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Conclusion
America Confesses its Fear of Fat and Food

This study does two things: It interrogates the culture that gives rise to eating disorders and the literary texts that interpret them; it also investigates confessionalism in contemporary American culture. In this conclusion I want to first briefly review the insights of the preceding six chapters and then move on to a more open-ended discussion of the issues that have been brought up there.

Review

The first part of this study describes what eating disorders are, why they have come to be so prevalent, and how to understand writings about them through the lens of cultural studies. The impassioned poem "Howl" testifies to the bodily and psychic abuses that forms of eating abuse entail. "Howl" also addresses two socioeconomic issues related to eating disorders in America. One, anorexia and bulimia are overly represented by Americans who are better off, whereas obesity is more the problem of America's poor. This has made thinness (and the destructive pursuit of thinness in eating disorders and chronic dieting) a powerful discriminatory class marker in America. Two, eating disorders are gender issues that result from tensions inherent to being an American woman now. I argue that the combination of rising rates of obesity in the general population coupled with a moralistic and punishing attitude towards "fat" individuals, particularly women, give eating disorders a particularly virulent edge in America. The review of literary accounts of eating disorders introduces a wide array of texts that ranges from first-person autobiographical poems and novels to third-person narratives told from the perspective of

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individuals who care about eating-disordered women. I justify the choice of texts to be analyzed in this study on the basis of their exemplary or literary qualities rather than their fictionality per se. The introduction also suggests that the current predominance of writings on anorexia is caused by America's condemnation of uncontrolled eating and the lack of a literary tradition about this experience.

The second chapter aims to debunk misconceptions about eating disorders. I amplify on Brumburg's analysis of anorexia and American girlhood by including Tilmann Habermas's pan-European insights into the cultural and historical roots of eating disorders. Poems are used to illustrate the three documented types of eating disorders as well as chronic dieting, with the argument that these texts reveal aspects of the eating disordered experience which medical and psychological texts cannot. These texts describe the food obsessions, body hatred, preoccupation with mirrors, loathing of the flesh, and profound sense of powerlessness many eating-disordered women have. In the discussion of the binge-eating disorder the paradox of America's becoming increasingly obese while standards of feminine attractiveness have grown thinner is addressed. The fattening of America's poor is examined as well as the issue of how women are especially made to suffer from being overweight in American society. The alteration of the focus of the feminine beauty from the face to the body and the rise of the cult of thinness is discussed to demonstrate that the meaning of anorexia has changed radically during the past century. While there are historical precedents for women expressing problems with their gender roles through food and body abuse—in Victorian times anorexia reflected the association of physical fragility with gentility and chastity in women—anorexia and other eating disorders are now often motivated by a desire to appear physically and sexually attractive. The Victorian "Goblin Market" makes an analogy between the consumption of fruit and sexual

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impurity. By contrast, current writings on anorexia conflate thinness with control and self-actualization.

Anorexia as we now understand it involves an obsessive fear of fat, the idealization of the thin female body, and the equation of the slim figure with success and happiness. Most women cannot achieve the standard of extreme slenderness that was initiated in the sixties with the model Twiggy. This ideal, coupled with American eating habits that encourage weight gain has led to the inception of a variety of eating disorders. The incidence of eating disorders has grown as many young women try to copy much-publicized and glamorized anorexic behavior as a way of controlling their weight. Since, however, only very few individuals can maintain self-starvation for long, many failed would-be anorectics become bulimic.

Comparing medical, psychological, and sociological explanatory models of eating disorders with one another show that anorexia, bulimia, binge eating and chronic dieting have no single cause. I argue that eating disorders can most readily be likened to hysteria at the end of the nineteenth century. Like hysteria, eating disorders are cultural malaises that are historically and culturally limited in scope. Predominantly affecting women and girls, these illnesses both reflect tensions inherent to women's secondary role in society and lead to exaggerated versions of so-called feminine behavior such as physical weakness and an obsessive interest in appearance.

The chapter regarding perspectives on literary accounts of eating disorders begins with a description of the cultural turn in literary studies. Literature is no longer treated as belonging to a separate sphere but as integrated into, responsive to, and responsible for new cultural and discursive formations. Ellmann's and Heywood's studies of starvation and literature were reviewed to show how these analyses differ from psychological explanations of eating disorders and to highlight how this study differs from their work. While offering a powerful examination of the interaction between the tropes of self-

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starvation, incarceration, and literary expression, Ellmann's study is ahistorical and acultural in its scope. Heywood's text makes an exaggerated case for modernity's sparse aesthetic having caused the rise of cultural anorexia. Heywood writes from a personal standpoint that stresses her painful corporeal experience. This mode of criticism reflects a trend in American public culture that I call "confessionalism," which came to a head in the intense public scrutiny of details of the Lewinsky-Clinton scandal. Texts on disordered eating examined here belong to the confessional genre; they reflect America's post-therapeutic culture in which identity is sought out in physical experience. Revealing bodily trauma or deviance comprises the center of experience and supposedly functions as a form of healing.

