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# On Fat and Fattening: Agency, Materiality and Animality in the History of Corpulence

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*English abstract: This essay argues that modern perceptions of the agency of fat people have been inflected by older ways of thinking about fat and fattening. This claim rests on two basic points. Firstly, the potentially encumbering materiality of fat has long been cited as preventing movement in ways that frustrate agency. Secondly, fat has implications for agency by virtue of the power relationships implied in the act of fattening, which has been repeatedly framed in the West with reference to animal consumption. Discourses of fat and fattening are thus saturated with allegations of failed agency, whether by citing the confining materiality of fat itself or by associating the fattened person with abject animality. After exploring these claims with reference to select examples from classical antiquity, the essay presents surveys how similar ideas mobilized weight-loss discourses from the nineteenth century through the 1930s, by which time most of our current anti-fat thinking had been firmly entrenched.*

As the quest for slimmer, more attractive and healthy bodies is often presented as a project requiring sacrifice and discipline, diet and fitness discourses are freighted with the language of willpower and self-control. Those who critique the bodily ideals promoted by the fitness industry rightly take issue with its fantasies of unlimited agency and energy, sometimes by analyzing how individuals and groups are often constrained by structures that either limit the number of realizable choices available to them or thwart what little agency they are able to exercise. One might expect medical practitioners to adopt a more balanced perspective than those in the fitness business, but such is not the case. When it is not a response to physical appearance, the barely concealed disgust often registered by health care professionals is linked to fat people's perceived lack of willpower and noncompliance with medical advice.<sup>1</sup> In an apparent example of extreme self-mastery, anorexia is similarly viewed as more a matter of control than of appearance, though the two are closely related.<sup>2</sup> In general, then, fatness

1 R.M. Puhl and C.A. Heuer, "The Stigma of Obesity: A Review and Update," *Obesity* 17, 5 (2009): 941-64, L.R. Vartanian, "Disgust and Perceived Control in Attitudes toward Obese People," *International Journal of Obesity* 34 (2010): 1302-7.

2 Susan Bordo, *Unbearable Weight: Feminism, Western Culture, and the Body* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), 144-52.

is stigmatizing because “it is both visible and perceived to be controllable.”<sup>3</sup>

Despite the rhetoric of willpower that accompanies fitness discourses, we know that the desire for control does not neatly line up with the realities of weight gain. Bodies are, after all, situated in contexts that affect them in multiple ways, leading Bruno Latour to define the body as “*an interface that becomes more and more describable as it learns to be affected by more and more elements.*”<sup>4</sup> Sociologists of the body more or less concur with this view. “Reflexively embodied agents,” as Nick Crossley observes, “are ‘in charge’ of a body which may not always behave or perform as they would like, and this ‘misbehaviour’ needs to be factored into our accounts. Reflexive embodiment is not only shaped by the ideals, norms and practices of wider society but also by the variability of the material body itself.”<sup>5</sup> Fattening itself is a phenomenon not completely within the sphere of personal agency and often occurs without awareness, at least for a while. “The fattening body is very distanced from the lived body’s everyday experiences,” notes philosopher Talia Welsh: “it arrives slowly and when it has arrived is resistant to leaving.” The idea that one can reverse this incremental process through equally incremental acts of willpower is also problematic. Whereas “any one act of food restriction seems well within our control, over time such control is illusory since it is determined by forces that far exceed the embodiment of moving hand to mouth.”<sup>6</sup> This is one reason that narratives of failed weight loss recur frequently in dieting texts and blogs, along with confessions of shame and self-disgust. From a phenomenological standpoint many aspects of embodied life simply go on without the conscious intervention or awareness of the person. Drawing upon the insights of philosopher Drew Leder, Crossley points out that “We are, in important respects, our own blind spot,” which makes it difficult to monitor and alter processes that unfold without the subject’s awareness.<sup>7</sup>

If control over – and even awareness of – the body is less than sovereign when it comes to weight gain (and countless other phenomena), Westerners today do not need to be persuaded of the agentic

3 C.S. Crandall et al., “Anti-fat Prejudice,” in *Handbook of Prejudice, Stereotyping, and Discrimination*, ed. T. D. Nelson (New York: Psychology Press, 2009), 477 (469–87).

4 Bruno Latour, “How to Talk about the Body? The Normative Dimension of Science Studies,” *Body & Society* 10,2-3 (2004): 206 (205-229).

5 Nick Crossley, *Reflexive Embodiment in Contemporary Society* (Maidenhead, UK: Open University Press, 2006), 78.

6 Talia Welsh, “Fat Eats: A Phenomenology of Decadence, Food, and Health,” in *Food and Everyday Life*, ed. Thomas Conroy (New York: Lexington Books, 2014), 268 (257-74).

7 Crossley, *Reflexive Embodiment*, 76. See also Drew Leder, *The Absent Body* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990).

potentialities of fat. Frontline missives from the “war on obesity” are rife with images of invasion and counter-attack, of pre-emptive or defensive strikes against a kind of “terror” sometimes described as more dangerous than al-Qaeda. At times the enemy identified by “militarized medicine” is rather abstract – fatness or “obesity” – while at other times the target is adipose tissue or dietary fats, forms of “female/feminizing filth” that position fat bodies as “passively feminine regardless of their actual sex.”<sup>8</sup> But just because fat bodies are often positioned as passive does not mean that fat itself is viewed in such terms. Rather corpulence is seen as something that befalls those who, either through weakness or lack of vigilance, seem to allow it to happen, which is one reason why the metaphor of “invasion” is common in discussions of weight gain today. This sense that fat exercises a nefarious agency is heightened among anorexics who, as Megan Warin’s ethnographic research shows, devote considerable time to avoiding fats (corporeal and non-corporeal) that, even when applied to the skin, possess the ability “to move and seep into the cracks of one’s body.”<sup>9</sup> One cannot be surprised that an Anglo-American fitness slogan personifies fat as an enemy agent – one apparently capable of emotions – fully deserving punishment for its misdeeds: “sweat is fat crying.”

That adipose tissue is itself active rather than passive has recently been noted by scientists who observe its role in the synthesis of proteins, “many of which are released as enzymes, cytokines, growth factors, and hormones involved in overall homeostasis.”<sup>10</sup> While it is possible to depict such processes in neutral terms, among health activists such activity is often framed as a form of contamination capable of eliciting disgust. This is the message of a series of Australian TV ads run by the LiveLighter campaign, which explains on its website that fat “is now thought of as an endocrine organ that releases chemicals into the body” leading to a kind of self-poisoning strongly reminiscent of the constipation-related “autointoxication” fears of the early twentieth century.<sup>11</sup> Putting aside questions of external appearance and the problem of having a “grabbable gut,” LiveLighter shows that the real horror resides within by offering the viewer surgical footage of sticky

8 Lee F. Monaghan, *Men and the War on Obesity: A Sociological Study* (London: Routledge, 2008), 184-5.

9 Megan Warin, *Abject Relations: Everyday Worlds of Anorexia* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2010), 123.

10 Quoted in Elise Paradis, “Changing Meanings of Fat: Fat, Obesity, Epidemics, and America’s Children” (Doctoral Dissertation in Education, Stanford University, 2011), 25.

11 James C. Whorton, *Inner Hygiene: Constipation and the Pursuit of Health in Modern Society* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000).

yellow “toxic” fat pulsating creepily as it envelopes the internal organs.<sup>12</sup> Threatening to subvert the body from within, fat exercises an agency of its own.

