about fat, our goal can also be summed up in two little words. Remember that Klein wanted us all to Eat Fat. Well, we think the many dimensions of fat deserve far more intelligent thought than they normally receive—even in a world that sometimes seems to talk about little else but fat. So whether or not you actually do eat fat, we hope this book will stimulate you, now and in the future, to think fat.

Don Kulick and Anne Meneley
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What would it feel like to suddenly find oneself in a place where women strive to be as fat as possible? Would it be liberating? Would it be easier to love one's body? Or would the same issues and pressures around eating and the body still arise, except in reverse?

I lived for four years in just such a place, among desert Arabs in Niger, a country that borders Nigeria in the south and Algeria in the north. Living in tents and simple adobe houses in the sparsely inhabited reaches of the southern Sahara, these Arabs
have for centuries cultivated an ideal of what Westerners would consider obesity in women, and girls are force-fed in order to achieve this ideal. In my work with these people, I quickly learned that even in the absence of glossy magazine pictures of fashion models, or any images of what women “should” look like besides the real-life women around them, body ideals are still very important. Intriguingly, however, attempting to achieve the fat body ideal did not seem to create the same feelings of personal anguish for these Arab women that striving for the thin body ideal seems to for many women in the West. As I learned to see the world through their eyes, I also discovered that changing the way I looked at the body was one of the hardest cultural leaps I, as an anthropologist and as a woman, have ever had to make.

Stepping on the Scale in Niger
I first came to this western corner of Niger in the mid-1980s as a Peace Corps volunteer posted to a village at a Saharan crossroads. I worked at the local clinic alongside local Nigerien nurses, weighing and measuring children and helping to treat, ironically, undernourished children. I soon discovered that women from all the diverse ethnic groups in the area wanted to be fat: Hausa, Zarma, Fulani, Tuareg, and the local Arabs. The Nigerien nurses I worked with, who were mostly from villages, would occasionally weigh themselves, just like women in the West might do when they find themselves in the vicinity of a scale. Unlike women in the West, however, who learn at an early age to remove shoes and as much clothing as possible before stepping on the scale for its verdict, the Nigerien nurses always put clothes on. They nonchalantly picked up their shawls, sweaters, and any other loose items of clothing they had with them before stepping on the scale. Taking their shoes off to weigh themselves was out of the question, because this would subvert their goal, which was to weigh as much as possible.

Weighing oneself was probably a relatively recently learned behavior for these women, a new practice made possible by the clinic scale. But for them, as for women of all ethnic groups in Niger and indeed in much of Africa, the hope is always that one will be bigger, not smaller. Among the seminomadic Arabs of the region, who had long had slaves and who now hired servants to do much of the hard labor, the ideal of fatness was almost a raison d’être for women.

Nigerien Arabs and the Fat Female Ideal
One hot, still afternoon partway through my Peace Corps stay, I stumbled into a compound where an Arab girl sat alone on a mat, disconsolately stirring an oversize bowl of porridge with a similarly oversize ladle. A woman nearby spoke harsh words to her, urging her to drink up the porridge. It dawned on me that the unwieldy bodies of the village Arab women, extreme even among peoples whose women all strived for wide girth, was achieved through the more or less forced consumption of food in childhood. Soon I learned from my Arab friend Boukia that she had indeed undergone this fattening process as a child, which had endowed her with what she called the “beautiful” stretch marks on her arms. Boukia did not have the means now to properly fatten her own daughters, but she told me she would do so if she had access to the necessary quantities of millet and milk.

I left Niger after two years, when my Peace Corps work was
over. But I went back again in the early 1990s and moved to a predominantly Arab village to study the bodily ambitions of Nigerien Arabs in more depth. By hunting down information in old missionary and travelers’ accounts, I had learned that a number of African peoples have had traditions of excluding girls before marriage and fattening them. However, the Nigerien Arabs and Mauritanian Moors to whom they are related seem to be the only ethnic group on record that begins fattening girls in early childhood. Historical accounts suggest that the practice has been going on for centuries across a wide swath of the western and central Sahara.

In the more remote village where I now established my strange Western presence, women were wonderfully welcoming, though it made little sense to them that, given their illustrious history and Muslim piousness, I’d want to ask questions about something as banal as fattening. Since a number of girls were being quietly fattened in corners of their tents, however, I soon learned the basics of the practice. Under the close watch of a female relative, girls begin ingesting large quantities of milk and porridge every day, starting when they lose their first teeth and continuing until they reach adolescence. The pudginess they develop is thought to (and, according to biologists, probably does) hasten the onset of puberty and the possibility of childbearing. Ideally, girls in this society are married in early adolescence. By then, women told me, girls have “learned the value of fatness themselves” and maintain their fatness on their own throughout their adult lives by stuffing themselves with a kind of dry, homemade couscous thought to maintain fleshiness in more mature women. Yet the women seemed reluctant to talk about this, and I soon learned why. To talk a lot about fattening was to risk casting the evil eye on the young girls whose central purpose in life at this stage was to make their blossoming young bodies sexually attractive and beautiful. Even if one did not consciously mean to cause ill, commenting on a girl’s fat could indicate envy and, according to local theories of health and morality, cause the girl to lose weight or become sick.

The risk that anyone would cast the evil eye on me, however, was minimal. My own bodily charms, meager as they were in my own country, certainly meant even less in this Saharan world. At home, where I flattered myself that my subtly visible collarbones were an ideal element of a young female body, in the eyes of the people I was living with, these bony protrusions brought to mind only unflattering images of scrawny cows! They coveted instead a smooth chest with no hint of collarbones and a long neck on which to display gold and bead necklaces. Since women who have their veils up to cover their hair and body may still show their face and neck, there is particular attention paid to making this area beautiful. When I would return to the village from brief trips to Niger’s capital, Niamey, “fattened” there on Western foods I longed for after long stretches of the desert diet, the women would all comment appreciatively that my collarbones were not quite so noticeable. They were attuned to every pound I would lose or gain, far beyond even my own awareness.

These Nigerien Arab women spent as much time as possible sitting or lying down, letting servants do the work of carrying water and cooking. But whenever they did raise themselves, they took the opportunity to show their large bodies off to advantage. Walking as slowly as they could, they swayed their buttocks from side to side, emphasizing this most important feature of a woman’s charms. Once, a young man who worked for one of the families I
spent time with sent all the women present into peals of laughter
imitating this walk, wildly poking his butt out from side to side
as he tripped across the sandy yard. In one of the many seeming
contradictions of this Muslim society of veiled women, men told
me they could readily identify any woman at a distance from her
walk and her silhouette. The veil that conceals is just as improtant
for what it reveals.

I was considered so skinny that the Niger women I lived with
did not, in fact, consider me fully a woman. “Why don’t you
marry Ahmed?” they said, referring to a sixteen-year-old boy,
alerting me to the fact that even though I was in my late twenties,
without a suitably round body I was essentially a young girl in
their eyes. With what they considered my sticklike body, I was
clearly abnormal. I think that my hosts’ distaste for my thinness
made living alone in their midst easier: Certainly no man would
really want me, and so I was not a threat to the women in any way.

So important are big buttocks to femininity in Niger that the
simple dolls girls make out of clay often have no arms or legs but
do have clearly demarcated buttocks. A woman, like these dolls,
should ideally not have to labor, walk, or really move at all. By
contrast, male dolls—and men themselves, it often seemed—were
all arms and legs. The male dolls were merely two crossed sticks
with a piece of cloth thrown over them. It is an apt representa-
tion, as Nigerien Arab men tend to be thin and wiry, constantly
on the move.

It was not easy for me to learn to appreciate the Nigerien love
of stretch marks. Stretch marks are sung about glowingly in a
love song as a “waist lined with stripes,” and all young women
hope to acquire them on their legs and arms, as well. “Anyone
can get stretch marks on their stomachs,” women told me, but
stretch marks on your arms and legs are a real achievement.
When my friend Boukia made me a cloth doll to take home with
me, she stitched a scrap of striped cloth across the doll’s stom-
ach, thereby mimicking the vaunted stretch marks.

When I asked people in the village whether the extreme fat
body ideal was perhaps on the wane, both men and women told
me that they no longer liked very fat women as they used to in the
old days. But when I asked them to name a woman who they
thought was beautiful, they inevitably mentioned the very fattest
women in the community. And although in less remote areas of
West Africa, where Western values and images have made inroads,
Western body ideals are contending with fatter traditional ones,
the Nigerien Arab women I knew never believed my seemingly
self-serving claims that women where I came from wanted to be
as thin as possible. They cited an apparently pleasingly plump
French nurse with the organization Doctors Without Borders
who had once passed through town as clear evidence that West-
erners did indeed prefer a female body much more portly than
my own.

