white Germanic sub-group he called the “Aryans.”

In using the term “Aryan” in this way, Gobineau, a philologist, had applied his
understanding of ancient languages to racial theories. In what some of his contemporaries
derided as a bastardization of linguistic theorizing, Gobineau argued that the “Aryan”
(Germanic) race was superior to non-Aryan elements within whiteness, and of course,
outside of it. Inventing what would later become known as a theory of Aryan supremacy,
by transforming a proto-Indo-European language into a people, Gobineau saw himself as
simply awakening the Germanic people to the “consciousness of their common origin”
(Arendt 1951: 45).

While Gobineau’s argument is strongly reminiscent of Anglo-Saxon theories of
supremacy (and could quite readily be mapped onto them), Gobineau’s conception
differed in that it considered three things typical Anglo-Saxon theories did not: language,
current geographical location, and recent parentage. For while the descendants of the
infallible Aryans spoke the language “Arya” and migrated from Germany, he believed
they settled overwhelmingly in Northern Europe, mixing with the Celtic, Latin and other
local populations of the northern region. In France this meant, “Celtic and Latin” mixed
with the Germanic elements (200). In terms of racial groupings, in the grand scheme of
things this meant that while German descendants were, historically the “superior” beings,
in the contemporary moment, their descendants in France and England (two of his key areas of interest) were mixed, among others, with Celtic peoples. This implied that contemporary elites had a measure of Celtic blood coursing through their veins.

Gobineau’s theory, articulated in his opus *Essai Sur L’inégalité des Races Humaines*, did not necessarily lead to an instant rehabilitation of the Celts in the eyes of the Germanic descendants, like the Anglo-Saxons in the U.S. For one thing, the Celts had, per Gobineau “degraded” the Aryan race to a certain extent. But, Gobineau (inadvertently, and perhaps ironically) did re-place the Celts in league with the *contemporary* group of elite whites, even if not as their express equals. By suggesting that northern Europe was where the majority of the surviving (if necessarily hybridized) Aryan strains could be found, he, unlike the work of many of his predecessors (and even contemporaries), posited a form of racial proximity between the groups. Significantly, if northern Europeans were the elite whites, southern and eastern Europeans, were used as his white racial foil, as according to Gobineau they contained more elements of the base “yellow” and “black” races.

Notably, when this book was written in 1853, it was coolly received and minorly regarded within intellectual circles in Europe and the States. It did not enter wide-spread circulation or receive mass recognition until the 1890s (Painter 2010).\(^8\) It was at that time that new ideas about race and racial heredity were spreading on both sides of the Atlantic.

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\(^8\) In 1855, a Southerner by the name of Josiah Nott brought Gobineau’s gospel to the States. But, his version of Gobineau’s work, which the Frenchman denounced as a perversion of his ideas, was not largely influential (Painter 2010).
The racial theorizing in Britain (and to a lesser extent the U.S.) that led to the “Othering” of the Celts and the “colored races” in the mid 19th century converged with two significant political events: the tensions with the Irish over Home Rule, and the growth of British colonial enterprise in Africa and Asia, as described in the previous chapter.9 The closing decades of the 19th century saw the rise of several new political tensions in the “Old World.” Two, those being the nation and empire-building efforts in Italy and Russia, had a palpable impact on social life (and racial theorizing) in Britain and the U.S.

In Italy, the nationalist movement known as the Risorgimento that began in 1815 culminated in 1861 with the fusion of the northern and southern regions of the Italian peninsula under one unified nation. While this was heralded as an achievement by many nationalists, the marriage of these formerly disparate entities played, by most accounts, heavily to the favor of the north. Newly devised taxes combined with the legacy of economic and political mismanagement in the region drove many southerners into abject poverty. The scramble for answers to what many in Italy deemed “the southern question,” led to a series of measures—such as administrative centralization, and a program of national meliorations—to bring the south into alignment with the new national economy and culture. These measures proved, overwhelmingly, to be ill-fated. Thus, the solution concocted by many southern Italian citizens by the end of the 19th century was simply to

9 Scholars from David Roediger (2007) and Noel Ignatiev (1995) to Nell Painter (2010) have described the political context for placing the Irish first outside of, then (mostly) back inside the category of whiteness specifically in the United States. Thomas Guglielmo (2003) has performed a similar exposition for Italians. A full exploration of the political context for a similar phenomenon happening for expats of the Russian empire during the late 19th century has, to my knowledge, not been undertaken.
escape the ever-worsening social conditions on the peninsula (Guglielmo 2003: 22). The majority set out for the presumably greener pastures of Western Europe and the U.S.

Imperial Russia, near the turn of the century, was also seeing a mass exodus of a sub-set of the population: its Jews. Jews of the Russian empire were evacuating the country in record numbers. And while their flight from the country was due to empire-building activities, the aim of these activities bore no resemblance to the nation-building activities in Italy. That is, rather than attempting to unify two formerly disparate states (and, as it was described then, “distinct peoples”) the goal in Imperial Russia was to purge the “alien” element.

Through the pogroms of 1881-1884 that were repeated periodically from 1903-1919, there was an unofficial policy (that involved the tacit cooperation state officials) of exterminating or otherwise removing its Jewish population. Purportedly, the goal of these riots was to reinstate peace and a sense of community within the revolutionary environment that had fomenting in the country after the assassination of the Russian Tsar, Alexander II. (Many in the country blamed his assassination on “the Jews.” There was never any definitive evidence to support this claim.) One way in which peace could be achieved, according to the new Tsar Alexander III, was to reconstitute a “racially pure” Slavic nation (see: NYT, “An Indictment of Russia: the great empire marching back to barbarism,” Sept, 14, 1891).