As striking as these images are, and as much as scholars tend to link them to distinctly recent developments in the West, their ideational content is neither novel nor even particularly “modern.”<sup>13</sup> The history of fat and fatness is filled with references to a substance that “creeps” and “invades” the body, initiating a process that “chokes” and “suffocates” the person who is eventually rendered a kind of “slave” trapped in a “prison” of fat. These are ancient tropes that, while frequently citing the deficient willpower of the person, afford fat and/or fatness a surprising degree of agency in its own right. To observe that this or that foodstuff “is fattening” accords to the substance a degree of power so that “if I eat this it will do something to me.” To struggle against fatness is not only to engage with one’s appetites and comforts, but to grapple with a material adversary that seems driven by its own agenda. The perennial perception of corpulence as evidence of failed agency plays a critical role in the stigmatization of fat people today as being lazy, dull, slow, sleepy, and even stupid – in fact, as not being fully conscious “persons” able to care and take responsibility for themselves. While hardly the only way in which fat people have been viewed, such ideas are rooted in ancient perceptions of fat as a material substance as well as ideas about certain non-human animals that are fattened for consumption by others.

This article examines the relationship between fat and agency from a broader historical perspective than is commonly adopted in the field of fat studies. Drawing upon sources from a variety of periods, it argues that modern perceptions of the problematic agency of fat people have been inflected by older ways of thinking about fat and fattening. This claim rests on two basic points. Firstly, the material qualities of fat act upon the person in ways that call into question the sovereignty of the human will. In particular, as a substance that is thick, soft, and capable of adding weight to the body, fat has historically been cast as an encumbering materiality that can prevent the free movement of the limbs even as it seems to anchor the “soul” in ignoble flesh. If, following Plato, the body

12 <http://livelighter.com.au/the-facts/about-toxic-fat>, accessed September 11, 2014. See also Deborah Lupton, “Revolt Bodies: The Pedagogy of Disgust in Public Health Campaigns.” Sydney Health & Society Group Working Paper No. 3 (Sydney: Sydney Health & Society Group, 2013), and Christopher E. Forth, “Fat and Disgust, or, the Problem of ‘Life in the Wrong Place,’” in *Le dégoût. Histoire, Langage, Politique et Esthétique d’une Emotion Plurielle*, ed. Michel Delville, Andrew Norris and Viktoria von Hoffmann (Liège, Belgium: Presses Universitaires de Liège, 2015), 41-60.

13 Christopher E. Forth, “The Qualities of Fat: Bodies, History, and Materiality,” *Journal of Material Culture* 18,2 (2013): 135-54.

could be viewed as the “prison of the soul,” by having a potentially immobilizing effect fat epitomized corporeality’s incarcerating potential. Closely related to this point is the article’s second claim: fat has implications for agency by virtue of the unstable power relationship implied in the act of fattening, which has been repeatedly framed in the West with reference to predatory animals that devour what belongs to others as well as domesticated animals fattened for consumption. Discourses of fat and fattening are thus saturated with allegations of failed agency, whether by citing the confining materiality of fat itself or by associating the fattened person with abject animality.<sup>14</sup> After exploring these claims about materiality and animality with reference to select examples from classical antiquity, the essay presents a brief overview of how similar ideas mobilized weight-loss discourses from the nineteenth century through the 1930s, by which time most of our current anti-fat thinking had been firmly entrenched.<sup>15</sup> By moving rather freely from the ancient to the modern this essay does not argue for an unbroken continuity across obviously diverse historical periods, nor does it seek to diminish the uniqueness of our contemporary concerns. Rather, faced with the commonplace assumption that our current anti-fat perceptions reflect distinctly “modern” developments,<sup>16</sup> it proposes that many of our current perceptions of fat may also be seen as amalgams of the archaic and the recent.

## Fat and Fatness

The very term “fat” is itself a source of some controversy and misunderstanding. For many activists it has become a fighting word, prompting some to observe defensively that “fat” is really just “an adjective, not an attack.”<sup>17</sup> But “fat” is not only an adjective potentially conveying value judgments about the size and shape of the body, but a

14 “Deprived of the human/animal hierarchy, racism and other forms of exclusion would lack the pejorative metaphors that animal alterity provides.” Christopher Peterson, *Bestial Traces: Race, Sexuality, Animality* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2013), 8.

15 Georges Vigarello, *Les métamorphoses du gras: histoire de l’obésité* (Paris: Seuil, 2010).

16 Scholarly claims that people in the ancient and premodern periods celebrated fat are widespread. For example, see Elena Levy-Navarro, *The Culture of Obesity in Early and Late Modernity* (Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave, 2008) and Amy E. Farrell, *Fat Shame: Stigma and the Fat Body in American Culture* (New York: NYU Press, 2011).

17 “Fat is an adjective, not an attack,” August 6, 2010, accessed August 26, 2015, <http://www.deeplyproblematic.com/2010/08/fat-is-adjective-not-attack.html>, August 6, 2010.

noun referring to material properties that are subject – but not entirely reducible – to cultural interpretation. Insofar as “fat” cannot be fully equated with the corporeal state of “being” or “looking fat,” it has a cultural valence in excess of its role in producing corpulence. Regardless of where we direct our scholarly gaze, the complex materiality of fat exceeds our current preoccupations with fatness.<sup>18</sup>

If we accept that fat is a noun as well as an adjective, to understand its role in agency we may also approach it as a *thing* in anthropologist Ian Hodder’s definition of the term. Like all “things,” fat fits into the category of contained entities that “create bundles of presence or duration in the continual flows of matter, energy and information.” Despite its lack of definite form, fat participates in the broadest sense of objectness when we consider that the word *object* is derived from the idea of “throwing in the way.”<sup>19</sup> Broadly construed as an object, fat has the capacity to assert itself, to resist or “object” in its relationship with subjects. It thus shares in what Hodder calls the “objectness, the stand-in-the-wayness to things that resists, that forms, that entraps and entangles.”<sup>20</sup> Although capable of possessing secondary agency derived from humans, fat also exercises “primary agency” in that it acts “in the world as a result of processes of material interaction, transformation and decay.”<sup>21</sup> As a substance, then, fat possesses the potential to thwart human intentions. Like any object, it can seemingly “object” to our wishes as it pursues its own agendas. Hodder thus echoes Bruno Latour’s point that, insofar as an object “might authorize, allow, afford, encourage, permit, suggest, influence, block, render possible, forbid, and so on,” it is fair to say that “*any thing* that does modify a state of affairs by making a difference is an actor – or, if it has no figuration yet, an actant.”<sup>22</sup>

That fat exercises agency in ways that may frustrate the intentions of human subjects is evident in scientific observations about its role as an “active” tissue, but we can also detect its agentic potentialities when we approach fats and oils as lipids. As material substances dietary lipids endow foods with particular tactile qualities, notably viscosity and lubricity, which contribute to their distinctive and appealing mouth-feel. As scientists working in lipodomics contend, “preferences for fat may be independent of the conscious ability to detect or assess the fat content of

18 Christopher E. Forth, “Materializing Fat,” in *Fat: Culture and Materiality*, ed. Christopher E. Forth and Alison Leitch (London: Bloomsbury, 2014), 3-16.

19 Ian Hodder, *Entangled: An Archaeology of the Relationships between Humans and Things* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012), 7.

20 *Ibid.*, 13.

21 *Ibid.*, 216.

