

## **Fat and Class Prejudice: America's Two-Body Society**

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Entering the United States at a major East Coast airport, the expatriate is struck by differences in bodies. A gulf of 50 pounds or more appears to separate the physiques of the people who service this large airport and the images of bodies on virtually every advertisement board that adorns its walls and every magazine cover that fills its newsstands: Those cleaning the bathrooms, pushing the baggage carts, running the security checks—often people of color—are by European standards alarmingly overweight if not obese. By contrast, those featured in the huge advertisements on the airport's walls and magazine covers present seemingly perfect or perfected, usually white, bodies. Next to celebrity magazines featuring the iconicized bodies of Britney Spears or Gwyneth Paltrow are an array of publications directed specifically at audiences interested in improving their physiques.

What's wrong about this picture? For the author of this essay who recently published a book about the cultural implications of eating disorders in America, it is the realization that anorexia and bulimia, despite some literature to the contrary,<sup>i</sup> remain problems and prerogatives of a relatively select and monied few. Overwhelmingly, the leading American eating disorder is the obesity which is disproportionately represented by those who struggle economically, those individuals whom I see working minimum low jobs at the international airport.

America is currently developing into a two-body society that mirrors the economic divisions between the privileged and the underprivileged. The increasing gulf between the affluent and mean wage earners that began during the Reagan administration has continued till today. As *The Economist* reports: "The wealthiest 1% of all households controls 38% of national wealth, while the bottom 80% of households holds only 17%" ("Inequality" 44). And George W. Bush's axing of the inheritance tax and reduction of capital gains taxes are measures likely to benefit only "the top 20% of households" thus increasing "the already wide gap between rich and poor" (45). The dis-

parity in wealth finds a compliment in divisions between unfit and hard-bodied Americans. The 'buff' body in its male and female variations stands in radical contrast to the increasingly obese bodies of the vast majority of Americans, who suffer not only from social stigmatization but also from health problems endemic to obesity.

In this article I am using the word "body" to describe the entirety of a person's looks. I do so because research has conclusively shown that the locus of beauty moved from the face to the body during the course of the twentieth century during which sweater girl contests and beauty queen pageants featuring bathing suit contests were first inaugurated (Brumberg *Fasting* 245-248). Moreover, the focus of television shows about beauty makeovers, heroicizing stories about incredible weight loss, and myriad magazines devoted to fitness is clearly on the body as the measurement of attractiveness and not the face. Being buff is prerequisite to attractiveness now, whereas having an attractive face is an important if secondary consideration.<sup>ii</sup>

*Dominant culture: the fattening of the majority but more of such for the poor*

The current facts are that two out of three adult Americans are overweight—roughly 60 million people—, and one out of three Americans is obese, defined as being more than 30% on the BMI. Furthermore, the number of adults who are obese has doubled since 1980 (Moukheiber). Simultaneously, overweight and obesity are disproportionately frequent among poorer American populations, including rural whites, Native Americans, Mexican Americans, and African Americans (Stearns 134-137, Foreyt 536-40, Stein 1, Paeratakul). In all racial and geographic population groups "women of lower socioeconomic status [...] are approximately 50% more likely to be obese" than wealthier women (*Surgeon's Call*). Hence there is both a gender and an income bias in the determination of who is seriously overweight in America. Documentation of childhood obesity further confirms that the rates of obesity differ along lines of race and ethnicity: Disturbingly, 10% more of black and Hispanic youth and children

were overweight than their white counterparts ("Obesity in America"). This figure suggests that if the current trend continues tomorrow's adult Americans will differ even more than today's do in terms of size difference as correlative of skin tone and lower income. Fat prejudice may potentially become even more coterminous with racial and class divisions than it is at present.

Why are the poor gaining more weight than their middle-class counterparts? Americans as a group have grown fatter since the seventies and appear to be growing heavier at an increasing rate. The well-documented palette of reasons for the gain include fewer and fewer meals being eaten at home, an increase in sedentary activity (particularly television viewing), decreased intervention by adults in children's and youths' eating behavior, the proliferation of fatty processed foods, and a move towards ever-greater portion sizes.<sup>iii</sup> Efforts to improve the national diet in the past decade by boohooing fats and championing carbohydrates appear to have helped Americans to become fatter rather than more lean. Beyond these general factors, poorer Americans have grown more overweight than their better-off fellow citizens due to their limited access to safe, affordable, and attractive areas to exercise and their having been targeted as customers by fast-food franchisers.