Not surprisingly then, Italy and Russia (including present-day Poland, Hungary, and Ukraine) sent the highest number of immigrants to the U.S. between the 1880s-1920s. The total Italian immigrant population jumped from 4,000 in 1850, to 44,000 in 1880. By 1900, nearly half-a-million people of Italian origin called the U.S. home.
Statistics from the U.S. Immigration commission show that 2.2 million Italians came to the U.S. between 1899-1910, 1.8 million of whom were from southern Italy.\textsuperscript{10} And by all accounts between the late 19\textsuperscript{th} and early 20\textsuperscript{th} century, there was a similarly sizable number of émigrés from the Russian empire. According to statistics from the same source, in 1880, approximately 5,000 arrived in the U.S. seeking new lives. In 1891, that number was up by nearly a factor of ten, to 47,000. Between 1899-1910, nearly 1.8 million expats from the Russian empire disembarked on U.S. shores. Significantly, while most immigrants from nearly any country at that time were male, nearly half of the Russian émigrés were female.\textsuperscript{11}

Importantly, this displacement and circulation of poor persons deemed nearly un-incorporable in their homeland, contributed to fears—particularly in England, France and the U.S. where many of these immigrants were attempting to make new homes—that the national fabric was being sullied by foreign elements. In the U.S., immigrants from Italy, Hungary, Poland and Russia were deemed “undesirable” and a “drug in every market” (NYT, “Undesirable Immigration,” June 21, 1884 and NYT, “The Rush to America,” May 4 1902).

While concerns over the prospect of a job squeeze on the native born were present in several articles, the fears of the evidently non-Anglo-Saxon immigrants mingling with the native population were coded largely in racial terms. A New York Times article from this era lamented the fact that “the quality of immigration is deteriorating. The percentage of Germans and Swedes is decreasing, and that of Italians and Hungarians is increasing”


\textsuperscript{11} Ibid.
(NYT “Undesirable Immigrants” May 2, 1890). Another article in the *New York Times*, originally printed in the *London Globe*, proclaimed that “continental riffraff” was flowing into the U.S. and England at alarming rates. The author explains that this “human rubbish,” and these “physically diseased imbeciles” could not possibly be assimilated (NYT, “Undesirables in America,” Jan 14, 1905).

The racially-inflected horror that accompanied the massive redistribution of southern and eastern Europeans throughout northwestern Europe and the U.S. played a role in the iterative process that exists between science and politics in the construction of racial categories. Thus, conveniently, amid the political tumult of the 1880s-1920s in southern and eastern Europe, the theories of Gobineau were resuscitated and expanded in the Western world. Building on his conception of the racial kinship (and elite status) of German-descended northern Europeans, a new generation of predominately British, French and American scholars began crafting theories of “Nordic,” “Teutonic” and “Aryan” supremacy.

The term “Nordic” was coined by a Russian-born French anthropologist by the name of Joseph Deniker (Hobsbawm 1992; Painter 2010). A racial cartographer, Deniker used the term—which can be translated to mean “northern”—to describe one of the many races of people found in the pulsing European metropoles. While this term was quickly adopted by scientists and laypersons alike, the rest of his 10-part racial classification system failed to be broadly influential. This was due, in part, to its complexity and the arbitrariness involved in trying to pry apart 10 presumably distinct races on the continent. As the field of race science went, his overall schema fared poorly against his intellectual competitors’ more easily digestible theories.
One of his foremost intellectual competitors was a man by the name of William Z. Ripley. A New-England born academic with a Ph.D. in economics from Columbia, Ripley was well aware of, if dissatisfied with, the work of Deniker and other race theorists. More than anything else, it was the inconsistency among the racial theories (and to be sure, within the work of an individual theorist) that rankled Ripley. In 1897, he began work on a 624-page tome that was to leave a lasting legacy on race science. The work, published in 1899 (with the help of his wife and suffragist, Ida S. Davis) was a synthesis of the work of hundreds of race scholars. And unlike Deniker, Ripley pulled off an easily palatable racial diagram. There were, according to Ripley, only three races in Europe: Teutonic, Alpine, and Mediterrane.

Relying heavily on both geographic origin and physical characteristics, Ripley described Teutons as tall in stature, blond and blue-eyed, with, importantly, Germanic origins. He further allowed that the term “Teuton” was a synonym for Deniker’s “Nordic” (Painter 2010: 216). His classification of Alpine and Mediterranean peoples was equally intriguing. Under the category Alpine, he listed in parentheses “Celtic,” as if to suggest they were one and the same. Ripley moreover described the Alpines as being of medium height, and “stocky” in build, reproducing the trope of the stout Celt (Painter 2010: 215).

Still, finding a classificatory solution to “the Celtic problem” was a lesser concern in the current historical moment. The political thrust of the racial mappings of the turn of the 20th century was to identify the origins and rightful position within the social hierarchy for these “new immigrants” of southern and eastern Europe. Curiously, Ripley remained silent on the issue of the racial affiliation of Russians and other eastern
Europeans, referring to them simply as “Slavs.” But, he spent a great deal of time
describing southern Europeans. They were, he claimed, representative of the
“Mediterranean” type. (For an illustration of the type, he uses a man from Sicily—see
Painter 2010: 219.) Mediterraneans, per Ripley, tended to be short in stature, dark in
color, and slender. Their color was, no doubt, owing to the fact that the Mediterraneans
were geographically, and biologically, kin to Africans in Ripley’s conception. States
Ripley,

Beyond the Pyrenees begins Africa. Once that natural barrier is crossed,
the Mediterranean racial type in all its purity confronts us. The human
phenomena is entirely parallel with the sudden transition to the flora and
fauna of the south. The Iberian population thus isolated from the rest of
Europe, are allied in all important anthropological respects with the
peoples inhabiting Africa north of the Sahara, from the Red Sea to the
Atlantic (1899: 272).