22 Bruno Latour, *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor Network Theory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 71-2.

solid foods.”<sup>23</sup> The conscious perceptions and intentions of the human agent cannot account for all the things occurring at the level of biological processes. Viewing the self as “an impure, human-nonhuman assemblage,” political philosopher Jane Bennett approaches “edible matter as an actant operating inside and alongside humankind, exerting influence on moods, dispositions, and decisions.”<sup>24</sup> Drawing upon recent scientific research on the active role that lipids play in the body, Bennett describes how certain fatty acids have the potential to alter moods and attention levels, rendering prisoners less violent, schoolchildren more attentive, and bipolar persons less subject to dramatic emotional shifts. To engage in the act of eating is not simply to adopt the role of a subject who actively consumes passive objects, but “to enter into an assemblage in which the I is not necessarily the most decisive operator.”<sup>25</sup> But we need not descend to the microscopic level to see how fats challenge volition. In simple gustatory terms, William Miller observes, greasy and sweet things allure us with their taste. “They have the capacity to make us eat more of them than we wish; they are will-weakening or will-deviating.”<sup>26</sup> Such observations support Rachel Colls’ claim that fat may be viewed as “a form of bodily matter that is not only impinged upon by outside forces but has its own capacities to act and be active.”<sup>27</sup>

The notion that fat interferes with human agency, and that it can exercise a kind of agency of its own, is not a recent insight, but one that can be traced to antiquity. In fact, our modern denigration of fat has links to the classical validation of muscles as emblematic of masculinity and willpower. Agency in the West has not only been linked to the inner volition of individuals (i.e., the movements of the “soul”), but to those parts of the body considered most likely to put inner commands into action. Seemingly more responsive to willpower, muscles have been more closely linked to volition than internal organs that function independently of conscious intention. Historian Shigehisa Kuriyama sees in the movement from Homer to Plato the gradual development of a notion of

23 Adam Drewnowski and Eva Almiron-Roig, “Human Perceptions and Preferences for Fat-Rich Foods,” in *Fat Detection: Taste, Texture, and Post Ingestive Effects*, ed. Jean-Pierre Montmayeur and Johannes le Coutre (Boca Raton, FL: CRC Press, 2010), 274 (265-91).

24 Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010), xvii.

25 Ibid., 40.

26 William Ian Miller, *The Anatomy of Disgust* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997), 122. See also Deborah Gewertz and Frederick Errington, *Cheap Meat: Flap Food Nations in the Pacific Islands* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2010), 19-24.

27 Rachel Colls, “Materialising Bodily Matter: Intra-action and the Embodiment of ‘Fat,’” *Geoforum* 38 (2007): 358 (353-65).



the human agent whose muscular activities express the volition of the soul: “the rise of the preoccupation with muscles . . . is inextricably intertwined with the emergence of a particular conception of personhood. . . . Interest in the muscularity of the body was inseparable from a preoccupation with the agency of the self.”<sup>28</sup>

This emerging contrast between the firmness of muscularity and the flabbiness of fat (or, excessive fleshiness in general) was especially pronounced in male bodies, which were considered far more active than those of females. As will be discussed below, Greek and Roman culture maintained conflicting views of large bodies that could be admired as evidence of power and status or condemned as proof of effeminate luxury. Viewed in medical terms as a kind of cold “residue” of nutriment that gathers in certain bodily regions, fat has been treated as (among other things) an insensate and even foreign material deposited in the body through an intemperate diet, lack of exercise, or simply residing in a moist and cold environment. Regardless of how it came to accumulate, too much fat was seen as interfering with motility, promoting infertility, and even blocking cognition itself.<sup>29</sup> According to the ancient science of physiognomy, fleshiness diminished the visible articulation of muscles and joints to create a “feminine” look in males that undermined ideals of virile hardness and agency. In fact, soft and flabby flesh could speak volumes about a person’s character. The pseudo-Aristotelian *Physiognomics*, which influenced Roman and medieval views of the body, linked personal character to bodily traits like shape, color, facial expression, and skin texture, as well as to physical actions like movement and voice. Among the beneficial signs of the brave man were “strong and large” bones and sides of the body with a “broad and flat belly” whereas excess flesh betokened foolishness and gluttony.<sup>30</sup> The Hippocratic authors had attributed similar qualities to those “fleshy, ill-articulated, moist, lazy, and generally cowardly” populations residing in fertile regions where the “fat” soil meant that food could be produced with little

28 Shigehisa Kuriyama, *The Expressiveness of the Body and the Divergence of Greek and Chinese Medicine* (New York: Zone Books, 1999), 144, 146. A popular misconception holds that muscle can actually *turn into* fat when one stops exercising regularly. Anahad O’Connor, “The Claim: Muscle Turns to Fat When You Stop Working Out,” *The New York Times*, July 26, 2005, accessed August 26, 2015, [http://www.nytimes.com/2005/07/26/health/nutrition/26real.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2005/07/26/health/nutrition/26real.html?_r=0).

29 Susan E. Hill, *Eating to Excess: The Meaning of Gluttony and the Fat Body in the Ancient World* (Santa Barbara, CA: Praeger, 2011), 68.

30 Aristotle, *Physiognomics*, in *Minor Works*, trans. W. S. Hett (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1936), 93, 99-101, 115-7; Kuriyama, *Expressiveness*, 134.

effort,<sup>31</sup> but these were often the same traits attributed to domesticated animals fattened for human consumption through restrictions on diet and movement.<sup>32</sup> In the case of humans great masses of flesh were seen as supplemental to – and thus not really *part of* – the “true” body which was perceived as being neither too thin nor too fat.<sup>33</sup>

Given the cultural devaluation of “softness” that circulated widely in Greece and Rome, cautionary tales about the effects of luxurious living were sometimes spun about Asiatic tyrants incapacitated by fat. The third century writer Aelian tells the story of the tyrant Dionysius of Heraclea, whose habitual gluttony caused him to gain so much weight that he found it difficult to breathe and, out of shame, held audiences while seated behind a chest that concealed all but his face. His physicians recommended passing long needles into his ribs and stomach while he was in a deep sleep so that, by passing through his fat – which, because “it was insensitive, and in a sense not part of him” – they could locate flesh that was “not transformed by the excess of fat.”<sup>34</sup> Ptolemy VII’s son Alexander was reputed to have been so fat that he could not take a leisurely stroll without “two men to lean upon as he walked.” Worse, perhaps, was the fate of the self-indulgent King Magas of Cyrene, who was so “weighted down with monstrous masses of flesh in his last days” that he “choked himself to death because he was so fat, never taking any exercise and always eating quantities of food.”<sup>35</sup>

In addition to providing the conceptual tools for the racialized antifat stereotypes that abounded in the nineteenth century, classical examples suggest that the materiality of fat possessed an agency of its own, encumbering and suffocating bodies in ways that threw into relief lapses of human volition. Possessing the qualities of softness and flabbiness, fat has functioned since antiquity as the moral and physical “other” of muscle and sinew, whether this tension has been manifested literally in the validation of “hard” and “taut” bodies over “soft” ones, or figuratively through references to a “softness” of character and a lack of willpower. One could propose that the cultural stock of the fat and flabby has often

31 Hippocrates, *Airs, Waters, Places*, in *Hippocrates I*, trans. W. H. S. Jones (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1957), xxiv, 40-60, 137.

32 Pliny, *Histoire naturelle, livre XI*, trans. A. Ernout (Paris: Société d’édition « Les Belles Lettres », 1947), Book XI, LXXIX, 559.

33 Karine Karila-Cohen, “Le gourmands grec sont-ils bien en chair?” 131-2 (109-32), in *Le corps du gourmand*, ed. Karine Karila-Cohen and Florent Quellier (Rennes: Presses universitaires de Rennes, 2012).