A Public Health Research survey showed income to be the greatest factor in determining whether respondents had access to indoor and outdoor areas to exercise or not. Particularly lower-income women questioned in this study commented on the lack of sidewalks and near-by parks and concerns about safety as hindering their getting exercise (Brownson). Access to the culture of body forming cultivated by regular gym goers is again dependent on income. Those with yearly incomes above \$75,000 account for 42% of the country's health club members ("Industry"). Where parents have fears about safety, the television is used as a pacifier to keep children from going outside. Research shows that every increased hour of television watching makes for the greater likelihood of obesity.<sup>iv</sup>

A second factor in the disproportionate fattening of America's poorer populations is their being systematically targeted as customers

by the fast-food industry, as Greg Critzer among others has shown. Much of this industry's growth has been caused by its successful marketing of super-sized meal values. This more-food-for-less-money strategy to keep customers coming back for more has had an obvious effect on the weight of those who regularly eat in fast-food franchises for instance the inner-city poor, who have limited access to healthier sources of food. The intake of sugar and saturated fats increases enormously with every eaten fast food-meal (Critzer 115).

Lack of opportunities to exercise and buy unprocessed food, franchise targeting, the use of television sets as child caretakers—all of these factors have led to poorer Americans having become more and more rapidly overweight than wealthier citizens. Moreover, poor women are the members of the population who are most likely to be obese. Given that women are judged more punitively on the basis of their looks, the social status of economically disadvantaged, overweight women has been rendered doubly precarious due to these trends.

*The cultural significance of being ripped: upping the ante in the fitness race*

The emergence and solidification of a two-body society could not have taken place if only the general population, the poor foremost amongst them, was growing heavier. Other factors must exist to make the delineation between the large and the lean culturally significant and to reinforce a dominant message about the acceptability of fat and class prejudice.

One obvious expression of the increasing valuation of the idealized body has been the steady slimming of the female body ideal<sup>v</sup> despite the general growth of the American waistline. Not only has the idealized body grown thinner but it has also become more visible and more subject to supposed amelioration through plastic surgery and other radical techniques. A cultural signifier of personal and economic success, the lean body—particularly the idealized woman's body—is represented and over-represented ad nauseam.

Lists such as *People Magazine's* annual 50 Most Beautiful People in the World and *FHM's* annual 100 Sexiest Women document the American obsession with the body perfect. ABC's *Extreme Makeover* FOX's *The Swan*, and MTV's *I Want a Famous Face* all feature the transformations of their willing contestants into supposedly more physically desirable versions of their former selves. In all of these shows a narrow and, I would argue, a Caucasian ideal of beauty is striven for in which the supposedly perfected body is given center stage. Comparing the rosters of these shows contestants shows that these makeover series overwhelmingly feature white middle-class women; when women of color do participate, their noses are transformed into upturned Claudia Schifferesque appendages.

Participants in *The Swan* are worked over by plastic surgeons, personal trainers and dieticians for months to then compete against another contestant to see who has been the most successfully and completely changed from her—following the show's premise—formally ugly-duckling self. She who wins goes on to compete with the other episode winners in a season's end beauty contest. Lingerie and bathing suit competitions within the final beauty pageant reveal the obsession with the body that underlies this show and give viewers the opportunity to judge the women in minute comparisons as though they were plastic surgeons themselves. That a woman's inherent worth is determined by her looks and that women are in a constant competition with one another to please a masculinized gaze are prerequisite assumptions to *The Swan*. The show's website features follow-up stories on the series initial contestants that stress their romantic rather than their career success. Typical is the reporting about one contestant: "She was a size 18, now she's a size 8. She feels great and has found herself a boyfriend who cares for her very much" (*The Swan*).