Ripley here, as well as with his comments about the Celts, clues us in to the ideological
foundation of his tri-partite racial system. First, it is evidently hierarchical, with Teutons
at the top, followed by Alpines then Mediterraneans. Second, the basis of this hierarchy is
physical (and this again being a double entendre) proximity to either the “pure” whiteness
of the German descendants, or the “pure” blackness of Africa. Third, the Celts are given a
measure of reprieve, as with the partial rehabilitation begun with Gobineau. This is
significant, as previous whiteness scholars such as Ignatiev (1995) and Roediger (1991)
have overestimated the extent to which being a Celtic person allowed full access to and
the validation of elite whiteness after the Civil War. Ripley’s foregoing sentiments
indicate that the Celts continued to be the racial “Other” to nativist Americans decades
after the Civil War. Finally, we find that despite the Celts here not being lumped together with the socially triumphant Teutons, the black (or at least part-black) racial Other that was evidently to be feared given their racial distance from “pure” whites were those from southern Europe.

While the work Ripley does in *Races of Europe* leaves the racial background of eastern Europeans largely undiscussed, he takes a decided stance against these “aliens” in his subsequent writings and lectures. In 1908, while a professor of economics at Harvard, Ripley delivered one of his most famous speeches, in which he describes the imminent threat of southern and eastern Europeans, particularly the Jews of the Russian empire. In an article that would be reprinted in a number of papers, including *The New York Times*, Ripley declaimed “The Anglo-Saxon race is threatened with complete submergence” by those he believed to be physically and mentally degenerate. He feared that the Jews in particular were out-living and out-breeding Anglo-Saxons (NYT, “Future Americans Will Be Swarthy,” Nov. 29, 1908).

Although Ripley popularized the term “Teuton” notice that he refers to Anglo-Saxon here instead, indicating of the slippage between these terms. It was not uncommon for Anglo-Saxon, Teuton, Nordic, or even Gobineau’s Aryan to be used interchangeably. As a case in point, two of Ripley’s associates and fellow ideologues were recognized Aryanists: Joseph Widney author of *The Race Life of Aryan Peoples* (1907) and Georges Vacher de Lapouge (whose work Ripley mined for his grand synthesis in *Races of Europe*), author of the 1899 book *L'Aryen et son rôle social* (The Aryan and his Social Role).
And, the work of Widney and Lapouge proved significant as it pertained to conceptions of the physical characteristics of the races. For Nordic/Teuton/Aryans (henceforth NTA) in particular, Ripley stated only that they were tall. Questions of their body size were left unanswered, probably because he could find no consensus on the topic in the work he used for this synthesis. But importantly, Widney and Lapouge contributed to the growing consensus that NTAs were likely to be slim, using Americans (who were long thought to tend to svelteness) as their example. French Sociologist Lapouge, for example, in an 1899 article printed in American Journal of Sociology claimed the physical type of the ancient Aryans, the modern-day Americans were the best example. Lapouge declared, “In my view…the builders of the Aryan nation were of the type of ‘Uncle Sam.’” He further describes the Americans as “lank-bodied…usually blond, adventurous and aggressive” (1899: 345-346). Joseph Widney would make similar remarks. According to Widney, the Aryans were a race of people who were tall, fair, prominent-nosed. He further codes American Aryans as typically spare in stature, claiming Abraham Lincoln was a descendant of the Aryan peoples (Widney 1907).

In terms of understandings of the eastern Europeans physique there was a growing belief that they were prone to corpulence. Indeed, some of Ripley’s contemporaries (like Madison Grant) placed them in league with the “heavy” Alpines (being also part black—or per Grant, part “yellow”). Others, like Widney, maintained their distinction as “Slavs” but argued, that they were broad and stout: “The Slav, for instance is now looked upon as a stocky broad-headed brunette, and yet…the original Slav was a tall blonde [that] has disappeared from the lands where he conquered the people” (NYT, “Who are the Aryans?” Aug. 17, 1907).
Southern Europeans, including the south Italians who were supposedly even closer to their “African roots,” were often described as weak and fleshy, a decided divergence from the supposed lean, firm, flesh of the Nordics. Still, being weak and “soft” was read in two ways. When not derided for the feeble kind of slenderness Ripley attributed to them, they were thought to be soft and fat, either form of physique presumably evincing a lack of self-discipline or rationality. Thus, famed northern Italian criminologist Cesare Lombroso suggested south Italians and those with superfluous fat tissue (there being a great overlap between the two) had a penchant for irrational illegal activity. Making his argument curiously gendered, Lombroso in his text *Criminal Woman* (1893) claimed, “Female criminals are shorter than normal women...prostitutes and murderers weigh more than honest women...” (quoted in Farrell 2011: 67; see also Jacobson 1998).

If this new moment in racial understandings coincided with the circulation of displaced southern and eastern Europeans, the fear expressed by Ripley and others of their unassimilability—evinced through, among other things, their kinship to Africans and their fat or fleshy bodies—was about more than simple racial difference. As noted above, it was increasingly about *racial heredity*, or the belief that both benign and calamitous racial characteristics could be inherited. This new conception of race was instigated in the late 19th century, but took off like wildfire in the early 20th century. It began with the eugenics movement.

*Eugenics*
Sir Francis Galton was born into wealth and distinction. The son of bible-thumping Quakers of landed wealth, it was expected that Galton would bring further honor to the family by becoming an MD. The pressure of living up to such expectations and his lukewarm interest in medicine would eventually lead him, while a medical student at Cambridge, to a nervous breakdown. But, Galton would find his true passion a handful of years later in 1845, while taking a trip up the Nile with a few friends for a short respite. Shortly after this trip—and a timely phrenological reading that indicated that he had the spirit for “colonising”—Galton discovered that traveling among and taking measurements of the world’s disparate peoples was a salve for his unsettled soul. He traveled throughout much of the Middle East and Africa for the next several years, literally sizing up Africans of different ethnic groups and tribes using the latest techniques of anthropometry (Kevles 1985).