34 Aelian, *Historical Miscellany*, trans. N. G. Wilson (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997), 291-31.

35 Athenaeus, *The Deipnosophists*, trans. Charles Burton Gulick (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1933), V: 493-7.

declined whenever muscularity and willpower have been privileged. If muscle is the volitional tissue par excellence, then, as a generalized flabbiness fatness may materializes the lack of willpower that disqualifies one from “embodied citizenship” in Western culture.<sup>36</sup> As the next section shows, the process of fattening offered a more pronounced example of failed agency.

## Fat and Fattening

Although largely ignored in contemporary analyses of fat stigma, the ambiguities surrounding eating and feeding (or consuming and devouring) are crucial for the social dynamics that fattening seems to crystallize. Such issues are central to what the sociologist Claude Fischler sees as “a fundamental conception, apparently very archaic and (perhaps) universal, of the social bond” in which food (i.e., wealth) is not created but shared. In this zero-sum situation, traces of which may be detected even in modern developed countries, individuals and groups relate to one another like communicating vessels whereby those who consume more than their share do so at the expense of others. This may be experienced not only as illegitimately taking the rightful share of another, but of nourishing oneself on “the very substance of another” that amounts to a form of vampirism or even cannibalism.<sup>37</sup> This is why Fischler, putting aside the aesthetic issue of bodily appearance, argues against imagining utopias long past in which fatness was unequivocally celebrated. Insofar as the corpulent seemed to thrive on the substance of others, it is safer to conclude that “the figure of the fat man is profoundly ambivalent.”<sup>38</sup>

Historically minded scholars are aware of how this ambiguity has been played out in the West, where representations of social elites as fat have been capable of signifying power (and thus an ability to act) as well as oppression, specifically when said elites seem to fatten themselves on what belongs to others.<sup>39</sup> What gives this ambiguity its force is the more basic fact that eating refers to a biological activity that people share with non-human animals, which is why nourishing oneself on “the very substance of another” inevitably raises the specter of “savage” or

36 Ana Carden-Coyne, *Reconstructing the Body: Classicism, Modernism, and the First World War* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 4.

37 Claude Fischler, *L'Homnivore. Le goût, la cuisine et le corps* (Paris: Odile Jacob, 2001), 346.

38 Ibid., 337.

39 Annie Duprat, “Obèses et dévoreurs: le corps dans le caricature politique,” in Karila-Cohen and Quellier, *Le corps du gourmand*, 272 (271-83).

“animalistic” behavior, one effect of which has been a recurring tendency in the West to draw analogies between gluttony and corpulence and the bodies and behavior of cows, pigs, bears, etc.<sup>40</sup> Of particular concern here, though, is the unequal power relationship between human and non-human animals that feeding and fattening have historically evoked. Consider the French term, *l’engrais*. In addition to denoting manure, a substance whose fecundity was linked to its intrinsic greasiness or “fatness,” the word also referred to the act of putting animals to pasture in order to fatten them for slaughter (*mettre à l’engrais*; *tenir à l’engrais*). In addition to evoking the scent of excrement, then, when viewed from the perspective of animal bodies fattening also carried a whiff of subordination and violence. Something similar occurs in English. The Oxford English Dictionary reveals that the verb “to feed,” which during the eighteenth century meant the same thing as “to grow fat,” could refer to the grazing of animals as well as “feeding on” someone else, or parasitically living at someone else’s expense. The verb could thus place one in a position of agency (*to take food*; *to eat*) or subjection, as in the nineteenth-century phrase *to feed off*, meaning “to fatten (an animal) for sale or slaughter.” The ambiguity of “feeding” is also at the root of the term “obesity.” As the past participle of the Latin verb *obedere* (to eat away, eat into), the term *obesus* originally meant “skinny, all skin and bone” but over time developed to refer instead to one “who devours.”<sup>41</sup>

We can probe this ambivalence with reference to the Romans, among whom fat elites could indeed be viewed in positive terms. Research into aristocratic portraiture suggests that, at least during the late Republican era, corpulence was a personal feature that could be highlighted and even exaggerated in order to underscore the character of an individual. This “respectable minority tradition” could even enhance the subject’s flesh in order to signify energetic strength and power.<sup>42</sup> In this sense the fattened elite seems to embody agency and power. Yet such positive depictions of patrician corpulence are complicated by suspicions that, rather than

40 For example, see Jérôme Wilgaux, “Gourmands et gloutons dans les sources physiognomiques antiques,” in Karila-Cohen and Quellier, *Le corps du gourmand* (23-36), and Florent Quellier, “Du ventre au palais. Le corps du gourmand dans les traités de civilité (XVe-début XIXe siècle)” (57-89), in Karila-Cohen and Quellier, *Le corps du gourmand*, 57-89.

41 Christine Hénault, “Eating Beyond Certainties,” in *From Polysemy to Semantic Change: Towards a Typology of Lexical Semantic Associations*, ed. Martine Vanhove (Amsterdam: Johns Benjamins Publishing Co., 2008), 293 (291-301).

42 R. R. R. Smith, “The Public Image of Licinius I: Portrait Sculpture and Imperial Ideology in the Early Fourth Century,” *Journal of Roman Studies* 87 (1997): 191-2 (170-202), see also Anthony Corbeill, *Controlling Laughter: Political Humor in the Late Roman Republic* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996), 139-43.

being in full possession of themselves, such people were subject to forces that controlled them, such as irrational appetites that have been given free rein. They reveal themselves, as Michel Foucault noted with regard to Hellenic culture, as being “in a state of nonresistance with regard to the force of pleasures.”<sup>43</sup> Bloated bodies were a common target of Roman satire that took aim at the corrupting effects that luxury could have on bodies and minds. Such people seemed as if they were mindlessly feeding, propelled along by appetites they would no longer control. Insofar as devouring threatens to call into question the agency of the one who devours, the ambivalence that Fischler rightly observes may be even more profound than he recognizes.

In such cases the reference to agriculture and animality is inescapable: one of the main functions of fattened domesticated animals is to be slaughtered and consumed by humans. The agricultural writer, Varro, had no doubt of the subordination that the weight of fat entailed for barnyard fowl: “These are shut into a warm, narrow, darkened place, because movement on their part and light free them from the slavery of fat.”<sup>44</sup> Even when having grown fat through feasting, an act that under the right circumstances could affirm the mastery of diners over their food, the fattening of humans has never been free of subtle links to animality. We have seen above how the Hippocratics viewed populations of “soft” people living on “fat” lands, and Greek moralists registered contempt for those who seemed to emulate the more placid of beasts. Plato himself wondered what people would be like in a society that freely provided basic necessities and eliminated the need for vigorous effort to obtain them: “is each of them to live out his life getting fattened up, like a cow?” In his view such people had become fit for the slaughter by stronger and hardier types: “it’s appropriate that an idle, soft-spirited, and fattened animal usually is ravaged by one of those other animals who have been worn very hard with courage and labors.”<sup>45</sup> If Plato modeled human hierarchies on animal relationships, the Stoics extended these ideas in their sharp criticisms of luxuries that threatened to reduce men to the level of the most ignoble of beasts. Seneca described how dissolute fat men who keep late hours and get no exercise are like birds being fattened for the slaughter, except that – unlike animals that have been captured by

43 Michel Foucault, *The Use of Pleasure*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Vintage, 1990), 84.

44 Varro, *De Re Rustica*, trans. W. D. Hooper and H. B. Ash (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1934), 481-2.