I wanted, of course, to fit in, and I had no trouble adapting
to my Arab hosts’ taste in clothing, jewelry, or sandals. I soon did
my best to have the right kind of gold necklace with red beads
and the right kind of local dress, in light tie-dyed cotton for every-
day and heavy indigo for special occasions.

Yet even as I learned intellectually to see in a certain fullness
of figure the beauty they saw, I could not apply the same aes-
thetic to my own body. Should I try to get fat just while I was
there, simply to fit in? The idea was impossible to, well, stomach.
I could pile my hair on top of my head as women did there, waltz about draped in desert finery, rub indigo on my lips, and put kohl around my eyes—even carefully veil my body and hair before older men. But to gain weight to comply with a foreign aesthetic felt like betraying myself and giving up my identity in a way that none of those other adaptations to local culture did. My own body ideal was just as much a construct as fatness was here, but it was too deeply integrated into my self-image to give up.

My difficulty in adapting to the thought that I should acquire a different kind of body is, I think, due to the fact that the bodily shapes and sizes that societies idealize are not so much fashion as they are physical manifestations of beliefs and practices that are anchored in a wider set of cultural values. For me, the sleek, streamlined female body I had been conditioned to emulate carried connotations of self-discipline, strength, industry, and general virtue. To change from wanting to look thinner to looking fatter was not like changing my taste in shoes, just because fashions changed. Much more was at stake: a whole set of values that I could not just shake off. I couldn’t just shake them off because they were fundamental to the cultural world from which I came.

**Where Do Body Ideals Come From?**

Although there seems to be a tacit public assumption that Western society is marked by more extreme bodily ideals than ever before in history, and that those ideals are more hegemonic or oppressive than at any time in history, my own experience in Niger calls this idea into question. We are not unique in the lengths women go to achieve a bodily ideal, nor are we unique in how well developed the ideal is. To give just one example in addition to the desert Arabs I have described, the late Yale art historian Sylvia Boone studied girls’ initiation among the Mende people of Sierra Leone in West Africa. She found that what women (and men) were most fascinated with were their own ideals of beauty, inculcated largely in initiation ceremonies. Boone had enough material to write an entire book about the highly detailed and developed ideals of body, face, and hair that people described to her, including high buttocks, a plump body, very dark and oiled skin, and graceful movement.3

According to Nancy Etcoff, a professor and psychologist who has researched beauty ideals historically and cross-culturally, ideals of body shape and size have probably been around as long as modern humans have.4 There is a degree of arbitrariness to the ideals: neck rings here (Burma), nose rings there (India), a well-shaped male calf here (historically, in the West), a lotus-shaped female foot there (China). But body ideals are also grounded not only in cultural values but also in environmental realities and economic orders. Generally speaking, fat bodies are appreciated where food is hard to come by, and thin ones are admired in places where food is abundant. Since food abundance has been relatively rare historically, it is not surprising that, according to one estimate, around 80 percent of human societies on record have had a preference for plumper women.5 Because humans evolved in environments of scarcity, they developed (unfortunately for us today) a desire for fatty foods and the ability to store fat easily—for women, in their behinds and stomachs.

In tandem with greater food security, but also with vast social and cultural changes, today modern Western ideals of slender-ness seem to be sweeping across the world. Even in West Africa, where traditional beauty contests have long celebrated zaftig
female bodies, things are changing. In the 2001 Miss World beauty contest, Nigeria, after performing poorly for years, entered a tall, svelte young woman whose skinny appearance appealed to few in Nigeria itself. She won. In the time since then, many women in the younger generation have quickly begun adapting to the Western-inspired ideal, especially in more urban areas, even as older Nigerians shake their heads in dismay. This revolution in national aesthetics is not taking place in a vacuum. The way has been paved not only by Western cultural influence but also by economic changes that make it possible to see the body in a new way and that make new kinds of bodies desirable.

But in a society like that of Nigerien Arabs, where a former slave population still does much of the cooking, water-carrying, and grain-pounding, an elite Arab woman's achievement of mobile immobility signals her ability not to work—indeed, makes it impossible for her to work. Their economy is also based on the herding of animals and long-distance trade, all carried on by men. When women drink the milk from men's animals and eat the grain men buy with their earnings from trade, they become potent symbols of their menfolk's success, transforming the goods men produce into desirability. Women's bodies thus constitute a convenient and symbolically potent place for men to invest their earnings.

A capitalist economic order like that of the West, on the other hand, needs both male and female bodies as workers and as consumers. Cultural critic Susan Bordo has pointed out that this means that individuals need to be self-disciplined and diligent workers, like the orderly and hardworking machines that have been the basis of our economy since industrialization. Our bodies should reflect these values in the sleek, efficient, machine-like contemporary body ideal. But since capitalism encourages—indeed, requires—the never-ending expansion of markets and the purchase of the commodities that are produced for those markets, we are also exhorted to consume and indulge. By this logic, our bodies should be anything but self-denying and machine-like; instead, we should give into our every whim and fancy. This tension between production and consumption, argues Bordo, creates the tension that pervades women's lives especially. Men are still the prototype of the productive worker, but women are now expected to both work outside the home and remain the primary shoppers and consumers. We should work out at the gym and restrain our appetites in order to express our diligent, energetic, and efficient natures as individuals (i.e., workers). But we should also indulge as dutiful consumers, in all manner of things available to us through the marketplace, not least the Big Mac, tall latte, and the jumbo muffin.

And yet, neither the environment nor economics determine bodily ideals entirely: otherwise, all people who live in deserts and herd animals for a living would have the same beauty ideals, which they don't.

Social orders and cultural values also play their part in making one type of body seem more pleasing than another. For Nigerien Arabs, for example, overarching notions of male and female make fat women and skinny men seem natural and desirable. Women and men are considered by Nigerien Arabs to be very different types of creatures, and their bodies should reflect this in fleshy, immobile femininity and hard, upright masculinity. A thin woman is considered "like a man" just as rounder men are
considered slightly feminine. Women can actively abet the gender difference intended by God by making their bodies as different from men's as possible, i.e., by getting fat.

In the West, by contrast, where women and men are now thought to be essentially similar, women are expected to resemble men in ways bodily as well: hard muscles, able movement, none-too-exaggerated curves.

Another cultural factor that contributes to the fattened aesthetic in Niger has to do with conceptions of a healthy body. In stark contrast to the West's machine-model bodies, Nigerien Arabs see bodies more like the vessels they use for cooking and carrying water. They are potentially leaky, contain potent substances, able to be opened or closed, and—at their most healthy—they are full and cooking!

A healthy body should also, for them, be balanced in terms of the forces of "hot" and "cold" that are thought to pervade the universe. To be not too hot and not too cold means having a body that is quite "closed off" to the world around it, rather than "open" to all the winds and spirits that could enter it. Women are at an immediate disadvantage in achieving this healthy, strong, closed-off bodily state, because, as the Nigerien Arabs say, women have three openings rather than two: a mouth, an anus, and a vagina. Women even sometimes playfully referred to themselves as "the cut ones" referring to their "open" genitals. When you are open, you get "cold," and women find themselves in the unfortunate position of being open all too often, notably when they have sex, when they menstruate, and when they give birth. Getting fat helps make one closed off and hot. It does so both by filling the body with energy, and by enclosing that energy by swelling the body and its openings.

If our body ideals are not entirely arbitrary but embedded in many aspects of our lives, then this explains, at least in part, why we are held so deeply in the thrall of how we think our bodies should look—in the West as in remote Niger. This, one may note, is at odds with the idea promoted by Naomi Wolf and others that female body ideals are the result of the patriarchy, capitalist enterprises, and the media. Clearly male desire, media images, and advertising have a lot to do with why women go to great lengths to make their bodies look particular ways, why they feel intense pressure to do so, and why they may suffer greatly trying to meet the ideals. But it is a matter of anthropological record that many societies without capitalism or media images and with varying degrees of gender equality have preferences for how female bodies, in particular, should look: usually youthful, curvaceous, and plump. And women in many places expend considerable effort trying to live up to the ideal.