Taking measurements of the height, head shape and stature, of women of Africa, and notably women of the Hottentot tribe (the same tribe from which the famous Saartje Baartman was extracted), Galton, like many European adventurers, would claim that the women of this tribe were well-apportioned. But, unlike many of his contemporaries, he did not deride their purportedly shapely physiques. Asserting that they had just the right embonpoint, Galton averred that the women he measured were “endowed with that shape which European milliners so vainly attempt to imitate...I have seen figures that would drive females of our native land desperate” (quoted in Kevles 1985: 8).

Galton’s somewhat unusual praise for the purported shapeliness of Hottentot women’s physiques did not, however, destabilize what contemporary scholars have recognized as his engagement with standard racist ideas about racial “inferiors” and
“superiors” (Kevles 1985; Stern 2005). In fact, he counted among his colleagues and intellectual sympathizers such luminaries as George Vacher de Lapouge and John Beddoe. And ultimately, his travels to Africa, Kevles reminds, confirmed his notions of African inferiority (1985). But, Galton’s work ultimately had little to do with the (re)constitution of hierarchical racial classificatory schemes that many of his colleagues used as their bread and butter. Rather, Galton crafted one of the most influential arguments for the heritability of physical traits that would subsequently be applied to race theories.

Galton, recognizing the growing differences in wealth and distinction in his homeland, realized that many of the country’s elite came from a small coterie of families. He posited that perhaps, natural ability, rather than circumstances accounted for these grave social inequities. In a blow-back against environmental theories of social outcomes, Galton proposed that most of the more important mental and physical traits, including intelligence, height, and the vaguely demarcated “beauty” were genetic. Working from newly revived ideas of Mendelian genetics and his own anthropometric investigations in Africa and Britain, Galton asserted that most physical and mental characteristics were inherited. The key then, to producing great men, was in biological, not environmental changes.

In an appropriation of his cousin Charles Darwin’s theories of natural selection, Galton assured the scientific community of Western Europe that it could, through artificial selection, choose to breed for the best characteristics. Coining the term “eugenics” which meant “better breeding” in 1883, Galton sparked a movement to breed
out of existence, the feeble, insane, physically debilitated, and breeding into existence a superior “race” of beings (Kevles 1985; Stern 2005).

The term “race,” as during the early post-Enlightenment moment, contained within it a great degree of ambiguity. Galton was a Social Darwinist, anthropometricist, and above all else, a statistician. He was not, as mentioned previously, a race theorist. Thus, despite his work in Africa, he did not spend a great deal of time speculating about the extent to which certain traits were “raced”. Instead, Galton was primarily interested in family ability and improving, through better breeding, the human family.12

Thus, Galton, founder of the eugenic faith, spent a great deal of his time and energy advocating for propitious eugenic marriages (Kevles 1985). This early form of what has come to be known as “positive eugenics” had less to do with race as with documented familial qualities. He set down his ideas on eugenics in a series of texts, beginning with the 1883 *Inquiries into Human Faculty and Its Development*. He helped co-found several eugenics societies and journals such as the *Eugenics Review* to advocate for advantageous marriages. Galton’s eminence as a scholar was undeniable during the late 19th- early 20th centuries. His efforts to promote eugenics led to his being knighted in 1909.

*Race and Destiny, Manifest*

Galton’s ideas about better breeding were only belatedly taken up in the U.S. Their spread in America can be traced to the work of Charles Davenport. Davenport was

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12 Still, given his own circle of colleagues, he too would suggest that there was a statistical concentration of intellectual ability and physical strength and beauty in England, and London in particular. For further details see his 1909 book *Memories of My Life*. 
a well-connected Puritan New Englander. Upon receiving his Ph.D. in biology from Harvard in 1892, he became interested in the laws of inheritance, particularly as they applied to humans. Finding Galton’s work intriguing, he traveled to London in 1901 to visit with the eugencist and talk controlled breeding (Painter 2010).

What could not help but to strike the American, was Galton’s conviction that there was a statistical density of intelligence and physical beauty among the “upper crust.” Being from a society in which racial hierarchies had a longer, more tortured history than those of class, Davenport took a new take on eugenics that was to forever alter its course in the U.S. Davenport made eugenics firmly about race.

In its execution, Davenport relied largely on the presumptions of Ripley and his ilk. Harboring the belief that “Poles, Irish, and Italians” were of a decidedly different race from the native stock of white Americans—in evidence through their color, stature, and propensity for crime and insanity—Davenport crafted a simplified version of Galton’s theories that made racial traits heritable.13

The notion that unfavorable racial traits could be inherited contributed to the paranoia of nativist Americans who saw themselves as being inundated with “aliens”. The implications were staggering, and prompted the elaboration of whole new racial scientific texts written specifically by eugenicists who could highlight the ills of poor racial inheritance. Among them were Madison Grant, who in his 1916 text *The Passing of the Great Race* borrowed from the work of Davenport, and reproduced Ripley’s tri-partite racial classification with a few modifications. First he placed Russian “Slavs” into

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13 Galton believed that some traits were more commonly found among racial lines. For example, he suggested that Jews and Hebrews had evolved different intellectual capacities. Davenport, however, removed the statistical complexity of his theories, making simplistic claims about the heritability of racial essences (Painter 2010: 270).
the category of “Alpines,” arguing, like Ripley, that “the Alpine race is taller than the Mediterranean although shorter than the Nordic, and is characterized by a stocky and sturdy build” (1916: 29). Second, he sounded the alarm over the role of the American melting pot in the retention of negative racial characteristics of the “stocky” Alpines and short, “weak” Mediterraneans.

Per Madison, the American crucible had not been working to appropriately smelt these foreign elements into one well-formed people. Rather, the American gene pool was degenerating. For evidence, he argued, one had only to look to the “Polish Jew, whose dwarf stature...are being engrafted upon the stock of the nation” (1916: 16). What was needed then, was a commitment to eugenics programs in the United States, to save the country from a downward spiral into savagery.