45 Plato, *The Laws*, trans. Thomas L. Pangle (New York: Basic Books, 1980), 806d-807b (196-7).

humans – such men are personally responsible for the fact that “their idle bodies are overwhelmed with flesh.”<sup>46</sup>

Insofar as self-mastery was often viewed as an intrinsically masculine attribute, “virile by definition,”<sup>47</sup> the subjection that fattening could imply was implicitly gendered. It is not simply that women’s bodies were thought to be “naturally” softer and fleshier than male bodies, although such claims have certainly appeared in medical writing since Hippocratic times.<sup>48</sup> What was at stake were the *circumstances* that might cause a properly firm and solid body to become soft and flabby, and here the agricultural imagination continued to supply food for thought. The history of meat-eating is permeated by sexualized images of women as docile, meek and/or cunning animals (birds, rabbits, foxes, etc.) to be “hunted” and “consumed” by intrepid men whose masculine status is reaffirmed through more-or-less figurative “hunting” and “slaughtering,” or less flatteringly as cows or pigs that invokes the deliberate fattening of animals for consumption. “The entire system operates as if women are perceived by men to be analogous to hunted, or else farmed, meat.”<sup>49</sup> While this fattening of animals for consumption reveals important homologies to the domination of women that, as we will see, became especially operative during the nineteenth century, it is also true that entire species are “feminized” through fattening, regardless of the sex of individual animals. As every farmer has known since antiquity, certain male animals tend to grow fatter once they have been castrated, with the result being that their flesh becomes more tender and palatable while their dispositions may grow softer and more docile.<sup>50</sup> The same was said to hold true for eunuchs who, as an anonymous Latin physiognomy text from the fourth century claimed, may be recognized by such traits as “fat calves, thick feet like lumps of meat, a feminine voice, women’s words, all limbs and joints without vigour, lax and loose.”<sup>51</sup> Animal analogies thus

46 Seneca, *Ad Lucilium Epistulae Morales*, trans. Richard M. Gummere (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1979), III: 412-3.

47 Foucault, *Use of Pleasure*, 83.

48 Ann Ellis Hanson, “Conception, Gestation, and the Origin of Female Nature in the *Corpus Hippocraticum*,” *Helios* 19,1-2 (1992): 48, 51-2, Lesley Dean-Jones, “The Cultural Construct of the Female Body in Classical Greek Science,” in *Sex and Difference in Ancient Greece and Rome*, ed. Mark Golden and Peter Toohey (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2003), 188-9.

49 Nick Fiddes, *Meat: A Natural Symbol*, London: Routledge, 1991), 151.

50 Noëlie Vialles, *Animal to Edible*, trans. J. A. Underwood (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 128-9.

51 Manfred Horstmanshoff, “Who is the true Eunuch? Medical and Religious Ideas about Eunuchs and Castration in the Works of Clement of Alexandria,” in *From Athens to Jerusalem: Medicine in Hellenized Jewish Lore and in Early Christian Literature*, ed.

provide the deepest cultural sources for the notion that fattening represents an abdication of (implicitly masculine) agency leading to a fleshy incarceration and eventual slaughter and/or consumption.

Voluntarist activity, especially when linked to muscular exertion and the generation of bodily heat considered most appropriate to male bodies, provided a status shield protecting elites from the potential stigma that excess flesh might provoke. In Rome a fat elite could enjoy public esteem so long as he continued to demonstrate energy and a capacity for work. Yet if his corpulence prevented him from leading an active and assertive public life, then his accumulated fat – as well as the fattening that brought this about – could be construed as a symptom of effeminate softness.<sup>52</sup> It was thus possible to condemn leaders who, once renowned for feats of bravery, grew fat and complacent during peacetime. Giving voice to what classicists sometimes call the “Spartan mirage” – which includes the recurring story of how fat Spartans were punished and threatened with banishment – Plutarch maintained that regular campaigns and warfare were good for kings. In his *Moralia* this great admirer of Sparta described how the once valiant King Attalus II of Pergamon had been so “completely enfeebled by long inactivity and peace” that he suffered the disgrace of being “actually fattened like a sheep” by his chief minister Philopoemen.<sup>53</sup> Although there is no space here to elaborate on the legacy of such images, it is worth noting in passing that the Middle Ages extended this ancient contempt for fattened monarchs whose bloated frames prevented them from riding and fighting, as if the taste for food and comfort had overpowered their hunger for glory.<sup>54</sup> The invective heaped upon such failed rulers borrowed liberally from agricultural models. In the twelfth century the troubadour Bertran de Born echoed this fear of corruption through too much peace: “War is no noble word, when it’s waged without fire and blood for a king or great potentate whom anyone can scorn and call a liar,

Samuel Kottek and Manfred Horstmanshoff (Rotterdam: Erasmus Publishing, 2000), 103 (101-118).

52 Sara Elise Phang, *Roman Military Service: Ideologies of Discipline in the Late Republic and Early Principate* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 264-6.

53 Plutarch, *Moralia*, vol. X, trans. Harold North Fowler (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1960), 123-5. For a general discussion of the Spartan ideal in relation to fat, see Christopher E. Forth, “Spartan Mirages: Fat, Masculinity, and ‘Softness,’” *Masculinidades y cambio social/Masculinities and Social Change*, 1,3 (October 2012): 240-66.

54 Sander Gilman, *Fat Boys: A Thin Book* (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 2004), 12.

and he just relaxes and fattens up! A young man who doesn't feed on war soon becomes fat and rotten [*gras e savais*]."<sup>55</sup>

These select examples suggest that fattening, as well as the feeding that produces it, has complicated implications for agency that have extended well beyond the classical era. Since antiquity European nobles have partly displayed their power through the quality and quantity of the food they consumed. As such they could be likened to predatory animals that "feed" upon the meek and powerless. The physical strength that was so closely associated with the warrior caste of noblemen, as well as the meat-eating that by the Middle Ages would distinguish noble fare from the mostly grain-based diets of the peasantry, placed great emphasis on the ability to eat to satiety, thus expressing in alimentary terms a nobleman's ability to dominate others.<sup>56</sup> Yet the seemingly positive images of wealth, status and power radiated by elite corpulence were potentially complicated by niggling questions about the circumstances surrounding such fattening. To *grow fat* through good living could signify agency, status and enjoyment. It could even indicate a predatory role in which a person "devoured" others in a manner commensurate with his or her power. But this impression remained haunted by the notion that such a person had abdicated self-mastery by succumbing to more powerful appetites, thus bringing about an internal reversal of power relations resulting in a sort of *self-fattening* that could be considered ignoble and demeaning. When it did not imply a kind of infantile position vis-à-vis a mother or caregiver, to be fattened by someone else, in the manner of a pig or chicken, could suggest a resemblance to docile livestock destined for the chop. If we recall that fat has itself been viewed as an intrinsically encumbering substance, we can see how the materiality of fat literally incorporated the power relationships that fattening could represent. As the next and final section shows, such ideas persisted well beyond the classical era, albeit in reworked and updated forms.

55 Wendy Pfeffer, *Proverbs in Medieval Occitan Literature* (Gainesville, FL: University Press of Florida, 1997), 56.

56 See Massimo Montanari, "Peasants, Warriors, Priests: Images of Society and Styles of Diet," 179 (251-67) and Antoni Riera-Melis, "Society, Food, and Feudalism," 260 (251-67), in *Food: A Culinary History from Antiquity to the Present*, ed. Jean-Louis Flandrin and Massimo Montanari, trans. Clarissa Botsford, Arthur Goldhammer, Charles Lambert, Frances M. López-Morillas and Sylvia Stevens (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999).