Further confirmation of America's growing obsession with the perfected body is the proliferation of plastic surgery as well as the waning of embarrassment regarding the vanity involved in taking extreme measures to improve one's looks. Plastic surgery—once the recourse of the aged and wealthy—has become increasingly common, and procedures have been lowered in price. Breast reconstruction, for

instance, now costs a twentieth of that which it did ten years ago, and this has helped to render common procedures more and more routine for the middle class: "More than 79% of those who come under the knife now earn less than \$50,000 a year" ("Pots" 71). Between 2000 and 2001 the rate of cosmetic surgeries performed on teens increased by nearly 22 % (Quart 114). One can hypothesize that the middle class expresses anxieties about social position by demonstrating its ability to improve itself visually through cosmetic surgery (118). An analogy can be made to Bourdieu's analysis of food expenditures among the French middle-classes in the seventies: he noted that foremen's families paid about the same amount for food as better-off executives in order to enjoy the social capital and class distinction that 'eating well' implies (*Distinction* 376). More specifically, Bordieu argues in a foot note to his essay on belief that cultural goods such as 'perfected' thighs serve as "instruments of distinction, first between the class fractions and then between the classes" ("Belief"). Choosing a new nose or slimmer thighs in the US demonstrates the ability to make social discriminations, to associate oneself first with a wealthier stratum of the middle-class and second in contradistinction to the economically disadvantaged. The remade body is evidence of both savvy about cultural delineations and a marker of comparative cultural rarity. The more 'perfect' the body appears, the more its owner will have a socially desirable position of cultural rarity attributed to him or her. However, unless one is chosen to participate in *Extreme Makeover* or *The Swan*, completely redoing one's appearance remains a financial impossibility for lower-class Americans. Yet, as the beauty standards inherent in these shows continue to be represented as the norm, the pressure to look like a participant will increase.

This trend is apparent in the increasing frequency with which celebrities who do not have work done are shamed in the media. Whereas Sharon Osborne is lauded in *People Magazine* because of her willingness to talk openly about the procedures she has undergone, Jessica Lange is criticized for not "get[ting] her crow's feet fixed" (Lipton 105). When the body and its parts are treated as significant

class markers, forms of deficiency are regarded as grounds for replacement or renewal.

Demonstrable evidence for the intensification of body concerns can also be found in the increasing specificity of corporeal techniques to shape the form through movement and resistance. 'Getting big' for men and 'getting toned' for women are representations of leisure time and the socially condoned volition to perform physical labor for no other purpose than to improve one's body. Muscles signify self-directed discipline as well as one's success in conforming to a normative aesthetics. That one works on one's physique or one's body parts suggests that these entities are products to be manufactured and completed. Whereas running on treadmills was once considered a severe punishment for prisoners in Victorian England, working out now signifies the freedom of the leisured to form bodies that are seemingly immunized against the effects of overabundant food, seated work, and lack of exercise in everyday life.

Another salient reason for the intensification of body concerns and the attendant solidification of a class system marked by body size has been the wholesale adoption of biological theories of sexual attraction in the popular press. Regularly cited as evidence for the importance of the pursuit of normative attractiveness are theories that insist on the universality of beauty standards, including facial features and body shape. Recently, the press has shown a particular infatuation with neo-Darwinian theories concerning sexual selection as popularized by the evolutionary psychologists Devendra Singh and David Buss. Buss has argued that sex differences in partner choice are universal across cultures and result from evolutionary processes. According to him these differences include men's preference for younger-looking women, because their looks signify greater reproductive potential (Buss 3). Similarly, Singh has argued that men in all cultures prefer women with hour-glass figures—because a big difference in hip and waist size supposedly denotes a high rate of fertility. The title of a *Newsweek* article collected on my desk betrays the uncritical acceptance of such reasoning: "Why don't women like square-jawed macho men? And what's all the fuss over J.Lo's bellybutton." Reporting on

men's supposedly inherent preference for "hyperfeminized" faces—full lips, wide eyes, small jaws, this article insists that these preferences are instinctual: "These features indicate fertility, and because they're biologically programmed, they're common to all cultures" (Hastings 55). Thus the cultural obsession with Jennifer Lopez's navel is explained by *Newsweek* with reference to Singh's theory about the universal appeal of curvy woman. The *Economist's* "Pots of promise: An industry driven by sexual instinct will always thrive," similarly explains women's willingness to pay high prices for beauty products and procedures on the basis of Buss's haven demonstrated that universally men's main criterion for mate selection is women's perceived sexual attractiveness ("Pots" 69).