The result was another modification of eugenic theories, a further divergence from its British roots. In the U.S. there was a growing emphasis on “negative eugenics,” that is the breeding out of “bad,” particularly racial traits. As in positive eugenics, it hinged on reproductive potential, but this time of non-elites. The negative eugenics program operated on two legal fronts: advocacy for legislation to restrict the immigration of southern and eastern Europeans, and the sterilization of women from “bad” stocks. Each one designed to protect the health and racial character of the nation, and this was central to the cultural nationalism of the period (Ordover 2003).

There is an immense body of scholarship on negative eugenics, including the legal restrictions to immigration and sterilization programs of the early 20th century (see Kevles 1985; Stepan 1991; Stern 2005). That work need not be replicated in the current examination. There are, however, a couple of things that are worth mentioning here.
Harry Laughlin, underling to Davenport, used the enormous amount of data he and his associates collected with the Eugenics Record Office at Ellis Island and elsewhere for legislative purposes. Laughlin tabulated the data to suggest southern and eastern Europeans carried of unfavorable racial traits, mental, moral, physical, and also political given the growing Red Scare. In 1920, Laughlin gave expert testimony at the House Committee on Immigration and Naturalization. His talk, entitled, “Biological Aspects of Immigration” made the case against allowing the further entry of southern and eastern Europeans (Ordover 2003). A few years later, the Vice President Calvin Coolidge himself would concur, arguing that “Nordics deteriorate when mixed with other races” (Kevles 1985: 97). By 1924, the feeling of the country and Congress, enabled eugenic lobbyists like Laughlin, Madison Grant, and Henry Cabot Lodge to pass the Immigration Restriction Act of 1924, which greatly restricted the numbers of southern and eastern immigrants who could settle in U.S. borders.

_A Medical 180 Degrees_

It is important to mention that the fear of “foreign bodies” was dually signified. Nativist Americans were concerned not only that the immigrants themselves were unassimilable aliens who would degrade the gene pool, but also that they were harbingers of dangerous foreign diseases (Ordover 2003: 37). As feminist theorists Barbara Ehrenreich and English remind, the crowding of low-income immigrant communities in the northeastern U.S. made them a hotbed of infectious disease (Ehrenreich and English 1973). Therefore, upper and middle-class Americans saw immigrants as doubly
dangerous, serving as both immediate (via disease) and long-term (via reproduction) threats to national health.

This dual fear of foreign bodies had critical implications for the reception of fat and fleshy bodies. Not only did fatness designate non-Nordic, but late 19th century developments in the field of medicine made it too, evidence of disease. In a stunning reversal, doctors, who long argued that a hearty dose of fatness was necessary for health, were providing new medical evidence that fatness was linked to illness.

Historians of fat like Peter Stearns (1997) and Hillel Schwartz (1985) have been unable to pin down precisely when the sea change occurred. Nevertheless, these scholars, along with others such as Kerry Segrave (2008), have shown that by the early 20th century the medical establishment increasingly connected “adiposity” and mortality, diabetes, hypertension, and heart disease. Moreover, and of significance for the present paper, research often directly linked obesity to disease in two populations: “women” and racial Others.

Thus, after decades of suggesting “women” (and again, here they were typically referring to women of the “cultivated classes”) were prone to a leanness that needed to be combated through heavy diet, physicians began make claims linking the habits of the luxurious life to obesity and disease. (In both cases of course, maintaining the pathologization of the female body.) Dr. Solis-Cohen, for example, writing in JAMA claimed although there may be an “endogenous” component to obesity in women, sedentary lifestyles contributed to their propensity to obesity and potentially diabetes (Solis-Cohen 1925). Another article in JAMA indicated women were more prone to excessive adiposity that was also linked to sterility in women. Showing a likely
engagement with the ideals of the eugenics movement and its attendant fear over the
decline of the Anglo-Saxon/Nordic race in America, the author of this article, titled,  
“Obesity as a Cause of Sterility,” claimed, “With [women], the first sign of old age is that 
they grow fat...[they] become pursy, short winded, pot-bellied, pale and flabby...” He 
added that this deranged menstruation and lactation, contributing to infertility (Gaff 
1897).

There were other, more explicit connections between gender, obesity and the 
eugenic future of the race. Dr. Willard J. Stone wrote, “Many physicians, while aware of 
the possible dietary deficiencies, do not believe that the causes, except indirect ones, of 
many diseases are to be found in faulty diets...*If a race of supermen is ever to be 
obtained*, the production of it may follow...the study of vitamins and their influence on 
growth (emphasis mine).” He further suggested limitations on women’s caloric intake 
and an increase in exercise to improve overall health and reduce disease (Stone 1930).\(^\text{14}\)

But, if there was a new horror surrounding elite women’s bodies as capable of 
sliding down the slippery slope to an obesity-enabled debility, the old trope of the body 
of the racial Other being *necessarily* fat or weak and fleshy was also present. Being 
refashioned to fit current racial ideologies, one doctor claimed southern Italians were a 
mixture of “Italian, Greek and African” blood, and that “they are small, dark and of a 
poor musculature.” He had a similar take on the “poor physical development” of the Jews 
(Friedman 1912). Another intoned “The Jew, in my opinion, is not prone to diabetes

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\(^\text{14}\) There is an interesting contradiction here. On the one hand, well-to-do Nordic women were supposed to 
have the racial propensity to lean physiques, with fatness being a constitutional debility of racial Others. On 
the other hand, as women, and therefore the sexual Other, they too shared, to a certain extent, this capacity 
for constitutional debility. Thus, we find elite white women in a liminal space given their race, class, and 
gender identity. In order to maintain their respectability, they would have to invest in their whiteness 
(Lipsitz 2006). In this case, this meant a performance of their “racial tendency” to svelteness.
because he is a Jew, but rather because he is fat. Jews are fat; though shameful to relate” (Joslin 1924). There was a persistent link between fatness, Jewishness and disease during the time period, as Dr. Joslin articulated in another article: “One has only to visit the Jewish quarter of a large Jewish city to be impressed with the frequency of obesity” (Joslin 1921).