## Materiality and Animality, c. 1850s-1930s

Leaping over centuries of undeniable change in how Western culture came to view bodies, this final section considers how ancient ways of conceptualizing the relationship between fat and agency continued to be imagined in the modern era, with special attention devoted to British, French, and American sources from the mid nineteenth to the early twentieth centuries. Of the several changes that took place during the modern period, especially a pronounced idealization of slender bodies beginning around 1900, three developments are critical for understanding the changing terrain on which our contemporary antifat sentiments took root. Firstly, the ambiguous vitality that had once been attributed to fatty substances fell into decline towards the end of the eighteenth century, after which fat was much more likely to be denigrated as a kind of “filth” connected to lower-class and non-white bodies.<sup>57</sup> Secondly, as exploration revealed more details about the world beyond European borders ethnographic reports and travelers’ tales began to recount with disgust and contempt how certain African and Asian populations relished fatness to the point of incapacitation, at times deliberately fattening girls in ways that Europeans likened to the treatment of livestock. In so doing the European cultural imagination drew explicitly upon classical antecedents to offer a more pronounced racial dimension to emerging obsessions with thinness around 1900.<sup>58</sup> What connected these two developments was, thirdly, a more heightened aversion to reminders of human animality and organicity that had been developing since the early modern era as well as a more pronounced concern with personal and racial “hygiene” that emerged in the early twentieth century.<sup>59</sup> As Westerners began to insist upon their status as clean, self-contained, and white, and thus to imagine themselves as standing outside of the cycles of organic life, they were challenged by the menace posed by an invading and potentially incapacitating substance. The discussion that follows offers brief glimpses into how the material agency of fat and the animalization of fattening complicated these modern ideals.

57 Forth, “Melting Moments,” 92-100.

58 Christopher E. Forth, “Fat, Desire, and Disgust in the Colonial Imagination,” *History Workshop Journal* 73, 1 (Spring 2012): 211-39.

59 Carolyn Merchant, *The Death of Nature: Women, Ecology, and the Scientific Revolution* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1980). As Christina Cogdell points out, “cleanliness often referred as much to having a pure hereditary lineage and unblemished moral record as it did to keeping one’s body and home free from dirt.” Cogdell, *Eugenic Design: Streamlining America in the 1930s* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004), 157.

If at the end of the nineteenth century “obesity” represented what a French physician called “the enemy of feminine beauty (in the West, at least),” then preventing this fatty “invasion” of the body was tantamount to repelling from the civilized self the creeping savagery that corpulence had come to represent.<sup>60</sup> Such impressions of fat as an alien invader of the civilized white body were widespread from the mid-nineteenth century onward. Defending his repeated use of the word “parasite” to describe the effects of adipose tissue on the body, in his wildly popular *Letter on Corpulence* the British diet reformer William Banting famously insisted that “if fat is not an insidious creeping enemy, I do not know what is.”<sup>61</sup> This claim was echoed decades later by the physician Leonard Williams. An outspoken critic of “obesity,” Williams supposed that aortic regurgitation, a heart condition in which the aortic valve does not close tightly, could be brought about by accumulated fat in the organ. Williams discouraged thinking about fat as being somehow inert. “There is something peculiarly repulsive in the thought of that small and innocent wad of fat lying along the coronary artery posing as a protector when in reality its purpose is to lie in wait.” This seemingly innocuous substance “begins its stealthy insinuating march towards the centre, to start a campaign of silent destruction, which it prosecutes with relentless industry.” Only when it reaches the tissue of the heart “does its work come to an end in the disaster which it has been preparing.” Making use of martial metaphors to describe “the sly and stealthy progress of this parasitic fat” as it makes its way to the heart, Williams confessed that it is “almost possible to persuade oneself that this wad of fat is possessed of a purpose; that its attack upon the very centre and mainspring of organic life is dictated by knowledge, and carried out on a diabolically effective scheme, devised of malice aforethought.”<sup>62</sup>

If in this particular case Williams’ concern was medical rather than aesthetic, readers of the French women’s magazine, *La Femme de France*, had every reason to believe that fat truly was “the enemy of beauty,” as the magazine pronounced in 1920. “Every woman knows it, and should fight it as soon as it appears.”<sup>63</sup> Many writers made use of metonymy that allowed the property of a thing (*l’embonpoint, l’obésité*) to stand in for the thing that effects that property (*la graisse*). “The more one allows oneself to be invaded by embonpoint, the more difficult it is to stop it.”<sup>64</sup> Hence the common metaphors of aggression and resistance used to market

60 Dr. E. Monin, *Hygiène de la beauté* (Paris: Octave Doin, 1890), 16-20.

61 William Banting, *Letter on Corpulence* (3rd ed.: London: Harrison, 1864), 43.

62 Leonard Williams, *Obesity* (London: Humphrey Milford, 1926), 38-9.

63 “La Ruche,” *La Femme de France*, no. 272 (25 July 1920): 5.

64 “La Ruche,” *La Femme de France*, no. 269 (4 July 1920): 3.

weight-loss products: "Don't let yourself be invaded by this enemy of beauty."<sup>65</sup> At times fatness was even invested with a kind of awareness, as if driven by the more or less conscious aim of murdering gracefulness: "obesity seizes beauty and suffocates it."<sup>66</sup> But this it accomplishes quietly, as a Dr Mestadier warned readers in one of his frequent articles on health: "Obesity does not begin all of a sudden; it insinuates itself sneakily [*sournoisement*], little by little, infiltrating the tissues, insidiously padding [*matelassant*] the cellular layer of the skin."<sup>67</sup> Here fatty tissue is accorded clear intentions. Its accumulation is the result of the will of a living substance that possessed feelings and that was smart enough to retreat when faced with muscle, that most agentic of bodily tissues. "Fat does not like effort and disappears with the play of muscles." Capable of being mischievous as well and lazy and cowardly, fat misbehaved in ways that demanded immediate correction: "Being active and sober, that's the sure way to prevent the misdeeds of fat [*les méfaits de la graisse*]."<sup>68</sup>

If the invasive agency of fat served to subvert the plans of human subjects, urban modernity's gradual erasure of the animal and organic from everyday life arguably sharpened repugnance towards fat. By 1900 the large urban centers that were once described as vast organisms were increasingly described in mechanical terms. By then the thousands of horses, cows and pigs that proliferated in nineteenth-century cities were linked to "animal" and "natural" categories that seemed unhygienic and inefficient in a world increasingly devoted to artifice and the mechanization of life.<sup>69</sup> One effect of the growing acceptance of mechanistic conceptions of bodies, which had been developing since the seventeenth century, was a corresponding denigration of those bodies that were too closely linked to sheer organicism and animality. This may be why, despite the growing popularity of mechanical imagery, agricultural common sense continued to play a role in perceptions of corpulence, mostly as a warning against allowing human beings to slip into degrading states of animality. After all, at this time the body was also imagined with reference to the vitalistic theories that since the

65 "La Ruche," *La Femme de France*, no. 230 (5 October 1919): 12.

66 "La Ruche," *La Femme de France*, no. 137 (23 December 1917): 3.