The second part of the study examines three extended literary accounts of eating disorders. *Life-Size* interrogates the culture that has made Josie severely anorectic. The combination of medial images, condemnation from her father and an admired youth for being "fat," her idealization of Barbie as well as her friend, the rich and thin Amanda Jane—all have contributed to her becoming severely emaciated and obsessed by thinness. Josie's anorexia imposes a penitential set of rules upon her that forces her to eat, buy, and interact with others less and less. Furthermore, *Life-Size* shows how the anorectic must constantly reinforce her fragile sense of identity in mirrors and measurements. The anorexic Josie displays dichotomous thinking about herself and her body: Either she is a thin leaping ballerina who literally flies over the heads of those who watch her perform or a fat clown who debases herself in front of a jeering audience. These exaggerated images also illustrate the romantic feelings many anorectics have about their illness: Josie perceives herself as an artist of her own "beautiful" skeletal form.

The Passion of Alice's depiction of a savvy and ironic anorectic's hospitalization also works as a "J'accuse" of American culture. The novel reviews how the adolescent Alice decided to give up desiring anything when

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she realized that she could never attain her mother's iconic bodily perfection. She renounces sexual, masticatory, and emotional wants. In her critical analysis of the eating disorder clinic in which she has been admitted against her will, Alice describes the economic and social dependency that makes women express unhappiness by pulling out their hair or abusing food rather than getting drunk or destroying things as men do. Her description of power structures in the clinic show that it is not conducive to health: the admitting doctor has unlimited power and coerces a patient into having sex with him; women counselors are themselves burdened by eating problems; to get out of the clinic one has to confess in some therapeutic setting to having suffered from hidden trauma.

The hybrid memoir *Wasted* offers a scathing critique of America's encouragement of young women to embrace the myth that being tall and thin and WASP-looking will make them happy. *Wasted* is also a study in narcissism. While stating explicitly that she wants to warn her woman reader from going where she went, Hornbacher stylizes herself as extraordinarily attractive to men and successful as a journalist, writer, and student during the most severe period of her anorexia. Additionally, Hornbacher appears to have emerged from her self-inflicted atrocities with a certain amount of conventional success. After all, she wrote a best-selling memoir at the age of twenty-three. In her association of fat with bulimia on the one hand and emaciation with beauty and artistry on the other hand, Hornbacher displays the polarized thinking that leads her to still idealize anorexia. This memoir erases the line that distinguishes fiction from non-fiction and presents the clearest case of how a narrator looks for, but cannot find identity and healing in the process of testifying about her illness.

Outlook

What do literary texts on eating disorders say about American society now? Reading a number of poems on eating disorders and dieting, two novels on

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anorexia, and a memoir about the experience of being alternately bulimic and anorexic reveals a number of issues that currently weigh uneasily on American cultural consciousness. These include an obsessive interest in physical appearance, which is specifically expressed in eating disorders, and more globally, by extremely exaggerated concerns about thinness and overweight. Moreover, many works discussed in this study interrogate American culture for encouraging women and girls to become eating-disordered. They indict a culture in which women are enculturated to equate thinness with happiness. They also bespeak America's confessional culture and the obsession with somatic experience.

I have argued that writings on eating disorders represent intensified versions of many American women's lives and preoccupations with food and weight. To a degree these texts are political protests. Hence these writings can be seen as belonging to the tradition of American novels of social protest, such as Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852), Upton Sinclair's *The Jungle* (1906), and Richard Wright's *Native Son* (1940).

These texts reveal the social and economic circumstances that contribute to the creation and proliferation of eating disorders in America. "Howl" and "Conform," *The Passion of Alice*, *Life-Size*, and *Wasted* all question why their narrators became eating disordered. Each narrator makes the point that the socialization process was the major cause of her obsessive interest in being thin. Without the cultural idealization of thinness, the narrators assert, they would not have become ill.

More than half of the adult female American population is on a diet at any given time. While not all dieters become eating disordered, they experience the same problems that plague anorexic and bulimic women to a lesser degree. "Normal" women regard weight as threatening, food as harmful, and thinness and the self-control it represents as ideals. The themes expressed in the writings of eating-disordered narrators are not just interesting as accounts of the

experience of one minority, but serve to document American conceptions of femininity, consumption, food, and weight. A high level of body dissociation and a tortured sense of what it is to live in one's own flesh are spoken to.