While it seems counterintuitive that those thin, willowy models staring down from billboards aren't somehow the engines behind the compulsion we women in the West have to look sleek and slim, my four years living in a culture without any media images whatsoever, but with a body ideal every bit as pronounced and sought after as ours in the West, has convinced me otherwise. The pictures of trim and trained, airbrushed, collagen'd and Botox'd bodies could disappear from our visual world, and it is not likely, I now think, that we would cease striving to get our bodies to look a certain way.
Reading the Body: Fat Is Sexy
When I traveled to Niger, I was interested in “the body”—then a hot topic in the social sciences. With time, however, my interest in the body as a purely social symbol waned. Instead, I came to see the body more as my Arab hosts seemed to see it: as a potential object of beauty, and as an object of sexual allure. The fattening that these Arab women engaged in was certainly a kind of cultural work, expressing in physical form many cherished values and reflecting the social order. But to Nigerien Arabs themselves, the fat female body was largely a simple matter of aesthetics. Just like thin bodies in the West, fat bodies in Niger were appealing because they were, quite simply, attractive.

Even if biological realities, economic circumstances, gender constructions, and conceptions of health and the body underlie Nigerien Arabs’ appreciation of fat women, it is not in these terms that they talk about fat women. In fact, they don’t talk about fat women much at all, not only because of fears about the evil eye, but also because fat is ultimately about sex, and sex is something you don’t talk about. When I spoke lightheartedly with teenage boys about the beauty of fat women, though, their insolent response was telling: they squeezed the air with their hands, in imitation of the pleasures of making love with a fat woman. When I gently broached the topic of the appeal of fatness with a woman known for her lack of appropriate reserve, she shot back, clearly annoyed at my naïveté, “Look, would you rather sleep on that mattress over there or on this hard ground?”

The sexiness of rolls of fat, stretch marks, and large behinds that girls invest so much in achieving here, however, creates a bit of a conundrum for women. For, as in so many societies, Nige-

rnen Arab females should be sexy but not be too eager for sex. So how do you consume voraciously and sexualize your body while simultaneously distancing yourself from sexuality? Fattening and fatness itself, it turns out, contain plenty of room to do both: to excite and deny sexuality.

As girls flesh out their bodies, creating the contours of Rubenesque, fertile womanhood through their unceasing ladlefuls of porridge, they are expected to become ever more silent and still. Once breasts and pubic hair appear, women begin to veil their increasingly desirable bodies. And as they grow older and fatter, movement becomes more difficult, so their activity is curtailed, even as they excite lust in men. And, in a familiar logic, the more unattainable women are, the more they appeal.

In other words, while fatness is highly arousing, it also imposes an immobility and closed-off-ness on women that is thought to protect them from the potential dangers of sexual forces. Fatness is thus simultaneously a condition of desirability and a means of keeping female sexual lust in control—under a veil of fat, as it were.

Individualism and Body Ideals
Both Nigerien Arab and Western body ideals contain numerous “messages.” Both are rather extreme; both are largely unquestioned in their respective societies; and in both places, women devote considerable time and energy to achieving them. Yet in the West today, the slender body ideal is experienced by many women as deeply oppressive, morally wrong, and a menace to young girls, even as women continue to emulate it. This is in stark contrast to the Nigerien Arabs. Women there did not seem

22 Fat

Ideal 23
to regard the imperative to be fat as problematic or troubling to
to their sense of self in any way.

This struck me as a paradox. Why did Western women, with
more opportunities and more power than women have had at
any time in history, feel so threatened by their beauty ideal,
whereas Nigerien Arab women, with seemingly much less agency
in their lives, do not seem threatened by their equally extreme
body ideal? One could argue that precisely because Nigerien
Arab women lead more circumscribed lives, the constraints on
their bodies are not experienced so acutely. But the puzzle is this:
in the West, where women choose their own partners (and can
choose to divorce them), choose their own careers (and can ac-
tually have careers in the first place), and choose their own per-
sonal styles in clothing and adornment, why do so many feel so
helpless and threatened in the face of beauty ideals? How do
women with so many concrete freedoms and opportunities si-
multaneously feel victimized by an abstraction?

I believe the pressure women feel from body ideals in the
West has little to do with the ideals themselves, as we tend to
think. Instead, it has to do with the social context in which we try
to live up to those ideals. Specifically, it is our culture of individ-
ualism and achievement that makes our bodily ideals feel so
oppressive.

If a Nigerien Arab woman fails to get fat, this is thought to
be due to her innate constitution, or because she is ill, or be-
cause someone has bewitched her. In the West, on the other hand,
where we have the freedom to develop an individual identity, we
also have the personal duty to do so. It is up to each individual to
determine his or her own fate, and characteristics—from tem-
perament to appearance—are readily interpreted not as given

but as under an individual’s own control and design. Thus, if
a woman fails to live up to the ideal, it is thought to be her
own fault.

The opportunity to invent oneself imposes a great burden on
the psyche as well as on the body. If we lived, by contrast, in, say,
an African village where every individual’s life course was far
more predetermined, a woman in an advertisement might not
automatically be read as a reproach or reminder of personal failing.
Who a woman’s father is, what village she lives in, what social
group she belongs to—these are the things that define the pa-
rameters and possibilities of her life in this Nigerien society, not
her own efforts and ambitions, although they, of course, may also
affect her identity and the outcome of her life.

In the West, where we are not so tightly embedded in social
networks that give us our identity, we have to search for ways to
be and ways to look, and thus the available role models and im-
ages can have enormous pull. I suspect that if images of women
representing various body and beauty ideals were to come to re-
mand Niger, women might get inspiration for a new hairdo or
jewelry from them, but they would not feel challenged, threat-
ened, or taunted by the images the way many women in the West
seem to feel. Their lives are not a self-designed project in the way
the lives of women (and men) in the West are. The sense of inner
responsibility for each pound lost or gained does not carry the
weight, so to speak, that it does for women in the West.

The nature of eating disorders reflects this, for while most
women in the West are exposed to images representing the cov-
ted thin body ideal, it is girls at the ages when they are expected
to develop their identities and define themselves as women who
are most prone to develop anorexia or bulimia. And to the extent
that eating disorders are beginning to crop up outside the West, it seems to be in societies and situations where women have gained increased freedoms and where an emphasis on achievement and individualism is beginning to be felt.

**Free at Last?**

Is it depressing or liberating to learn that women in the middle of the Sahara desert, without the Britas, Myn, or Nyoyn magazines, also devote much of their energies to achieving a particular body ideal? I hope that it is liberating to realize that our contemporary ideals, along with many other sets of ideals, are not as universal as we would like to think.

Even after two years working at the health clinic in Niger, I still felt a twinge of happiness if I weighed less rather than more, and I still thought my life was going better if I was thinner rather than fatter. But I also had to see the beauty of those around me in their fatter, too, found that Nigerien woman less attractive than a fatter one, and when I came home to the United States, I began to find American women who approximated the Nigerien ideals attractive, even if I still held to the thin ideal simultaneously. (I have since come home to the thin ideal since.)

I began to find American women who approximated the Nigerien ideals attractive. Even if I still held to the thin ideal simultaneously. (I have since come home to the thin ideal since.)

Then, after returning to Niger after my initial visit, and living in the desert with Nigerien Arab culture for two years, I finally did start "reading" even Western slenderness in a new way. Thin women started to appear severe and many to me, as if their body...
it has become such an odious, even illness-inducing task for so many women in the West today. But, fat or thin, it may be difficult to eliminate the ideals themselves. Better, perhaps, to work on our own attitudes toward them, helped at least a little bit by knowing about places where fat itself is ideal.

Oil
Anne Meneley

I’m staying in a charming Tuscan villa that looks as if it has existed from time immemorial, on a lovely olive and wine estate. Tuscany in mid-November is misty and cool, lit with a luminous light. The view from my room: cypress-lined drives, rolling hills, and picturesque terra-cotta farmhouses nestled amongst olive trees. In the tiled dining room surrounded by charming examples of Italian pottery, we sip the famed Italian sparkling wine, Prosecco, and graze on newly cured plump green olives. We taste and compare five of the more expensive Tuscan extra-virgin olive
oils, each from a particular estate. We ask each other: a hint of watercress? A peppery aftertaste? We are newly minted olive oil connoisseurs, after all. We rave about our intriguing visit to the _frantoio_, the olive mill, where the air is moist and oleaginous and the people with their olives so photogenic. Exquisite courses follow, one after another, each coupled with a different wine . . .