When theories of selected evolutionary psychologists become the press's truths, our culture's current standards of beauty are reified. These include women's looking young, unlined, and lean. The economic underpinnings of these standards go unmentioned: a lean body is a form of social capital and a mark of class membership. While I have no interest in indulging in science phobia, I do want to point out that the media's undifferentiated reporting on biological theories of sexual attraction reinforces the dominant cultural message of look, and implicitly, class prejudice, not to mention sexism. Evidence that physical attractiveness is not related to the number of children women produce is ignored in such reports (Barnett 12), as it would interfere with the dominant message of lookism.

### *The ideology of fat prejudice*

How is the ideology of fat prejudice reproduced in the private theater of consent, to borrow a phrase from Stuart Hall ("Signification" 100), in the living rooms and work streets of America? In the following I wish to try out a multi-causal explanation.

- The American ethos of individual responsibility precludes the idea that it is the state's responsibility to prohibit the sale of fast food in schools, to guarantee the poor access to exercise areas, or to monitor the public's diet. A prevailing American myth suggests that any

individual can attain whatever form of personal success s/he wants if s/he only desires this enough and is willing to work hard enough to achieve it. Apparent in every weight-loss add that features the protagonist in before and after pictures is the American faith in the individual as the origin and measure of her or his own success. Such weight loss narratives work along the same story lines of Horatio Alger's *Ragged Dick* series about the shoe shine boy whose honesty and hard work helped him to remove himself from poverty to middle-class success. Any boy can become a Bill Gates if he tries hard enough and any woman can become as 'hot' as Catherine Zeta-Jones if she really applies herself. This myth helps Americans to ignore cultural reasons for the fattening of Americans and to blame those individuals—often those less well off—who fail in or do not enter into the beauty race.

- Part of the American credo of individualism is an inherent, if ill-founded, faith in social mobility. The ideological conditioning that allows Americans to ignore the economic realities of a two-body economy is reinforced by shows such as *The Swan* and *Extreme Makeover* in which an average-looking person is transformed into having near-celebrity looks. For their contestants, the prohibitive costs of plastic surgeries, personal trainers, and cosmetic dentists—not to mention lost work time—are covered by the network, suggesting that this Cinderella scenario is within everyone's grasp. Just as Americans' blithe confidence that they will be promoted in their work and will end up amongst the top earners in the country may keep them from addressing the institutionally-reinforced economic disparities in their country ("Inequality" 44-45), the belief that anyone may gain access to the corporeally fit segment of US society also helps to maintain the status quo. The wealthy have access to a variety of goods and practices—less processed more expensive foods, gym equipment and places to use it in, plastic surgery, personal trainers, new body-forming techniques—that are not accessible to the poor. However, as long as the illusion exists that any individual may attain a better body through hard work (and perhaps a bit of surgery sponsored by some network Fairy

Godmother), the accompanying faith in fairness can be maintained.

- A moralistic disdain for the fat has traditionally informed middle-class Americans' sense that 'those' people were simply lazy. As long as Americans have been dieting, fatness has been associated with a lack of effort and idleness (Sterns 149). Laziness continues to be the attribute that even small children first associate with the obese as well as dirtiness and stupidity (Strunkard and Sobal 417). These characteristics have informed class-prejudiced depictions of the poor since before the United States existed.

Some readers may object to my use of the heavily burdened term "ideology" in the above; I welcome them to substitute "dominant cultural meaning" in its stead. Stuart Hall's work on Althusser has reinterpreted the latter's thesis that ideology represents not real relations of production but what individuals imagine their relationship to these relations to be (Althusser 111). Instead, Hall has argued that ideologies are multiple, complex and changing symptoms of representation in which we are implicated even as we may seek to alter them ("Signification" 103). Moreover, in more recent formulations he has moved away from talk of ideology to a more generalized neo-Gramscian and neo-Foucauldian concept of power. Power works through representation and its changing meanings, through coercion as well as consent ("Spectacle" 261). In this section I have argued that there is a historical and mythic element to American fat and class prejudice which involves the belief in equality, mobility, and individualism as well as historical fat prejudice. Our cultural practices which include television series like *The Swan* support and reify this prejudice and work to solidify the current two-body visual economy.