Many primary texts cited in this study demonstrate that eating disorders express class distinctions. Thinness, associated with affluence, and the arduous means to thinness is described by the narrators—all members of the well-educated, upper middle-class, white world. In America being poor often also means being fat; the far greater prevalence of obesity amongst poor population groups in America suggests that thinness is a marker of wealth in the States. That immigrant women who aspire to belong to the middle class become eating disordered soon after arriving in the States and that thin women tend to marry up in our culture suggests that being thin has far greater economic significance for women than for men.

The exclusively female narrators of literary treatments of eating disorders attest to eating disorders being a gender issue. For women and girls the importance of being slim often overrides basic considerations of health. Women are still disproportionately valued and rewarded in our society for their looks rather than their accomplishments. Body worries have in fact grown more acute during the past century and now figure prominently in American life. As dependent members of a culture that stresses physical self-presentation as a measure of personal worth, women and girls react acutely to messages about the importance of thinness. This is, for instance, reflected in the mirror theme, featured in many of the poems and all three of the longer texts discussed here. Women do not experience mirrors as sites of transformation, as Jenijoy La Belle envisions them, but as cruel witnesses or judges of their sense of self worth. Mirrors, scales, and body checks provide narrators with a means of measuring their worth.

Similarly, Joan Brumberg describes the unstable sense of identity that leads many contemporary high school girls to value themselves depending on

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how they think they look. High school graduates represent themselves with full-body portraits in senior yearbooks, because the body has become synonymous with selfhood. For eating-disordered women and the many American women plagued by concerns about their weight, mirrors have a threatening aspect. Like the looking-glass in the story of Snow White, mirrors have the power to decide whether a woman will—like Snow White's step-mother—accept herself or not. Mirrors determine whether a woman perceives herself as "good" or "bad," "fat" or "thin."

The stigmatization of fat and bulimia and the idealization of thinness and anorexia have a Gothic quality. The texts described here feature speakers who feel threatened by their surroundings (food), vulnerable to people around them (who would make them eat), and lost or disoriented in a nightmarish world when they go on a binge. Again and again the desire to eat or binge is depicted as a foreign entity that takes over the better thin self. Speakers liken their urge to binge to demons, beasts, or monsters. The natural need to eat is perceived as an evil outside force, and as fundamentally other. The self is fashioned as an imperiled, idealized thin creature that is constantly impinged upon by an enormous, overpowering, monstrous desire to eat.

Foods, too, appear to have personalities for eating-disordered and dieting American women; they are "good" or "evil." In all the texts cited here foods have nothing to do with nourishment but rather inspire feelings of dread or even hate. The use of military imagery in "Becoming a Woman" suggests that to be a woman in our culture requires that one be in a state of constant vigilance against the threat of invasive calories. Similarly, "Surrounded" expresses the sentiment that a woman cannot get away from the threat that food represents to her even when she tries to commune with nature. So food-obsessed is the speaker of this poem that she is reminded of Tootsie rolls by a glimpse of dog's feces while she takes a walk in the woods.

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Writings about eating disorders also indict the prejudicial quality of American culture by making moralistic attitudes towards the overweight apparent. America's cult of thinness was indoctrinated into Josie, Alice, and Marya not only through women's magazines, diet books, and popular novels about slim, happy girls, but also through the message they received as girls that it was their personal responsibility to "measure up" and make themselves thin. All three narrators display disgust and reprobation to those they judge to be overweight, most particularly themselves.

Thus the American belief that with hard work one can achieve anything influenced these narrators' burgeoning eating disorders. Again, I see a collision between a popular American myth and an American reality: the reality is that the country is growing fatter. To not be getting fatter is then the exception or the oddity. On the other hand the still popular Horatio Alger story informs American society—the belief that by working hard enough, every individual may achieve his or her heart's wish and, like Ragged Dick, go from being a shoe-shine boy to a successful businessman. The female variation of this narrative is that inside every ugly, fat duckling, a beautiful slender swan is waiting to emerge. The effects of genetics and life-style are ignored in such simplistic formulae. Moreover, as Peter Stearns points out, the American faith in individualism and the benefits of hard work leads to a tendency to blame overweight or obese individuals for their apparent moral failings. This blame falls more heavily onto women than onto men.