67 Dr Mestadier, "Le poids et la taille," *La Femme de France*, no. 332 (18 September 1921): 24.

68 Dr Mestadier, "Pour ne pas grossir," *La Femme de France*, no. 358 (19 March 1922): 24.

69 Peter Soppelsa, "The Instrumentalisation of Horses in Nineteenth-Century Paris," in *Anthropocentrism: Humans, Animals, Environments*, ed. Rob Boddice (Leiden: Brill, 2011), 245-64, Peter Atkins, "Animal Wastes and Nuisances in Nineteenth-Century London," in *Animal Cities: Beastly Urban Histories*, ed. Peter Atkins (Farnham: Ashgate, 2012), 19-51.

nineteenth century had insisted on the properly “spiritual” dimensions of human life.<sup>70</sup> Not only were vitalism and mechanism at times combined in the bodily ideals of the early twentieth century,<sup>71</sup> but to the extent that each provided ways of thinking about human perfectibility neither had much tolerance for banal animality. The popular beauty writer Ella Adelia Fletcher, who was also a noted theosophist, was among those who promoted a transcendence of animality: “Living to eat is debasing life to its lowest terms, on a plane with mere animal life, and the man or woman who does this often fails to evince even the instinct and discretion with which the higher order of beasts control their appetites.”<sup>72</sup> Hard-nosed medical authors concurred. Writing against the French practice of child-rearing known as “puericulture” that celebrated the plumpness of babies, the physician Armand Hemmerdinger retorted that “The value of a pig is measured according to weight, not that of a child.”<sup>73</sup>

Such associations between animality and primitivity relied upon stereotypes created during the age of European empires and pertained especially to the treatment of women. Female agency and emancipation were among the things promoted by those authors who objected to the forced fattening of non-Western girls as a form of brutal subjection. In the nineteenth century it was often claimed that excess fat “corrupts” female beauty, but readers were also reminded that, when encumbered by fat, “the soul is oppressed by the enormous weight of the substance” and thus impairs “all the functions of the understanding.”<sup>74</sup> Acknowledging subtle connections between desire and power, several commentators proposed that the pleasure that Asian and African men took in excessively fat females thinly concealed their tyrannical wish to dominate them. Variations on the claim that “Oriental ladies are fattened for matrimony,

70 James C. Whorton, *Nature Cures: The History of Alternative Medicine in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 10.

71 See Joan Tumblety, *Remaking the Male Body: Masculinity and the Uses of Physical Culture in Interwar and Vichy France* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), and Ina Zweiniger-Bargielowska, *Managing the Body: Beauty, Health, and Fitness in Britain, 1880-1939* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010).

72 Ella Adelia Fletcher, *The Woman Beautiful* (New York: Brentano's, 1901), 411.

73 Armand Hemmerdinger, *La fin du martyre de l'obèse* (Paris: J. Oliven, 1932), 19, on puericulture, see Peter N. Stearns, *Fat History: Bodies and Beauty in the Modern West* (New York: NYU Press, 1997).

74 Séjour de Lorraine, *Les secrets de la beauté du visage et du corps* (Paris: chez l'auteur, 1855), 31, 37. This text reiterates the point made a century earlier in Antoine Le Camus' well-known beauty manual *Abdeker*: “The Soul is overwhelm'd with the Weight of a huge Lump of Matter, and all the Functions of the Understanding are in such a languishing Condition, that it can shew no marks of its former Brightness. Antoine Le Camus, *Abdeker: or, the art of preserving beauty* (London: A. Millar, 1754), 25.

as we of this Western world fatten pigs for the market”<sup>75</sup> were made throughout the century, as were complaints about how the bodies of such women were rendered sensual, indolent and vain because their flesh had been “nourished at the expense of their souls.”<sup>76</sup>

Disgusted reactions at non-Western aesthetic appreciation for fat women were combined with outrage at the implications that such fattening had for female dignity. How, some wondered, could men in such cultures turn “the most excessive embonpoint, and the perpetual imprisonment that encourages it, into principles of honor, wisdom, and good taste”?<sup>77</sup> Disregarding the numerous ways in which Western culture imposed its own demands upon female bodies, many contended that compulsory fattening represented a crippling of women that rendered them immobile and stupid as well as unappealing. One thus claimed that the practice of force-feeding slave girls revealed a desire “to shackle the liberty of women under the burden of excessive embonpoint” not unlike the motivation behind the Chinese practice of foot-binding.<sup>78</sup> Mobilizing ancient agricultural wisdom to make a modern point, others proposed that true respect for women required being released from such fleshy prisons: “When birds endure captivity they get fat. Such are the prisoners of the Orient.”<sup>79</sup> Others looked beyond gender to propose that fattening reduced a human being to the level of sheer animality. “This is not obesity, this is fattening [*engraissement*],” emphasized one academic, a “horror” so degrading that finding a single comparative term to describe it would force one “to descend to relations that would be insulting for the human species.”<sup>80</sup>

Although it is unlikely that many of these commentators would have supported feminist causes, political imperatives accompanied these aesthetic exhortations to slim down. The American writer Vance Thompson, who in an earlier book had fretted over how many young and beautiful women had succumbed to the “tragedy of fat,”<sup>81</sup> deplored the historical conditions that reduced women to life in a “coop” in which they

75 Anna Kingsford, *Health, beauty, and the toilet. Letters to ladies from a lady doctor* (London: Frederick Warne and Co., 1886), 9.

76 Adèle Hommaire de Hell, “Les Arméniennes à Constantinople,” *La Revue de l'Orient: Bulletin de la Société Orientale*, 7 (1845): 138 (130-9).

77 Antoine-François-Félix Roselly de Lorgues, *La croix dans les deux mondes, ou la clef de la connaissance* (4th ed: Paris: L.-F. Hivert, 1847), 94-5.

78 Paul Belouino, *La femme: physiologie, histoire, morale* (Paris: Perisse Frères, [1845] 1853), 217.

79 Casimir Henrycy, *Les mœurs et costumes des peuples de l'Afrique et de l'Océanie* (Paris: Les principaux libraires, 1847), 82.

80 Joseph de Crozals, “Tunis,” *La Revue bleue* 18,9 (27 August 1881): 277 (275-86).

81 Vance Thompson, *Eat and Grow Thin: The Mahdah Menus* (New York: E.P. Dutton & Co., 1914), 3-4.

are fattened and subordinated to men. Africa offered a good example of this. According to Thompson, a certain chief from the Congo regularly “fattens his females up and uses them as cushions to sit on – or mattresses to sleep upon.”<sup>82</sup> Such transformations of females into sex toys, domestic animals, and perhaps even furniture, located fatness and fattening on the side of socially backward and misogynist values, though one did not need to be a feminist in order to deplore such practices. In addition to calling upon women to leave the prison of “coop-life,” Thompson even applauded sartorial reforms in which women might wear breeches: “As a matter of fact every woman who approaches, even, the normal type of humanity looks well in them. It is only the women, unhappy victims of life, who have had fat bred on to the wrong parts of their bodies by generations of coop-life indolence, who need shudder away from them.”<sup>83</sup> Similar ideas circulated in other countries, where the implications of treating women like livestock were sometimes coupled with reminders of what happened to animals systematically deprived of movement and light. When pondering corpulence, warned Armand Hemmerdinger, one should not confuse the perspective of the cook for that of the bird. Citing the inevitable fate of Strasbourg geese as well as pigs, he reminded women that the “breeder considers the beast to be ‘in good form’ [*en bon point*] when it is fat enough to be killed.”<sup>84</sup>

Advocates for women’s rights shared the idea that fatness was a form of domestic servitude that needed to be overcome. Those pressing for women’s suffrage saw the battle as being not simply about beauty and appearance, but about the personal qualities they hoped that their bodies might convey: not flabby sentimentality or weakness, but the courage, resolve and willpower that only slender bodies seemed to signify. The latter were dramatized when imprisoned suffragists went on hunger strikes and had to resist both their own hunger pangs and the force-feeding to which they were sometimes subjected.<sup>85</sup> But this was evident in women’s fitness movement as well, many of which were consistent with calls for female emancipation. German feminists like Anna Fischer-Dückelmann, for example, saw in women’s engagement with modern health and beauty regimens evidence of a fully developed female personality capable of achieving social and economic independence.<sup>86</sup> Beautification techniques thus enhanced female agency even as they

82 Vance Thompson, *Woman* (New York: E.P. Dutton & Co., 1917), 20.

83 Thompson, *Woman*, 136.

84 Hemmerdinger, *La fin du martyre*, 28.

85 Hillel Schwartz, *Never Satisfied: A Cultural History of Diets, Fantasies and Fat* (New York: Collier MacMillan Publishers, 1986), 124.