I feel myself starting to wax rhapsodic, as if channeling one of the myriad food and travel articles about the unmitigated aesthetic and gustatory pleasures of Tuscany. The kind of writing that exudes the breathy impression that the only crises that one may face in Tuscany are those of food and wine is a style of which I am usually skeptical. Of course, I’m imitating it rather badly, since I can’t really remember exactly what we ate that night, nor the names of the olive oils after the third (fourth?) round of prosecco. A real aficionado of this discourse, like _Under the Tuscan Sun_ author Frances Mayes, would be able to describe the olive oil this way: “I think I taste the hot wind of summer in one, the first rain of autumn in another, then the history of the Roman road, sunlight on leaves.” One might finish with a lament that one won’t really be able to properly reproduce the experience anyway, because everything tastes better in Tuscany. But I’m an anthropologist, not a foodie, and my interests lie elsewhere.

Why, I wondered, in this fat-phobic moment in North American history, is olive oil growing in popularity? Extra-virgin olive oil has become the sexiest and most desirable of the fat family of late. It has gone from “ethnic” oddity to household staple; it has displaced butter from the tables of fashionable North American restaurants. Butter, of course, has been demonized not only as a fat but also as an animal fat, bad for one’s cholesterol. Even though the sudden reemergence of the Atkins diet equally de-

monizes carbs, trans fats—the solid, hydrogenated fats—are still making headlines. Fat has been dubbed “the new tobacco” and is the leading cause of cardiovascular illness. Olive oil, in contrast, is at the center of the “heart-friendly” Mediterranean diet. As such, it is a “good” fat, a vitamin-rich, life-giving fat, as opposed to the fats that threaten life by hardening the arteries or disposing one toward diabetes. Yet, health concerns cannot be the only reason for the shift from animal fats, like butter, to olive oil: fatty fish oils are also promoted as heart-healthy, but it is hard to imagine dishes of salmon fat gracing the tables of chichi restaurants.

When I was sampling different extra-virgin olive oils at the tasting, I did not think about the fact that I was sipping straight fat—healthy or otherwise. Rather, I was trying to appreciate aesthetically the qualities of each oil. Extra-virgin olive oil is a fat that lends itself to being experienced and talked about in the language of discernment that many call “winespeak.” The language of wine evaluation, whereby the taste and aroma of wines are described in reference to other tastes and smells, has inspired similar ways of evaluating not only olive oil but other luxury products like gourmet coffee, Scotch whiskey, and cheese. Like those products, extra-virgin olive oil requires knowledge and sophistication to be properly appreciated. Like good wine, it should be appreciated for quality over quantity; indeed, extra-virgin olive oil should be used not to fry but to adorn salads, vegetables, or bread. Extra-virgin olive oil is a good fat for contemporary North American palates these days because it is at once ascetic and hedonistic: ascetic in that it is healthy and consumed sparingly, and hedonistic in that it can be aesthetically appreciated as a tasteful luxury good.
But it is also a fat that is often associated with a place, as the term Mediterranean diet, of which it is a mainstay, implies. More specifically, it is a fat associated with Italy. Even though much of the oil that comes from Italy is produced elsewhere—in Spain, Greece, Tunisia, or Turkey—and merely blended and bottled in Italy, the impression that the producers strive to give is that the oil is Italian. The reason for this is that Italian olive oil is described and marketed as being intertwined with Italy as a site of beauty and contentment. Discussions of the qualities of Italian olive oil will often begin with a statement like the following from Bauson and Chibois’s gourmet guide to olive oil: “The colors and the perfumes [of Italy], the houses and objects, the cooking and the music—all come together in an ambiance very much resembling happiness.”

Not only things Italian, but particularly things Tuscan, are highly valued these days. Tuscany is not only noted for high-quality olive oil, although Tuscan producers have been particularly successful in selling their extra-virgin olive oil on the international market. Tuscany itself is pervasively, imaginatively desired as a sensual place with a sexy cuisine. In foreigners’ accounts of living or vacationing in Tuscany, we read endlessly of delicious meals in beautiful surroundings. Take for instance this snippet from Hungarian novelist Ferenc Mate’s The Hills of Tuscany: A New Life in an Old Land, in which the author describes living in a Tuscan farmhouse with his wife, Candace. Here he recounts one of the most memorable gastronomic moments of his life:

Candace had asked for olive oil at the hamlet’s store, and the owner took her down to his cantina where a big earthen jar was hiding in the cold, and ladled some thick oil into a jar for pre-

serves. So we spooned some of that over the sliced tomatoes... and then we took a bite. And fell silent. We looked at each other. What kind of flavors do these tomatoes have? They tasted peppery and bittersweet, and tangy with a complexity that burst as it passed over your tongue. Then we realized it wasn’t the tomatoes at all, but the opaque green olive oil that we’d poured over them. We poured some more. We dipped bread in. We spooned it. We dipped a carrot in it. We dipped our fingers in it. We licked the forks. And we moaned like kids let loose in a pastry shop. It was our first encounter with hill-grown, stone-pressed Tuscan olive oil. One of God’s great creations—now that we press our own, we use a quart a week.”

It is hard to imagine all this sensual dipping, licking, and moaning about another fat, like margarine, for instance. And extra-virgin olive oil is a fat that can be described as “one of God’s great creations.” Even metaphorically, a fat like margarine cannot be perceived as either divine or sensual.

Mayes’s Under the Tuscan Sun seems similarly seductive for readers, at least if its years on bestseller lists can be taken as an indication. The book is a memoir of Mayes’s relishing of the sweet life—la dolce vita—in Tuscany, where she bought and renovated a villa with her second husband, Ed, a poet. Many Italians I met in Tuscany who had read the book said that it made life in Tuscany sound not only sweet but perhaps a little too sweet. At the same time, though, they said that Under the Tuscan Sun was great for tourism, which keeps many Tuscans employed.

Of course, a book like Under the Tuscan Sun is aimed not at Tuscans at all but at the non-Italians who wish to go to Tuscany. It describes a life that does indeed sound sweet, with the chief
preoccupations being the acquisition and consumption of delicious food and wine. Mayes’s house is beautiful, the air aromatic with flowers and herbs. Tuscan recipes adorn her accounts of shopping for the perfect seasonal vegetables or exquisitely produced cheese or sausages while visiting yet another picturesque hill town. Mayes and her husband themselves participate in this artisanal production, by picking and pressing their own olives, producing their own extra-virgin olive oil from their own trees. She writes:

At home we pour a little into a bowl and dip in pieces of bread, as people all over Tuscany must be doing. Our oil! I’ve never tasted better. There’s a hint of a watercress taste, faintly peppery but fresh as the stream watercress is pulled from. With this oil, I’ll make every bruschetta known and some as yet unknown. Perhaps I’ll even learn to eat my oranges with oil and salt as I’ve seen the priest do.⁴

The appeal of the book for legions of middle class North American readers is surely its tantalizing contrast to the lives that they lead at this moment in late capitalism, where people feel themselves to be under almost continual stress and the pressures of time. Time in Tuscany, if we are to believe Under the Tuscan Sun, moves at a different pace, more slowly, as if almost not of modern time. People take siestas in cooled tiled rooms, behind shuttered windows, something few employed North Americans can do. The book is structured seasonally, evoking a life ordered by an agricultural calendar instead of the needs of a corporate workweek. In North America, concerns about the safety of the food we consume often involve the anonymity of modern industrial food production. Foods can contain dangerous trans fats; it’s nearly impossible to trace the meat in a hamburger infected with E. coli; distantly grown vegetables might be genetically modified to withstand packaging and shipping; foods may contain dangerous additives and pesticides. In North American grocery stores, we can buy produce from all over the world, in any season, but we don’t know who the producers are or how they are producing it.

In contrast, Mayes describes buying meat from local people she knows, and vegetables that are grown locally, picked fresh, and sold in season. Or she grows her own—potatoes, for instance—to roast with her own rosemary and newly pressed olive oil. In the Tuscany that Frances Mayes describes, fast food, consumed alone and on the run, does not appear. Rather, meals are slowly prepared and consumed convivially. No dangerous fast food fats disguised with artificial flavoring appear here; food in Tuscany is drizzled with or dipped in healthy and naturally delicious fat, olive oil.

**Following the Extra-Virgin**

Consumers in North America and Northern Europe seem to view olive oil as an exception to a more general perception of fat as bad; indeed, in the aesthetic economy of fat, consuming extra-virgin olive oil is now a positive fat experience. I wanted to know how the Italian producers understood their country’s beloved fat, now popular abroad. So I went to Tuscany to interview olive oil producers, who love to consume their own product, too, but their understandings of it, I learned, extend far beyond the delights of its consumption. Both producers and consumers value the same
qualities of the oil, its full-bodied taste, and its virginity, but they do so in different ways. North Americans who comment on my research on olive oil invariably ask, “What’s with the extra-virgin thing?”—bringing to the fore the link between oil and sex. Both producers and consumers seem to link olive oil to sensual pleasure. But I have found that producers of olive oil in Tuscany see the connections between sex and Tuscan olive oil differently than do its consumers abroad.