These ideologies were by no means fringe (Segrave 2008). During this time period, physicians in the U.S. commonly connected fatness with disease, and in nearly the same breath—using theories of racial heritability—with gender and race. In this medico-scientific maelstrom in which fatness was coming under fire seemingly from all sides, its celebration was to be found less and less often. Slenderness, given its growing scientific validation, was gaining in esteem.

Breeding a Race of Superwomen: Representing the National Body

If there was obvious ideological freebooting going on between race scientists, eugenicists, and doctors, it is clear that within each intellectual niche the concern was fundamentally about safeguarding the health and racial character of the nation. Indeed, the rigor and robustness of the entire country was purported to be at risk with the immigration of fat, fleshy and disease-laden southern and eastern Europeans. If the efforts to limit their entry (and curtail their breeding) were a recognized part of U.S. nation-building efforts at the time, little if any contemporary scholarship has explored how the nation was “protected” (or reconstructed) not just by the negative eugenics

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15 Sander Gilman has also described this phenomenon in his book, Fat: A Cultural History of Obesity (2008).
programs described above, but by so-called positive eugenics activities which targeted Nordic women.

That is, during this time period, discussions of the beauty of “American” women, popular in newspapers and magazines since the days of *Godey’s*, evolved. Bearing a newfound cultural nationalist positive eugenics slant, proponents of the quintessential idealized woman demanded *physical evidence* of better breeding. In what was referred to as the search for the “American Beauty,” a proliferation of mainstream publications exalted a heritage and a tall, lanky, physique deemed peculiarly Nordic.

The first such “American beauty” to capture the national imagination was the Gibson Girl. Created by Massachusetts-born illustrator Charles Dana Gibson, the ideal was taller and slimmer than the voluptuous model that made a cameo on the aesthetic scene in the mid-19th century. It was quickly embraced as *the* American ideal. An Atlanta Constitution article from 1899, for example, claimed, “Mr. Charles Dana Gibson first charmed the world with his original illustrations…[a] type of American beauty Americans and foreigners admired as the highest type of the American woman” (AC, April 30, 1899, “Fads and Fashions”). Another, written three years later, reminds us that the Gibson Girl was regarded as “the acme of American beauty and refinement” (AC, Nov. 8, 1902, “The Gibson Girl”).

When asked about his creation, Gibson replied using a rhetoric that smacked of the medico-racial talk about the health of the nation:

> What Zangwill calls “The Melting Pot of the Races” has resulted in a certain character… They are beyond question the loveliest of all their sex. Evolution has selected the best things for preservation…Why should
women not be beautiful increasingly? Why should it not be the fittest in form and features, as well as mind and muscle which survives? And where should that fittest be in evidence most strikingly? In the United Sates of course, where natural selection has been going on, as elsewhere, there has been a great variety to choose from. The eventual American woman will be even more beautiful than the woman of to-day. Her claims to that distinction will result from a fine combination of the best points of all those many races which have helped to make our population (NYT, Nov 20, 1910, “Gibson Girl Analyzed by Her Originator”).

If one were curious as to which races he was referring, he does not identify them all, but he does name the one he finds most important: “The best part of her beauty will and has come from the nation of our origin—Great Britain” (NYT, Nov 20, 1910, “Gibson Girl Analyzed by Her Originator”).

Gibson’s overture to Nordicism was far from atypical. While absent in pre-1890s discussions of beauty in the fatherland, thereafter they became standard. Describing the beauty of American women in terms of height, weight, and racial heredity, quickly became the norm. For additional evidence, we turn to an article from *Cosmopolitan* magazine which claimed that in America, “it is equally and famously certain that the women surpass all others in the flower-like delicacy and perfection of their loveliness.” The author, a woman by the name of Elizabeth Bisland, goes on to describe, two famous American Beauties, “They both have Scotch blood in their veins. Mrs. Potter’s being of both the Lowland Scotch and Celtic Highlander. Miss Anderson…and being German and Scotch” (Cosmopolitan, Jan 1890). Significantly for our purposes, Ms. Bisland adds a
physical description of Mrs. Potter and Miss Anderson: “Both are tall and exquisitely slim.”

The latter article reminds that during this time period, while Nordics sat atop the racial hierarchy, Celtics were no longer derided as the focus of inferiority. Indeed, their liminal position in the racial hierarchy alongside their elevated position in the social hierarchy meant that they too could be, at times, included in the melting pot of “northerners.” Consider an article from The New York Times in which an artist, credited with finding a new type of beauty in a racially-mixed woman, claims, “Miss Rasmussen is tall and slender…That the ideal American beauty should be somewhat of a cosmopolitan is evidenced by the fact that Miss Rasmussen’s Americanism comes from a blend of Irish and Danish blood” (NYT, Jan 22, 1911). These and many other articles of the time were laden with a positive eugenics, pro-Nordic (or in the case of the last example, Nordic/Alpine) program aimed at promoting the “right” racial mixtures. This “right” racial brew could purportedly be read from the tall, svelte body.

As the fervor for tall, slim physiques to represent the national body spread, the Gibson Girl would no longer suffice as its model. The growing sentiment, particularly in the North, that it was not slim enough. In a country besieged by the terror of the fat, fleshy, immigrant racial Other, the thinner, apparently, the better. Writer Pennrhyn Stanslaws perhaps described the move to ever-svelter physiques best, “We or at least our

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16 Of note, however, is that Cosmo’s melting pot occasionally allowed in elements of racial Otherness that were commonly rejected in other popular periodicals. For instance, an article from 1906 included a woman with Polish heritage: “an extremely beautiful Indiana girl, who came to notice in some recent studies of the effect of racial immigration…was found to have a German father. Her mother, however, was of a composite type. Her maternal grandfather was a Scotch sailor, maternal grandmother was a French seamstress. Her paternal grandfather was a Dutch burgher…and paternal grandmother was Polish…the most extraordinary beauty is a frequent result” (Cosmopolitan, May 1906).
fathers, were all in love with the Gibson girl, with her broad shoulders and her tiny waist who weighed from 110 to 175 pounds. No (sic) we show a most decided preference for the girl whose waist line is about 24 or 26 inches and who tips the scale at 110 to 120 pounds” (NYT, Sept. 18, 1923, “Our Girls are Psycho-Eugenic”).