86 Michael Hau, *The Cult of Health and Beauty in Germany: A Social History, 1890–1930* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 72–5.

represented submission to aesthetic ideals.<sup>87</sup> Historian Amy Erdman Farrell thus rightly observes that “to the extent that feminism means claiming a place of equality and resisting the position of ‘other,’ it is no wonder that feminists have had a peculiar relationship to weight – both recognizing the way ideas about weight get wielded against women but also wanting to resist the stigma of ‘weak willed’ and ‘primitive’ that fatness connotes.”<sup>88</sup>

Amid growing claims that masculinity was under fire in the twentieth century, the idea that fattening is feminizing, and thus at odds with agency, was central to many calls for male weight-loss. Fat women might be “hard to tolerate,” claimed one fitness writer, but “it is absolutely impossible to look at an obese man without a feeling of disgust.”<sup>89</sup> Leonard Williams, whom we have already encountered, warned men not to be fooled if women seem to take pride in their swelling bodies “as a farmer takes in his well-fed animals,” for she probably has darker motives for fattening him up. “She realizes by a sort of hereditary sex instinct that a fat man is easy-going, yielding, uncritical; stupid in fact.” Demonstrating the ancient insight that informed his claim, Williams proposed that those women for whom this was not a purely instinctual reflex could consult Shakespeare’s claim (borrowed from Plutarch) that Julius Caesar wisely preferred to surround himself with lazy and sleepy fat men: “All tyrants know that they are safe with fat men, and the domestic tyrant is no exception.”<sup>90</sup> Modeled on perennial references to livestock that become fatter and more manageable after castration, this was a form of domestication that women just “know” as part of their evolutionary heritage. Williams was hardly the only one to make such claims. Drawing direct analogies between “the obese man and the animal being fattened for the kill [*l’animal à l’engrais*],” the French physician Francis Heckel described the former as “a monster ill-adapted to his human function.” Insofar as the act of fattening constitutes beauty only among pigs, sheep and cows, it was completely at odds with masculinity. “Fat devirilizes and emasculates.”<sup>91</sup>

87 Katharina Vester, “Regime Change: Gender, Class, and the Invention of Dieting in Post-Bellum America,” *Journal of Social History* 44,1 (2010): 39-70.

88 Farrell, *Fat Shame*, 115.

89 Amelia Summerville, *Why Be Fat? Rules for Weight-Reduction and the Preservation of Youth and Health* (New York: Frederick A. Stokes Co., 1916), 38.

90 Williams, *Obesity*, 3.

91 Francis Heckel, *Maigrir: pourquoi? comment?* (Paris : « La Renaissance du livre », 1930), 28.

## Conclusion

In an apparent reversal of early twentieth-century fears of housewives fattening their husbands like domestic animals, sexualized power relationship between those who feed and those who are fed is evident in the erotic fetish known as feederism, whose participants take special interest in becoming or helping others to become very fat. For many (usually) male feeders the thought of filling a woman to repletion and beyond combines agency and power with an eroticism that likens feeding to sexual penetration. In this subculture being “taken to immobility” represents complete commitment to the feeder-gainer relationship, even if this exists more as a male fantasy than a lived reality.<sup>92</sup> “Feedees” are thus often fattened and photographed or videoed so that their size and weight may be displayed on the internet. While it is sometimes claimed that feedees take an active role in their own fattening and obtain a sense of accomplishment when they achieve a certain weight,<sup>93</sup> a recent study shows that in the feeder/feedee relationship “men are still in control of the behavior and of how women are portrayed and treated as feedees.”<sup>94</sup> It is perhaps telling that more extreme feederism sites typically refer to feedees as “pigs” (see <http://www.extremefeeding.com/index.php/en/>) or that stories and personal ads posted on Fantasyfeeder.com often discuss the feeding individual in terms of livestock or cattle. Feeding and fattening thus retain their ancient links to animality as well as an encumbering materiality capable of undermining agency, especially when real or fantasized immobility is seen as an ideal.

All of this suggests the durability of certain ideas about the body and eating that have continued to circulate in Western culture since antiquity, albeit in selective and altered ways. To borrow the phrase of George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, fat and fattening are bound up with the very “metaphors we live by,” just as the language of the firm and the flabby permeates our everyday lives, as do the closely related oppositions between hard and soft, masculine and feminine, human and animal.<sup>95</sup>

92 Don Kulick, “Porn,” in *Fat: The Anthropology of an Obsession*, ed. Don Kulick and Anne Meneley (New York: Tarcher, 2005), 82 (77-92).

93 It is not only women who engage in such practices. As a gay man identifying himself as “fatten me up to explode” (currently: 150lbs, goal: 799lbs) posted on the Fantasy Feeder website on 2 July 2015, “Hi, I am looking for someone to feed me till I cant move anymore. Then I wanna keep eating and eating and eating. I wanna just keep growing. love to get fat :)” <http://fantasyfeeder.com/gainers?rowStart=10>.

94 Ariane Prohaska, “Feederism: Transgressive Behavior or Same Old Patriarchal Sex?” *International Journal of Social Science Studies* 1,2 (2013): 111 (104-12).

95 George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980).



However unstable, contradictory and deconstructable they may be, these oppositional pairs are so durable that they continue to structure perceptions even when we consciously resist the urge to insert individuals into these categories. Indeed, in addition to the racial dimensions of antifat invective, it might be said that stereotypes about fat people today are still haunted by the niggling specter of animality that attends so much of our stereotyping. Thus, if fat people have been likened to “beasts,” as one disturbingly dehumanizing blog today insists,<sup>96</sup> it may have as much to do with aesthetic claims as with challenges that animalistic fattening poses for agency. Indeed, to characterize fat as a form of “blubber,” or to describe corpulent people as whales, pigs, cows, etc., reveals a deeply ingrained tendency to invoke certain animals as ways of denigrating individuals. Nor have we lost connections between feeding, power and animality. Greg Critser suggests that typically more healthy and slender white elites are happy to align the poor with livestock whose consumption reduces the possibility of their demanding real social change: “fat people do not threaten our way of life; their angers entombed in flesh, they are slowed, they are softened, they are *fed*.”<sup>97</sup>

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96 “The Crusade Against Fat People: Saving the World from One Disgusting Beast at a Time,” <https://wehatefatpeople.wordpress.com/>.

97 Greg Critser, “Let Them Eat Fat: The Heavy Truths about American Obesity,” *Harper’s Magazine*, March 2000, 47 (41-7).