Technically, the term extra-virgin is now used to refer to oil that has less than 1 percent acidity. This grading is now established scientifically, but the way extra-virgin olive oil is talked about by producers and consumers suggests that its metaphoric power extends far beyond science. All of the olive oil producers that I spoke to displayed distaste for the “industrial” processing of olive oil. Each claimed a production style that at least evoked a traditional style of production—the use of a stone mill to grind the olives, for instance—as a way of claiming an authenticity for their oil. But what struck me most in conversations with Italian olive oil producers was their reference to the themes of purity and danger, their use of metaphors of religious and sexual notions of purity and pollution, metaphors of surveillance and enclosure, and concerns for establishing authenticity.

I was told of a Tuscan proverb that says “Your oil is more important than your wife.” Another is “Oil is the mother, wine is the sin.” Oil is referred to as if it were a virginal daughter who must be kept secluded from taint, but also as a chaste mother to be revered. Olive oil was the pure “lean” fat of Lent in medieval Italy; lard was thought to be an indulgence. The complicated connections between the sexual and the sacred are also evident in the fact that when a bottle of extra-virgin oil is broken, one is supposed to call a priest to get the house exorcised. It is as if the virgin olive oil, escaping its vessel, spreading across boundaries, out of control, penetrating where it is not supposed to, requires a strong ritual hand to restore virtue.

This connection between sex and olive oil came up during a conversation with a family of former sharecroppers who operated a mill in the province of Arezzo, in Tuscany. I spoke with the patriarch and his middle-aged son, who was currently running the mill. In the midst of the son’s explanation of how they retained the old stone mill to ensure an authentic cold-pressed oil, his father jumped up to interject, “These young people, they can’t make love!” Here he made a screwing motion with his hand. “They eat the industrially processed oil without the vitamins and goodness of the virgin olive oil. Italian women are going to be very worried if men continue to eat mass-produced oil, because their men are not going to be strong enough to satisfy them sexually.”

Of the mass-produced oils of which he spoke, the very worst kind is called sansa oil. The dregs of the olive pressing, the crushed pits and skins, are chemically treated until they become “fit, if not desirable for human consumption,” as one of the increasingly ubiquitous olive oil guides describes it. It is highly processed, brought to the accepted acidity level only through chemicals and steam. Sometimes this sansa oil has a little extra-virgin oil mixed in to add color, and according to my Italian informants this is often sold as “light” olive oil to North American consumers, who are fooled into thinking that the label means light in calories, which it is not.

As we were sitting drinking an espresso in the central square in Cortona, my young Italian tutor explained his theory that
North Americans are more flabby than sexy because they consume this sansa oil when they eat their daily buckets of french fries. I protested that not every North American ate french fries every day, but clearly I did not convince him, especially as droves of weighty North American tourists tramped past us, unabashed in their shorts, baggy T-shirts, and jogging shoes, in stark contrast to the slim and chichly adorned Italians. My tutor seemed to find this topic a good deal more fascinating than our Italian lessons: he relentlessly detailed his thoughts about the connection between the kind of fat consumed and both moral and physical qualities of the persons who consume them. Consuming mass-produced, cheap, commodity oil denuded of the healthful qualities and distinctive taste of the olive produces bodies that are swollen and unkempt, not capable of discerning good taste from bad, neither healthy nor attractive.

**One Bad Olive?**

This kind of industrial fat is the opposite of sexy; extra-virgin olive oil, in dramatic contrast, is a fat that is both sexy and virginal. Producers in Italy are vigilant about their virginal oil. The taint imparted to bad oil cannot be expunged, as Lorenza De’ Medici, the famous culinary author, olive oil producer, and cooking school diva, notes: "As anyone knows who has developed a taste for fine extra virgin oil, bad oil cannot be disguised by any amount of cooking or seasoning. It is immediately detectable and will ruin the taste of your sauce." Thus, like parents following their daughters around on the *passeggiata*, the evening stroll through the town, to ensure that their reputations are not besmirched, owners of olives are vigilant and suspicious, following their own olives throughout the entire processing, even if they know and trust the miller. One olive producer, Maurizio, told me that you had to pay even more attention to your olives than to your daughter. Olive producers know that, as with sex, olive oil, once no longer virgin, can never regain its virtue. When I asked Maurizio the question that I’ve so often been asked, “What’s with that extra-virgin thing?” he laughed and said that it is more about marketing than anything else. After all, he quipped, olive oil is like a woman, who can either be a virgin or not: how could either be extra-virgin?

Italian olive oil producers refer to extra-virgin olive oil as "liquid gold," an unusual nickname for a fat, but apt indeed from the perspective of the North American consumer who now pays forty or fifty dollars for a 500-ml bottle. Those Italian olive oil producers who receive an extra-virgin grade get a subsidy from the government to use toward the next year’s oil. It also means they can sell their oil for more money. Yet olive oil producers are not solely concerned with financial gain. Those who bring their olives to the same mill are highly competitive with one another, and the purity of their olives and the resulting oil is a point of honor for them. The quality of the olives not only affects the acidity level of the oil—and subsequently its grading as extra-virgin or not—but also the quantity of the oil. Producers watch every drop of the precious greeny-gold fat as it pours out and cast suspicious glances over their shoulders. The men—this is predominantly a masculine space—eye one another’s oil, trying to gauge how many liters each man is receiving for each hundred kilos of olives. There is fierce competition down to the last liter.

I visited a *frantoio* (olive mill) one autumn with Maurizio. Although I had previously visited olive mills in the summer, the
charm of the mill is not evident until it is in operation, which happens in Tuscany from mid-November to mid-December. The air was redolent of olives. The normally immaculately dressed Italians wore scruffy clothes, their hands black from picking olives. Each container of picked olives was adorned with a scrap of paper noting the name of the owner, which seemed largely superfluous given the close watch that each owner kept over his olives. What stuck me most were the both challenging and defensive looks on people’s faces as we walked into the frantoio. Everyone I talked to expressed a fear of the “bad olive.” The reason for this soon became clear.

Everyone’s olives are processed in the same equipment; the olives are first crushed in a stone press. The olive paste is then spread onto circular mats (fiscoli) and squeezed until the oil comes through and the sediment is left on the mat. The owners of the olives want to ascertain that olives that preceded theirs are pure. Acidity level (which is increased by bad olives) will affect whether the oil can be officially graded as “extra-virgin,” so someone else’s bad olives can affect the virginal status of one’s oil. The millers, too, have to be vigilant about this lest their mill get a “bad reputation” as a “tainted” mill.

The relationship between olive owner and miller should ideally be one of trust: trust that the miller won’t accept impure olives, which could then taint the olive oil of all the customers. It is the responsibility of the miller to screen out the bad olives. Yet the customers who bring their olives to the mill rarely leave it up to him. In fact, as Maurizio told me, as soon as you walk into the mill, you should look at the other men standing there, to see what kind of people they are. It was not quite clear to me how one would identify by sight a person who would have the temerity to pass off bad olives as good olives, ruining everyone’s oil in the process, but Maurizio implied that it was self-evident. He described how he would peer into others’ olive crates, asking their owners when they had picked their olives. What he wanted to know, he told me, was whether their olives were bruised or moldy. I asked Maurizio if he might not possibly insult people by questioning their olives. He retorted with a contemptuous shrug, “If you insult them, you insult them. Who cares? You will save your own oil. And those behind you, waiting to press their olives, will thank you for keeping the bad olives out of the mill.” The subtext was that it was more important to defend one’s oil than to be polite to purveyors of skanky olives, who clearly do not deserve the ordinary tokens of civility.

With the widespread practice of selling foreign oil as Italian, producers were concerned to establish the origins of their own oil. Questioning an oil’s origin was something I heard over and over again, with people worrying that the label did not represent the product. Some claimed that you could only trust estates that guaranteed the origin of the olives. Others said it was best to see the olive oil bottled straight from the terra-cotta pot. People talked about nationalities of olive oil—both favored and despised. These territorial concerns seemed to evoke just as powerfully concerns for paternity and legitimacy: the desire to know with certainty of whom this olive oil was the progeny.