According to artist M.Philip Boileau, in his conception of the American beauty she was characteristically “blonde, with the tall, slender, nervous nature that is so great a promise, and so alluringly different from any other type of woman in the world” (NYT, “American Beauty Analyzed by Artists,” Sept. 29, 1907). And, if this were the case, “stout” immigrants from southern and eastern Europe were typically left out of the eugenic melting pot that created the “American beauty”. That these purportedly heavy immigrants might represent beauty was laughable, and that they might be so bold as to attempt make themselves its models, distressing.

The author of a New York Times article articulated as much, lamenting the fact that, “[m]odeling grew as fashionable as War Causes.” In the post-WWI environment, she links modeling and “war causes” for the express purpose of creating an elision between the two, suggesting that modeling was itself becoming a war cause, as it was opening its doors to ill-suited refugees and immigrants. Representing beauty in the fatherland, she implied, should be reserved for slim, “native” Americans. This is something, she argued, immigrants and their sympathizers should do well to respect: “clearly there are social distinctions with the mannequin lines with which the extra stout must cope (emphasis mine)” (NYT, “Rude Intrusion of Facts Into Fashions, Aug 1, 1920).
But importantly, the promotion of such an aesthetic ideal called not only on (eugenic) images of race and nation, but were increasingly co-opting the language health and illness, bolstered by the medical establishment’s new anti-fat discourse. Thus, a contributing writer to *Harper’s Bazaar* could expound, relying explicitly on claims of health and race in the U.S.:

Fatness is a most undesirable state. It is dangerous to the vital organs, and it is destructive of vanity….I say that to be fat—to be, oh, awful word obese—is to be miserable… It is her nature—hereditary, possibly—and all she can hope for is not to become obese. That is the state all persons of refinement must shun…. She will not be a social success unless she burnt-cork herself, don beads, and then go to that burning clime where women, like pigs, are valued at so much a pound (Harper’s Bazaar, “The Sorrows of the Fat” Aug 1897).

The last line is an explicit reference to the invidious link between fatness and blackness—both being stigmatized—that had been used by race scientists since the late 18th century. Returning us to the fact that while southern and eastern Europeans immigrants were feared in part because they were believed to have a measure of black blood, the true horror (the Heart of Darkness) lies on the continent itself.

Significantly, unlike literature from earlier eras, the author uses new medical language of its health dangers to further validate her claim. Other self-styled health and beauty experts used more technical medical language, arguing “fatty degeneration” affected the vital organs, causing indigestion, and a hardening of the liver or the arteries. The food turned into fat, “choking the vital organs.” (Harper’s, “Diet for Old Age,” Nov 1909). Some simply stated that “[s]uperfluous flesh, or fat, as it is ultimately called, is a disease…” (Harper’s, “The Reduction of Flesh” Jun 1906).
Even physicians themselves, once horrified by the trend of women training down, could increasingly be counted on to validate the slender aesthetic by encouraging belt-tightening regimes. Dr. Gregory P. Murray intoned, “It does not take many seasons for the debutante to lose her freshness and become a prey to the dyspepsias that the older matrons and chaperons [must] withstand.” He encourages the restriction of food to avoid obesity and illness, among society women, who, “in their overpowering dread of the obesity which is sure to come to them unless they curb their indulgence, fast with a determination and martydomlike persistence of a nun in her cell” (Murray 1901).

In the end, the tall, svelte American beauty was established as the feminine physical ideal of the nation.
CONCLUSION

In this dissertation, I have examined the historical developments leading up to the consecration of thinness as a feminine aesthetic ideal, and the concomitant denigration of fatness, in the United States. While a number of scholars have shown that by the 1920s, the slender ideal had become the mainstream aesthetic standard for white women of the upper and middle classes in the United States (see Bordo 1993; Brumberg 1988; Schwartz 1985; Seid 1989; Stearns 1997; Wolf 1990), this is (to my knowledge) the first empirical study attempting to trace its development. I have shown that it was not merely coincidental that upper and middle-class white women would have been both the primary targets of and adherents to this ideal. Rather, because lean physiques were associated with Anglo-Saxon character in the U.S. since the late 18th century, well-to-do white women (as the denigrated sex) could maintain a measure of respectability by investing in their whiteness (Lipsitz 2006) through reining in the borders of their bodies.

This project builds on theories of intersectionality and cultural dispositions, showing that ideologies about race, gender, and class are inscribed on bodies, which are then marshaled in the edification of social hierarchies. I make a contribution to the literature bridging these fields by revealing that—in addition to physical anatomy and skin color—body size too has been used as a visible marker of distinction. Fat and thin bodies provided a visual rubric for social standing, and masqueraded as a natural material basis of the raced/classed/gendered order.
It is useful here to detail what happened after the 1920s. That is, even if by this time our current mainstream aesthetic valuations were firmly in place, how did they move beyond their Nordic (or Nordic/Alpine) associations, and come to be linked to whiteness (or more accurately “cultivated” white womanhood) more broadly? To address this question, we turn to yet another revision to whiteness within the scientific field. The final major one as it were; the one that obliterated petty sub-groupings such as “Nordic” and “Mediterranean” and re-instated “white” as a category that was nearly synonymous with European.