### *Outlook*

What can we expect in the future? My fear is that the waistline will become an even more important class marker in America. The disparity I see between body types in the airport will become an insurmountable gulf. The poor will continue to grow more obese and to

suffer from the prejudice associated with this state. They will also endure the economic disadvantages caused by health problems associated with obesity, including diabetes type 2, hypertension, arthritis, and breathing problems. Without access to places to exercise, socially-mandated cosmetic dental care, plastic surgery, liposuction or Botox shots, the economically disadvantaged will become all the more visually stigmatized: they will be separated from the economically privileged not only by girth but also by the lack of economic means to buy the new products and treatments that inevitably will be developed to combat (and abet) obesity.<sup>vi</sup>

The media will continue to highlight the divide between beautified individuals who populate their shows and the less fortunate who watch them. Miraculous transformation stories about fat ducklings being turned into elegantly toned swans with the help of surgeons and stylists will proliferate in order to sustain the belief that every obese person might one day have the chance to move amongst those considered hot. Makeover shows such as *The Swan* will continue to emphasize racialized norms of beauty and the American belief that it is within every individual's grasp to become or be transformed into the beauty ideal. Moreover, these shows will enforce the cultural sexism that equates women with their looks.

If evolutionary psychologists continue to be cited in the mass media and class rooms as justification for its being every man's instinctual right to prefer a young-looking, fair, hourglass-shaped woman with full lips and shining hair, the reign of the conventionally beautiful and economically privileged will expand. Fat prejudice, now rampant although nominally subject to anti-discrimination laws, will become more socially acceptable on the basis of its being allegedly reproductively sound in evolutionary terms.

The dystopia I have been describing is an uncomfortable one. Unless the political implications of the socioeconomic division of body types are addressed explicitly, Americans may continue to believe that obesity is an unaesthetic health hazard caused by individuals' lack of will power and laziness. In fact, disproportionately high rates of obesity among the poor result from living conditions that do

not allow certain groups to eat healthfully or to exercise easily. Obesity is a class issue. The mirroring of America's enormous income gap in one group that can afford the means to be thin and one group that cannot reproduces and enforces class prejudice and will result in the double stigmatization of the poor.

*Points of intervention*

When I held this paper at the conference the question arose of what can be done to alter the current trend? Simply noting how predominant racial and class prejudices are reinforced by makeover shows and fitness techniques should not be an invitation to cultural pessimism or political passivity. How then can the ideology of class prejudice that is solidified around the marker of overweight be countered? How can this ideological field be re-articulated or transformed, to again borrow from Hall's terminology? I can offer no simple program here but a few suggestions:

- Every ideological chain of representations is simultaneously a point of potential struggle where the "society-in-dominance" (Hall 113)—here a society that encourages look and class prejudice, not to mention sexism—may have limits set to its ability to reproduce itself. Every effort to boycott shows like *The Swan* and every public effort to question the ideology behind such programming represents an effort to resist a prevailing cultural trend.<sup>vii</sup> Actively struggling against the dominant cultural messages of class prejudice, racism, and sexism that inform this series is significant for those of us who live outside the United States, since at the time of this writing *The Swan* is being premiered in the UK as well as in Germany.
- While offering criticism of the ideology that informs *Extreme Makeover* and *The Swan*, it has to be remembered that these shows enjoy very high ratings and offer tangible sources of pleasure to their viewers. The often visited forum on the website for *The Swan* as well as the beauty tips offered on the website for *Extreme Makeover* suggest that these shows have given rise to a symbolic community of viewers, who find some fantasy fulfilled or some

form of escapism in their viewing of these series and their actively commenting on what they see. Analyzing the source of the pleasure these shows provide to their viewers may be an important step to countering their messages of lookism and classism. (I am thinking here of Ien Ang's and Janice Winship's convincing work on the pleasurable aspects of watching *Dallas* and of reading women's magazines.) I suspect part of the viewer's pleasure rests in her taking on the role of being the agent of the scopophilic drive to judge the minutiae in the women contestants' physiques. She reverses then her role as the passive inevitable object of the active masculinized gaze.