The writings I have described here do more than interrogate American culture, they also testify to the current taste for confessional detail. This literature reflects a wider societal tendency to value the body and the testimony of bodily experience as marks of authenticity. Confessionalism describes both a trend in realistic[1] contemporary fiction and a societal pattern. By calling

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[1] See Monika Fludernik's definition of realism in *Towards a 'Natural' Narratology* (London: Routledge, 1996): "*Realism* refers to a realistic portrayal of the fictional world in the sense

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literary treatments of eating disorders "confessional" and treating them in a culturally critical manner, I read them in a way that reflects undercurrents in American society now. Written, as it were, from the couch, these texts document a literary sensibility and a fascination with intimate details.

In the three extended texts the eating disorder hospital unit or clinic is a setting where confession is cultivated or coerced. Patients in Seaview eagerly divulge the secret things they did with food before they were hospitalized. Similarly, the Internet sites from which many of the poems cited here were taken attest to the pervasive need to share personal details in American society. In this forum individuals can anonymously post real or embellished accounts of their experiences, and these can be read and commented on by others. These web sites grow in a pattern similar to the way participants share their experiences in group therapy, as Alice describes them: First there is silence, than a faltering testimony occurs, and then comes a rush of effusions.

The majority of the poems cited here, as well as *Life-Size* and *Wasted,* operate on the premise that telling one's secrets will effect relief if not healing. Narrators begin their tales with an admission that they are ill and their perspectives are skewed. Revealing the "worst" secrets is the narrative climax and is intended to bring about absolution. Josie describes how she once tried to eat ground-up glass before she prepares to leave the hospital in an altered if not healthy state of mind. The abundance of physical viscera in Hornbacher's memoir resembles an informational purge. Such details have a legitimate shock value: they call the reader to arms to wake up to the dangers of eating disorders. Like the poems "Howl" and "Conform" such intimate testimonies demand that society change. However, these revelations may have a compulsive quality, particularly Hornbacher's manner of relating her painful experiences.

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that secular non-fantastic explanations can be provided for the plot and seemingly fantastic experiences are eventually explained in 'realistic' terms" (37).

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I am aware that talk of compulsivity smacks of moralistic judgment making. I run the danger of sounding like many traditional, predominantly male, reviewers of literature who speak disparagingly of "confessional" writing when they want to say that texts are too full of the embarrassing details about women's lives. This, at least, is Caroline Heilbrun's charge. Narratives of pain and body obsession reveal untold aspects of many women's and hence human experience.

However, by describing purging techniques in detail and by depicting the anorexic period of their lives in glamorous and sometimes self-aggrandizing terms, writers such as Hornbacher perpetuate the values of the cult of thinness from which they have suffered. Compelling and aestheticized versions of anorexia add to our culture's wealth of romanticized visions of beautiful, dying women and may encourage young women to emulate this imagery. Finally, the demonization of fat and the othering of bulimia that occurs in texts by eating-disordered narrators may further inculcate some readers with an obsession with being thin.

The existence of so many texts about eating disorders demonstrates prima facie that these problems exist in great number and writers want to talk about them. How these writings reflect common difficulties American women have with food, weight and identity has been the farther-reaching goal of this study. Anxieties expressed by eating-disordered narrators represent heightened versions of worries most middle-class American women how much they "should" eat and weigh.

The reader will note my ambivalence about the revealing, deeply painful—and, in the case of *Wasted*, the narcissistic—quality of the texts on eating disorders I have described in this study. On the one hand it is important that attention be paid to the problems of eating-disordered women and the culture that makes them so. These texts render the experience of suffering from anorexia, bulimia, binge eating, and chronic dieting comprehensible and

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compelling. On the other hand I find the fetishizing of the female body that occurs in these narratives deeply disturbing. For eating-disordered narrators, identity represents the digits on the scale, the perceived image in the mirror, the shape of the thigh, and the amount of flesh that can be pinched between the forefinger and thumb. The complexity of human experience narrows down to the corporeal detail. The story of the self is told in the language of the sickened body. Although the narrators directly or indirectly accuse American culture of overvaluing women's bodies, they essentially commit the same crime. Physical appearance becomes the measure of who the narrators think they are, and what they think, feel, and may potentially do. In the reduction of women's lives to attestations of bodily obsessions, cultural scripts that equate women with somatic experience and physical weakness are perpetuated.

Narratives about binge eating, bulimia, and anorexia, like eating disorders themselves, both express and exaggerate larger trends in American culture. It is a culture, self-confirming and endlessly reinforced and reinvented, which makes many women sick. American women have of sense of being mortally threatened by food, weight and fat. Due to a sense of confusion about who they are outside of their bodily experience and appearance, women seek and express their identities in narratives that equate selfhood with their flesh.