Concerns for an oil’s origin and purity are evident in the promotional material for the Laudemio group, a collective of Tuscan estates that produce extra-virgin olive oil. In its signature bottle, this oil sells for close to $40 U.S. for 500 ml. The prerequisite for membership in the Laudemio group is location within a specific region of central Tuscany. Geographical origin is not the only
qualification, however; when I asked an Italian if former peasants in this region would be eligible to join Laudemio, he laughed and said, "No, only the nobility can join Laudemio." Laudemio markets its "noble oil" by highlighting the noble descent of its producers, as if the oil itself were the spawn of the noble lineage. Its expensive promotional book, *An Oil Called Laudemio*, includes photos of the Laudemio members on their stunning Tuscan estates, and recipes for Laudemio oil offered by famous foreigners and Italians. Movie producer Franco Zeffirelli, for instance, claims that the Laudemio group has taken steps to stop the "bastardization" in the purity of the olive lineage. He says, "All we can do is hope that [Laudemio's] creators manage to keep it in the enviable position which it currently occupies of being the purest of the pure."

This concern to protect extra-virgin olive oil against taint extends to the ways in which it is stored. The oil is enclosed in cool interior rooms, far from prying eyes. One Italian aristocrat showed me into his olive oil storage room, a pristine cold room in the cellar. It was this room—housing the large and shapely terra-cotta pots in which the extra-virgin olive oil is stored—that he referred to as "his kingdom," not his grand house, even though it was formerly a Medici tower.

Although my friend Maurizio let us see his wine cellars, something his assistant said not many people would do, he did not volunteer to show us his olive oil storeroom. He told us that after the oil was pressed, it needed to rest in dark and quiet, undisturbed. One is not supposed to smoke or use heavy scents when entering a mill or oil storage room; these odors could penetrate, spoiling the oil. Like wine, olive oil should be evaluated by color, aroma, and taste (*colore, profuma*, and *sapore*); like a woman, olive oil should make a good impression, cut a fine figure, a *bella figura*. With a deft gesture, Maurizio mimed the shape of a woman's body, slim yet full-figured; his wicked grin and wink suggested her allure. Extra-virgin olive oil is a fat that should itself have a *bella figura*, and it is also a fat that can ensure a *bella figura* in people.

Tuscan olive oil producers often claim that "Tuscan olive oil is the best. That is well known and that is why it sells so well." Whether or not this assertion is strictly true is perhaps best for professional olive oil tasters to judge. But what is true is that as Tuscan olive oil flows into North American markets, North Americans flow into Tuscany. So, as the commodity moves toward the customers, the customers move toward the commodity. Extra-virgin olive oil is one element of a prestigious cuisine that evokes sophistication and *la dolce vita*. It is a fat that achieves what seems to be impossible now: being aesthetically pleasing and healthy, alluring and unsullied, hedonistic and ascetic. Although North American olive oil consumers might not put it in quite the same way as my Italian tutor, they seem to be, implicitly at least, making a similar association between bad, processed, and tainted fats that lead to a flaccid and unhealthy body, and a good, natural, and virginal fat which lead to a healthy and attractive body, a *bella figura*. And in extra-virgin olive oil's carefully pressed, virginal form, this is fat that can be imagined as liquid gold or a gift from God. It is a rare fat these days that can be envisioned as both precious and divine, both sexy and pure.
character Gargantua, who revels in his gluttony, rappers embrace "unapologetic fat" that represents a lusty love of living life to its fullest. Unapologetic fat attempts to mask the effects of hunger that are created by the lack of a nurturing environment and, often, a lack of food itself. Lack reminds one of one's defenselessness, one's small place in a world brimming with desirable yet unattainable objects. Fatness symbolizes the desire to take up space and be recognized.

The escape of hip-hop heroes from urban poverty to the acquisition of wealth and fame adheres to the beloved American narrative of moving up the social hierarchy through individual effort. But the stories diverge from the typical American success story in that in the rap narratives, social mobility is achieved through violent, illegal means—drug dealing and robbery—not legitimate work. (The actual intellectual work that goes into rhyming and marketing those rhymes is hidden from the listener.) On the other hand, the focus on consumer goods in the lyrics and lives of rappers follows the common American pattern that urges us to buy more and eat more. In this sense, while it does protest many aspects of mainstream culture, hip-hop culture does not escape the webs of American consumer society.

In the end, though, hip-hop does offer a different perspective on fat. For Big Pun and other fat rappers like him, fat bodies and fat music translate into fame and financial success. The celebration of corpulence in rap music contests mainstream American ideals and messages that tell us that fat is sad, repellent, and shameful. Rather than being a source of shame, in hip-hop, fatness is celebrated as a positive sign of power and attraction.

One recent, lonesome night at the seedy Chelsea Star motel, my childhood friend Eli decided to price out some escort services with numbers culled from the back of a certain well-known NYC weekly. Realizing that his dream night was only to be a night of dreams, he headed out into the humid darkness in search of a less expensive way of sating his appetite. He came back with a cheese steak and one copy of Big Butts. I had never known Eli—the person with whom, in the seventh grade, I viewed my first porn—to have a taste for larger women... But he does. And so, I imagine, do some of you.
That little quote is the beginning of a review on fat hard-core films, in The Village Voice's biweekly porn column, written by someone who calls himself Johnny Maldoro. The review rates videos like Chunky Cheerleaders: Obesity U, Chunky Chicks 19, and Scale Bustin' Bimbos 5. It makes a lot of lame fat jokes along the way, and it concludes on the same note, with the self-satisfied chuckle that "sweet dreams are made of this."

The videos that Johnny Maldoro reviews are ones in which the women featured, for the most part, have some form of vaginal sex. The sex might be somewhat out of the ordinary: in Chunky Cheerleaders: Obesity U, for example, two women insert a long, fleshly dildo into each other's privates, but the camera focuses on how they then simultaneously eat out the centers of a couple of Twinkies. So it isn't exactly traditional hard-core porn. Nevertheless, some form of genital contact is depicted.

Beyond this kind of pornography—which differs from more conventional varieties only in that it features fat women—there is another kind of fat pornography directed at a more specialized audience. This is a pornography that many of us have encountered, usually without even being aware of it—often, it turns out, in shopping malls. It is displayed on the racks of greeting-card stores, in the sections reserved for gay birthday cards, fart cards, and cards featuring toothless old women. Interspersed in sections like this, you will often find a range of fat-lady cards. These will always depict full body shots of astonishingly obese women, either nude or in see-through lingerie, smiling seductively and blowing kisses above captions like "It's Your Birthday, Let It All Hang Out" or "The Best Things Come in Big Packages." Next time you see a card like this, take a moment to consider that many of the models in those cards are famous in the world of fat pornography, where they are regarded as goddesses.

This kind of pornography specializes in women who weigh well over three hundred pounds. Some of the biggest stars tip the scales at more than five hundred pounds. Aside from the sheer size of these models, the single most striking thing about this genre of pornography is that the women who are pictured do not engage in sex. Instead, they pose: dressed in lingerie in their bedrooms, clad in bikinis or everyday clothes on their living-room sofas, standing naked in their kitchens. While they do sometimes display their breasts and their behinds, most of the camera work is focused on their stomachs. Genitals are generally not exposed, perhaps because once a woman passes the four-hundred-pound mark, it's frankly impossible to actually see her genitals without the aid of special equipment.

Instead of having sex, these women have food. They eat. Photos show them tucking into a pizza, spooning into a carton of ice
cream, slurping spaghetti, luxuriating in whipped cream, pouring syrup on a stack of pancakes, biting into a bun.  

The pornographic act is not the display of a penis or some other object entering a woman’s vagina. Instead, the pornographic act is the display of fat food entering a fat woman’s mouth. Look at the racy promises made on a Web site advertising videos for this particular erotic market:

"Sandie—The Boudoir Video" is a private peek into a fat woman’s boudoir and bath. This video features Sandie in revealing lingerie, moving and dancing and smiling seductively. There is an extremely provocative eating scene, not to mention her playful ex-

perience with a large bowl of whipped cream, for those of you who enjoy eating fantasies. And finally, we see all of Sandie in her 350 lb nude exuberance, enjoying herself in a heart-shaped Jacuzzi tub full of bubbles. (Tasteful nudity) 55 minutes, set to music.  

“Tasteful nudity,” indeed: the playful experience with the large bowl of whipped cream electrifies that phrase, opening it up to a whole new range of possibilities and meanings.

Here’s another teaser, this one from fat porn diva Supersize Betsy’s Web site:

*My new video includes: my eating a huge breakfast-in-bed in the nude . . . me walking in the nude . . . me being tied down and fed two quarts of cream through a thick tube (thicker than previous video—so it flows into me very fast! My belly also “sits” on the bed beautifully in this scene) . . .  