- Those who judge shows like *The Swan* critically, like myself, must examine our own potential cooption in the dominant ideology of beauty prejudice. Whereas I suspect that the individuals who care to read this article would abhor and rebuke any articulation of bias based on class or race, they may be more accepting of and receptive to articulations of fat prejudice. To my regret I find that my own children make enormously derogatory remarks about the obese, remarks that they would never make about individuals who deviate from the visual norm for other reasons. As participants in a culture whose dominant message constantly cajoles us to remember the importance of looking young and remaining lean if we wish to enjoy personal and professional success, we may find our own prejudices about fat to run deep; they need to be confronted and eradicated with care.
- We need to actively counter the claims of evolutionary psychologists regarding sexual attraction as they are propagated in the media. Here I cite the work of the biologist and social critic Anne Fausto-Sterling (cf. References) as well as the critique of neo-Darwinian theories by Hilary and Steven Rose, a sociologist and a biologist, in *Alas, Poor Darwin: Arguments Against Evolutionary Psychology* (2000) as exemplary in this regard. These thinkers successfully refute biological theories about inherent sexual dimorphism and critique the cultural implications of the rhetoric of difference. They insist that analogies to animal behavior or the ar-

chaic human past are insufficient tools for explaining the complexities of mutable, culturally-bound gender behaviors.

In this essay I have reviewed changes in the American body, its representations, and cultural significance during the past twenty years. While the general population has gained weight, the poor have done so at a disproportionate rate, for which there have been manifest economic reasons. Simultaneously, the cultural significance of having a lean, worked on body has vastly increased. Mass media venues in which the supposed perfecting of the body is celebrated and, particularly women, contestants are presented as being in competition with one another as objects of visual transformation have proliferated. These forums reify the American fiction that the individual is solely responsible for his or her destiny, be it the shape of one's body or the size of one's bank account. Traditional associations of fat with laziness and lack of will-power which correlate to entrenched prejudices about the poor have remained. These factors have all contributed to the visual discrepancy between body types that I have observed in the US airport, a discrepancy that mirrors American economic divisions.

It is my wish that the status quo made visually evident in the airport may change, that the bodies I see there not be separated by a visual barrier of overweight that serves, one, as the equivalent of a class marker and, two, as socially acceptable grounds for prejudice. It is my wish to resist the solidification of our two-body society and the prejudice this society entails.

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## Notes

<sup>i</sup> See, for instance Thompson and Nassar.

<sup>ii</sup> Brumberg uses girl's diaries to document the increase in body preoccupations in *Body Projects*. That body anxieties have now infected or affected men is manifested by the burgeoning market for beauty products for men, the rise of cosmetic surgical procedures being undertaken by men, and the phenomenon of so-called metrosexuals—heterosexual urban men who use beauty techniques such as body hair depilation once associated only with women.

<sup>iii</sup> On overeating see Duenwald; on decreased intervention as compared to the French, see Stearns 137-146; on the increase of fatty, fructose-laden processed foods see Critzer 63-108 and Schlosser 239-243.

<sup>iv</sup> Critzer analyzes the marketing of fast-food to the inner city poor, the use of television as a child-minder, and the refusal of researchers to address issues of obesity in minority populations for fear of encouraging bulimia and anorexia (109-126).

<sup>v</sup> On this trend see Cartwright's discussion of Devendra Singh's analysis of Miss America statistics (244-45).

<sup>vi</sup> *Forbes Magazine* now features an article about hedging one's bets about whether Americans will grow less or more fat by investing in stocks for Bally Total fitness gyms and weight-loss service companies or for Nestlé's and McDonald's. The implication of this tongue-in-cheek article is that it behoves the investor to buy both kinds of stock: Americans will continue to fatten and they will continue to fit the glut ("Investing").

<sup>vii</sup> See for instance, the petition to FOX to boycott *The Swan* ("Morality Television.") See also critical analyses of the cultural assumptions behind these programs in UK and German periodicals (Wood for the UK, and Von Rohr for Germany.)

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