This revision came in the wake of WWII, as the horrors of the Jewish genocide caused many to re-consider such “race thinking” (Arendt 1951). It arrived amid a growing international movement for racial tolerance, and was expressed in a series of publications and exhibits by the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO). One exhibit from 1943 featured an installation titled, “Who are the Aryans?” and argued against intra-white distinctions, asserting that there was no Aryan race. In their depiction of the falsity of Aryan as a racial category, they declaimed, “[The] ideal Aryan would be slender, long headed, blond and virile,” (emphasis mine, see Jacobson 1998:107). Seeing that there was no one group of people that uniformly fit this description, UNESCO argued that we could reject such sub-groupings.

While UNESCO may not have been the first or last word on the re-constitution of whiteness, it was certainly one of the most visible bodies to argue against the splicing of whiteness that had been taking place for over a century. What few at that time seemed to challenge, interestingly, was the logic of the “colored races” or indeed of race thinking as a whole. That is, while the taste for making infinite cuts to the white race waned, few
questioned the existence of races that fit, roughly, the historical colonial conception of black, red, yellow, and white (Jacobson 1998).

And, importantly for the present examination, the erasure of white sub-categories did not undermine the aesthetic hierarchies that existed concomitant with them. Rather, the decline of the Aryan/Nordic/Anglo-Saxon supremacy only disconnected the high valuation of slenderness from its racialized legacy. Slimness remained intact as a hegemonic aesthetic ideal.

The Obesity Epidemic

It is worth mentioning here that a key finding of this project is that the high valuation of slenderness and its association with whiteness, and stigmatization of fatness and its association with blackness in the United States preceded, rather than followed, the discovery by the medical establishment that excess weight can be unhealthy. This is significant, since in the contemporary moment, there is still a great deal of anti-fat rhetoric circulating in the mass media, but at this point, it is constructed as a tremendous individual and public health problem that is enabled by culture (as opposed to a cultural problem that makes linkages between fatness and illness all too probable).17

Indeed, in an unsurprising repetition of a long-standing historical trope, black women are again coming under fire for their “excess” weight, this time within the context

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17 Sociologists like Troy Duster (1991) have shown that only some diseases will receive the spotlight at a given moment. That is, while there may be any number of pressing illnesses in a given community, only some are going to receive mass media attention and public health finance. Frequently, the diseases receiving public interest and funds are those that prime us to attend to existing cultural arrangements. We need only to remind ourselves that HIV is still a leading cause of death of black women ages 25-44 (see: http://www.naacp.org/pages/health-care-fact-sheet), and yet the proportion of studies on HIV in the black community is on the decline, while those on obesity are on the rise.
of the “obesity epidemic.” Nearly half of all black women can be clinically labeled as obese, a higher rate of obesity than any other sub-population of the U.S. Much of the coverage in the popular press, instead of focusing on the myriad causes and consequences of this phenomenon (of which very little is known) have queried the obesogenic tendencies of black women, and the obesophilia of the black community.

As a case in point, a New York Times op-ed article from 2012 bearing the title, “Black Women and Fat,” begins with the supposedly authoritative medical position that “four out of five black women are seriously overweight.” The author presents what she believes to be a fetishism of fatness among black women as the cultural burden of a presumably backward people. What is needed, she argues, is a “cultural revolution” in which black women come to understand the medical (and social) dangers of obesity.

The author, Alice Randall, is a black woman, and yet her descriptions of the cultural backwardness of the obesophilic black community reproduces the centuries old invidious race science that stigmatized fatness and associated it with blackness, examined in this dissertation. Randall, like many describing the health risks facing obese black women is apparently unaware of that there is a mounting set of studies indicating that the link between obesity and disease, has been overblown. That is, amidst the clarion calls to fight this supposed mounting public health problem, a growing number of scholars are questioning the science behind the so-called epidemic. In his book *The Obesity Myth*, Paul Campos shows that while medical professionals often correlate being fat with disease and death, the scientific evidence on which these correlations are made is unreliable. This is especially true for the data on black women, who often have a higher muscle-to-fat ratio than women of other races (Campos 2004). And Campos isn’t alone; a
number of new studies suggest that being fat may not be as harmful as we’ve been taught, but we nevertheless maintain a curious aversion to fatness (Flegal et al. 2005, 2010; Luik et al. 2006; Saguy and Riley 2005; Wann 1998).18

Looking Forward

It is difficult to anticipate whether slimness will remain a hegemonic ideal in the coming years, but it shows little sign of slowing. Some have pointed to a growing appreciation for the more curvaceous physiques of the likes of Sofia Vergara.19 But, it is useful to keep in mind that there was another time in the 20th century when voluptuous physiques came back into vogue: the 1950s. Norma Jeane Baker, known most commonly by her stage name Marilyn Monroe, was the iconic blond bombshell of the period. Being 5’10 and a size 16, she is oft-referenced by contemporary scholars who like to romanticize a simpler time of yore, when the yoke of slenderness was not quite so tight. Still, scholars have shown that this was a post-war blip on the radar screen; and though Marilyn was adored as a sex symbol, she too, towards the end of her career especially, was under constant pressure to train down (Churchwell 2005; Rosen 1973).

Since the tail end of the 20th century, particularly with the protests of Second Wave Feminists, the gods of fashion occasionally make gestures toward the rejection of

18 Randall’s claim that black women need to adopt leaner aesthetic ideals is seemingly at odds with white women’s call, since the 1980s, for freedom from the tyranny of slenderness. If the likes of Susan Bordo, Kim Chernin, and Naomi Wolf have argued that they deserve liberation from the oppression of thinness, Randall uses nothing less than the pathologization of black culture and black bodies in to appropriate, or at the very least, approach, an ideal that mirrors that of the mainstream white community. It rehearses what Audre Lorde in the indispensable Sister Outsider recognized as the black aspirant’s co-optation of bourgeois ideologies (Lorde 1984).

“ultra-svelte” models. In reality, the threatened dismissal of the slender aesthetic has been rehearsed for years, with very little movement on that front. As long as the specter of the fat, unhealthy, black woman continues to haunt the popular imagination, serving as a racial mirror, and the pathological alternative to slimness, it’s doubtful that we’ll see any real movement on that for years to come.

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