What, one might ask, is going on here? Are scenes of eating like this really pornographic? Yes, they are, say fans. The first issue of the now-defunct lesbian zine Fat GIRL (“A Zine for Fat Dykes and the Women who Want Them”) contained no less than eighteen photos of hefty women, most of them fully clothed, feeding each other grapes, whipped cream, ice cream, and other foods. Issue number two published this letter from a reader:

*I think my favorite part of the first issue . . . were the photos of the women feeding each other. So pornographic!!! I don’t think I’ve ever seen pictures of big women eating, happily eating, much less feeding each other with such obvious enjoyment. Those pictures just shot an electric current through me."
Others who clearly find such pictures erotic are individuals who identify as “feeders” and “feedees.” A feeder is a person who gets pleasure out of encouraging and helping another person gain weight. A feedee is someone who enjoys gaining weight, especially when assisted by a feeder, in the context of a sensual or a sexual relationship. The ultimate sign of commitment in a feeder-feedee relationship is when the feedee allows herself to be “taken to immobility” by her feeder—that is, when she is made to gain so much weight that she is unable to walk. Women like Supersize Betsy, who is one of the best-known feedees, speak about this in romantic terms. At over five hundred pounds, Betsy told an interviewer that she thought she could only put on about another eighty pounds before she reached immobility. But “I wouldn’t want to put it on casually,” she explained. “I’m sort of saving myself for the right man.”

Feeder-feedee relationships are controversial, even among fat admirers. It is striking that the majority of feedees seem to be heterosexual women: fat lesbians who discussed the phenomenon in an issue of Fat Girl were appalled by the patriarchal implications of a man fattening up a woman so that she remained totally dependent on him. But as Supersize Betsy herself points out, few male feeders are in fact willing to take their female feedees to immobility:

There are other problems that come with the size, like skin-fold rashes. You’d have to be with somebody that’s willing to care for you 24 hours a day. And those people don’t really exist. I’ve been looking for six years and I haven’t found any man who really wanted to take me to immobility. They may fantasize about it, but they don’t really want to do it.

It is this realm of fantasy that fat pornography caters to. And although fantasies are always intensely private experiences, one thing we do know about them is that they do not occur randomly. Instead, what people fantasize about is related to their position and power in the real world. For this reason, fantasies tend to cluster in socially predictable ways. So a sociological question that can be asked about fat fantasies is: Who has them?

If we begin with gender and sexuality, we can note that there are, perhaps unsurprisingly, no pornographic Web sites or magazines where five-hundred-pound men strut their ample stuff for women. Neither have I found much evidence of lesbian-oriented fat pornography. The zine Fat Girl, which I have already mentioned, existed for three years in the mid-1990s, but it only published six issues and then stopped appearing in 1997. The images in Fat Girl were in many ways similar to the images of display and eating that I have shown so far. There was more sex, however: the first issue contained a centerfold that featured a fat woman in leather being fisted in the vagina. This image was typical of the magazine. Whenever fat sex was portrayed in Fat Girl, it tended to be bondage or sadomasochistic sex.

There are Web sites and magazines for large gay men, such as magazines called Bulge and Bulk Male, and a Web site called Big Beller. These exhibit some of the same pictorial conventions as the magazines or Web sites that feature women: that is to say, there is a focus on the stomach, and there are sometimes photos of eating. But a very clear difference is that the extreme forms of obesity that characterize many of the “Big Beautiful Women” (BBW) Web sites and videos are absent. There are no five-hundred-pound gay male porn stars. Instead, gay male fat admiration seems focused on an ample, often hairy belly but not on disabling
obesity. I have not found any indication that there are any fat gay men out there wanting to be taken to immobility by other men.

Race is a very interesting dimension of fat pornography, because fat pornography is consistently racially marked as white. There are, of course, hundreds of “booty” videos, magazines and Web sites in which black and Latina women display their behinds. But the kind of fat pornography I am discussing here consists overwhelmingly of white women, and it seems directed, as far as one can tell, at white men. It is not particularly obvious why this should be the case, especially when you consider that one of the most widespread and enduring images of fat women in North American culture is the black ‘mammy.’

And sure enough, the mammy image was raised during a roundtable discussion on fatness and race that appeared in the third issue of Fat Girl. During that conversation, an African American woman named Wolfie observed that she had always found that it’s more acceptable for women of color to be fat “because we’re the ‘Earth Mothers,’ we’re more in touch with our ‘naturalistic feelings.’ . . .”


Yeah, Wolfie agrees: “And it’s like, No, you do not get to automatically take comfort from my tits!”

The kinds of associations between black women, “naturalistic feelings,” and large breasts that “automatically” offer comfort are, of course, the result of a long and demeaning racist history. So why aren’t they out there circulating in fat pornography? It’s surprising that they’re not, because while it holds much allure for many, pornography is the last place one should look to find socially progressive messages. To the contrary, pornography is the corner to which the politically incorrect retreats where it has nowhere else to go. Pornography welcomes the forbidden. It sustains the vulgar. It traffics in the offensive. Hence, the fact that fat pornography has not (yet?) exploited racist images of obese black women is puzzling.

Perhaps the place to find an explanation for this absence is in social attitudes toward obesity. To the extent that Wolfie’s experiences can be generalized, it seems that perhaps (in the United States, at any rate) fatness in nonwhite women may not elicit the same condemnation as does fatness in white women. This is certainly the case in many nonwhite communities, where we know that fatness does not have the same strong associations with revulsion that it has among whites. Studies about body images among different groups conclude that among African Americans, for example, there is a more flexible image of female beauty—one that places more emphasis on personal style than on approximations to an ideal standard.” We might say that the reason why fat pornography is a predominantly white genre is this: because fatness in women of color isn’t as denied and repressed as fatness in white women is, black fat doesn’t lend itself as readily to pornographic representation.

So, What’s with the Eating?

Why does fat pornography exist at all? Like all pornography, fat pornography produces frissons (little eruptions of surprise, shock, and/or erotic pleasure) because it transgresses social norms. It celebrates what society tells us is nasty. And the way pornography celebrates is by inverting social messages: turning them on their head. In fat pornography, what is inverted, obviously, is the value that society places on thin bodies and on the carefully controlled eating strategies we should all practice in order to attain those bodies. Celebrating fat as sexy is an outrageous provocation in a
society where fat women are reviled. Fat Girl asked readers how they thought fat women were represented in the media. A typical response was this:

_Hatefully. You almost never see positive representations of fat women on TV. If a woman is fat, she has to be: sloppy, ugly, funny—but self-deprecating funny, asexual, confined to her home or office, sitting in front of the TV eating bon bons, on a diet, on an exercise binge, sick because she’s got high blood pressure or she’s fat (not because she’s sick from dieting, purging and yo-yoing to meet some impossible standard), hoping for Mr. Right to love her in spite of her “weight problem.”_

On the other hand, examples of the outright celebration of women who shed pounds abound. The adulation that greets celebrities like Elizabeth Hurley and Catherine Zeta-Jones when they manage to lose the weight they gain during pregnancy is of the ecstatic sort usually reserved for Olympic champions. Many seemed to think that the actress Renée Zellweger deserved an Oscar in 2003 simply because she transformed herself from the overweight frump she portrayed in Bridget Jones’s Diary into the svelte sexpot she played in Chicago. Oprah Winfrey’s never-ending “battles” with her weight (for an earlier generation, it was Elizabeth Taylor’s) continue to galvanize a nation. Ex–Spice Girl Geri Halliwell keeps getting thinner and blonder and has built a second career out of dieting. The cover of the second installment of her autobiography features her smugly entwined in a tape measure.

In contemporary Western societies, where fat is relentlessly demonized as unattractive, unhealthy, and undesirable, it is both culturally and psychologically predictable that there should be a “return of the repressed.” Long ago, Freud explained that a sure-fire way to make something desirable is to say it is bad and forbid it. We see evidence of this all the time. What words do small children positively delight in repeating? The forbidden, “bad” ones. What do we do to celebrate some victory or happy event? We eat cake, drink alcohol, smoke cigars—all behaviors that are widely classified as “bad” and that many people ban in their day-to-day lives.

Because the forbidden incites desire because it is forbidden, to wonder why fat pornography exists is to miss the obvious. At least if you believe Freud. He would tell us that it exists, not despite the fact that it repels many, but precisely because it repels many people.

The much more intriguing thing to consider is what exactly we are seeing when we see fat pornography. If it is indeed the case, as cultural critic Laura Kipnis puts it, that “fat . . . is what

Photo by Vicki Martin. Reproduced with permission.
our culture doesn’t want to look at. Pornography, in response, puts it on view,” then what exactly is it that is on view? 21 What are we being called upon to see when we watch a video of 350-pound Sandie enjoying a playful experience with a large bowl of whipped cream, or when we gaze at 540-pound Supersize Betsy eating a huge breakfast in bed in the nude? Or when we see this happy lesbian on the cover of Fat Girls? 21

One of the first scholarly studies of hard-core pornographic films was written by Linda Williams, a professor of film studies at the University of California, Berkeley. Williams’s book, Hard Core, was published in 1989; 4 today it is regarded as a classic. The central claim of Hard Core is that pornography poses a challenge for itself that it subsequently has problems resolving. The challenge is how to depict true sexual pleasure. Men’s pleasure is easy to show. It is hard if not impossible for a man to fake an ejaculation, especially given the low budgets and limited editing capacities of most pornographic films. Hence, the so-called money shot—the orgasmic scene at the end of a sexual encounter where a man ejaculates onto a woman’s body or face—says it all, which is why those shots exist in the first place. In other words, the coitus interruptus we see in porn films is not a magnanimous gesture of the industry to help prevent unwanted pregnancies among pornographic actresses. It is there to show that the sex that is depicted is genuine, hot, and orgasmic. For the man.

Women’s sexual pleasure is much trickier to portray convincingly. Sure, a woman can moan and writhe and cry, “I’m coming, I’m coming.” But how do you know for sure that she really had an orgasm and that she isn’t just acting or faking it? Where is the evidence? For a long time, pornography dealt with this problem either by ignoring it (pre-1970s stag films, for example, were indifferent to women’s orgasms) or else by portraying a woman’s invisible pleasure by showing close-ups of a man’s visible ejaculation. The single most famous scene in which this occurs is the climactic sequence in the 1972 film Deep Throat, when the star, Linda Lovelace, has her “first” orgasm. The entire movie builds up to this moment, and it finally occurs when Linda Lovelace performs fellatio on a doctor who has diagnosed her as having a clitoris at the back of her throat. In the film, Linda Lovelace’s orgasm is visually represented by big bells ringing, fireworks exploding, a rocket launching—and the doctor ejaculating onto her cheek. We don’t see the doctor’s face during this orgasmic sequence. All the visual signs represent her pleasure; the camera remains focused on Linda Lovelace’s face, even during the climactic money shot.

During the past few decades, pornography has attempted to find other ways of depicting female pleasure. Some films occasionally omit money shots: they emphasize foreplay and afterplay, and they film sex acts in full figure, rather than zooming in on close-ups of genitals. But despite these innovations, visually depicting female sexual pleasure continues to be a specter that haunts pornography as a representational genre. How can female pleasure be represented as anything but desire for or submission to a penis that symbolizes phallic power and potency?

This is where fat pornography suddenly becomes very interesting. In its own modest way, fat pornography may have hit on one powerful way of providing another representation of female pleasure.

Shortly before he died in 1984, the French philosopher Michel Foucault granted an interview in which he waxed lyrical about sadomasochistic sex. Foucault had discovered S/M a few years earlier and was captivated, partly because of the sexual charge it gave him, but also because the philosopher in him perceived S/M as something truly radical. Foucault had spent the
better part of his working life documenting the rise of sexuality in Western life. He had shown that what we consider to be "sexuality" is not a natural or God-given phenomenon but is, instead, a culturally and historically specific way of linking together particular body parts, specific activities, sensations, and knowledges. For example, in contemporary mainstream understandings, sex is widely thought to be activity of limited duration that occurs when a person's so-called erogenous zones (nipples, mouth, genitals) are stimulated, ideally to orgasm, often by coming into contact with another person's erogenous zones. This activity is supposed to be pleasurable and to produce pleasure, and its most socially sanctioned forms occur between persons of roughly equal age, class background, and status.

Sadomasochistic sex disregards many of these linkages and rearranges them. In S/M sex, objects and body parts that are not usually imagined to be sexual (clothespins, dog collars, urine, fists) become highly eroticized. S/M sex often does not result in orgasm for anyone involved. Although it is pleasurable, it arrives at pleasure through pain, thereby linking together two sensations that "sexuality" tells us are supposed to be kept apart. It exaggerates and eroticizes power in situations where "sexuality" exhorts us to equalize or downplay it. Foucault became fascinated by S/M because he saw it as breaking with the regime that "sexuality" has imposed on our bodies, our relationships, and our perceptions of pleasure. If "sexuality" is one of the ways we come to know ourselves as individuals in contemporary society ("I am straight," "I am gay"), then S/M sex, with its disaggregation of bodies, pleasures, and knowledges, offers refreshing and subversive ways of knowing ourselves in different ways, in ways that may lead to different potentials and realizations.

Had Foucault lived long enough to surf the Web and light upon some of the "Big Beautiful Women" home pages, I think he would have liked fat pornography for similar reasons. Like sadomasochistic sex, fat pornography displaces erotic pleasure from the genitals and disperses it to other parts of the body, thereby reconfiguring what can count as a pleasurable body. That both S/M sex and fat pornography do this makes the equation in Fat GIRL between fat women and S/M a logical one.

Another break that fat pornography accomplishes is with the limited time frame that "sexuality" demands. Our understanding of sexuality dictates that we should not have sex all the time. Sex should occur in private, away from public view, and for limited periods of time (twenty minutes, two hours, a whole afternoon ... but not all the time). Fat pornography flouts this convention. It does not restrict itself to portraying particular, temporally discrete acts: indeed, to the extent that eating is sexy and even pornographic, then five-hundred-pound-plus women like Supersize Betsy clearly have bodies marked by a long history of pleasure—pleasure that far exceeds the limited duration of any particular act of sex. Sex here is not an act or a series of acts so much as it is a deliberately fashioned kind of self—an insistently sexualized self that does not stay behind closed doors but that unapologetically broadcasts its pleasure at every moment of every day.

Finally, despite the fact that most of it seems designed for male consumption, there is a decidedly nonphallic component to fat pornography's representations of female pleasure. In fact, if we wanted, we could continue to get all French about this and argue that fat pornography is a representation of the what psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan, in characteristically cryptic language, called the "jouissance of The Woman." Jouissance is French for pleasure,
or orgasm. And Lacan crossed out the *The* to indicate that there is no such thing as "The Woman," even though one of psychoanalysis's favorite pastimes has always been to generalize about "The Woman" and lecture us about what "She" wants. Toward the end of his long life, Lacan finally concluded that psychoanalysis had misperceived women all along. Female pleasure, he decided, is actually not dependent on, or even really desirous of, the phallus. On the contrary, what characterizes female pleasure and sets it apart from male pleasure is precisely that it exceeds and bypasses the phallus, therefore undermining its imagined role as the ultimate bestower of rapture.

Fat pornography depicts just this. There is no sense in many of the images that circulate in fat porn that the thing that is going to save the day for the models is a man's penis, or any other kind of genital sex. There is no indication that they are fantasizing about performing fellatio when they eat their hamburgers or that they long to be penetrated as they enjoy their stacks of breakfast pancakes. The position of the phallus is usurped here by food.

There is another French psychoanalyst—this one a feminist, expelled from Lacan's institute precisely for that reason (this was before Lacan grew old and ended up becoming something of a feminist himself). Luce Irigaray has made much in her writing about the power that a woman's "two lips" might have to *parler femme* (speak woman) and thereby displace the male phallus from its Freudian throne as the supposed source of all erotic joy. The "two lips" Irigaray refers to are vaginal lips. But maybe we should, instead, consider those other two lips and what they can do. And perhaps those intensely mouthy pleasures of lapping, licking, slurping, and crunching that we see depicted in fat pornography are some version of *parler femme*—a language of pleasure, power, and supreme disinterest in everything the phallus has to offer.

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In northern Portugal, not far from the Atlantic coast, there is a little village called Balasar. Balasar looks like many other villages in the Portuguese countryside: simple stone houses on tiny plots of land clustered together around a church. Goats tug at the grass just beside the main road. Their jingling bells fill the air with brittle clanging. Only the church bells, marking the passing hours of the day, ring louder. At the village's tavern a few guests eat in silence, virtually hidden under the vine leaves that shade the terrace. For a tourist, there appears to be nothing in particular to see or to do in Balasar. And yet almost every day, all year