Considering Fat Shame

Toward the end of fall semester in 2006, leaders from the national office of Delta Zeta sorority visited its DePauw University chapter, ostensibly to encourage the sisters in their recruitment efforts. Membership in what one unofficial survey on the campus had called the "socially awkward" Delta Zeta chapter had declined to the point that the national office was considering shutting it down. The national officers met with the thirty-five members individually, discussing each one's specific plans to increase membership. A week before finals, twenty-two of the members received a letter from the national chapter explaining that they had been placed on "alumna status"—in other words, they had been kicked out. By the beginning of the following semester, the letter explained, they had to find other housing.

According to a *New York Times* interview, the ousted members included all the "overweight" women as well as the only Vietnamese and Korean women. (The one African American member never received an expulsion letter, nor did she receive a letter asking her to stay. She presumed she had been kicked out.) The national officers countered that the evictees demonstrated insufficient commitment to the sorority. According to the evicted sisters themselves, it was all about looks and popularity, not about commitment. They pointed out that the national office had purged the sorority of the girls who did not match the stereotypical image of a "sorority girl," one who was attractive and well liked by fraternity brothers. Indeed, the national officers had actually requested that these same "unpopular"—that is, fat or nonwhite—sisters stay upstairs during a recruitment party, instead bringing in slender Delta Zeta sisters from neighboring Indiana University to meet with prospective sorority members.

While many of the rejected sorority sisters described feeling depressed after they received their letters, their sorrow soon turned to activism. Many of those who had been allowed to stay in the sorority quit in solidarity with their sisters. DePauw faculty began a petition objecting to the focus on these women's looks over their academic and service accomplishments. The

president of DePauw, Robert Bottoms, wrote a letter of recrimination to the national office of Delta Zeta. By the end of February, the *New York Times* had picked up on the story, followed by stories in *Time*, *Newsweek*, and *Ms.* Public outrage, as well as the anger of alumni and parents, led the president to kick the Delta Zeta chapter off of campus. After refusing any more communication with what it termed a hostile media, the Delta Zeta national office launched a federal lawsuit against DePauw for defamation and breach of contract. In its press release, however, it did acknowledge the "negative impact caused by the stereotypes imposed on college women in general and sorority women in particular."[1]

The story of this Delta Zeta saga may seem of little import—certainly all the rejected young women found housing for the winter term and the fate of Delta Zeta as a whole may not much interest readers other than Delta Zetas themselves. On a larger level, however, it is an interesting story about the creation of social hierarchy in the United States. While the mission statements of U.S. sororities often focus on the role of the organization in philanthropy and in creating a supportive network for its members, the reality is that sororities and fraternities are also deeply about the construction and maintenance of social status, both within the collegial environment and after graduation. Perhaps in a way the national leaders of Delta Zeta were speaking honestly when they said the twenty-two young women they kicked out were inadequately committed to the sorority; that is, if, de facto, to be a sorority member is to be concerned with maintaining and reaching the height of the social scene, and, if, de facto, this meant that one needed to be white, thin, and "American," then, by definition, these twenty-two young women could never "look" committed.

Within this Delta Zeta controversy, what particularly interests me is the way that "fatness" served as a crucial marker of social status, or rather the lack thereof. Interesting as well is the way that fatness intersected so pointedly with issues of ethnicity, class, and gender within this saga of college life in the 21st century. Indeed, the attempt by the Delta Zeta national office to reinstate a hierarchy of "white, thin, and privileged" encapsulates many of the key social issues and struggles that this book addresses: the enduring power of fat stigma; the way fat denigration overlaps with racial, ethnic, and national discrimination; the connections between both of these (fat and ethnic denigration) and class privilege; and, finally, the ways that all these elements (fat denigration, ethnic discrimination, and class privilege) intersect with gender and the construction of what it means to be a "popular girl," a properly constituted gendered subject. What is it about fat that makes it so stigmatized? What are the connections between fat denigration and eth-

nic, class, and gender discrimination? What does it mean that an institution known for bolstering economic privilege and normative femininity—a college sorority—would kick out the young women who are too "fat," too "ethnic"? Why is body size connected to a "right to belong," a "privilege of membership"? What is it, in particular, about *fat* that makes it such a liability? Why did the rejected sisters experience lingering feelings of shame and depression although they knew they had been victims of discrimination? Despite these powerful negative feelings, what gave them the strength to resist the judgment of the national officers?

Fat Shame: Stigma and the Fat Body in American Culture takes up these questions through a historical exploration of the links between body size and notions of belonging and social status, or, to use a term more common in contemporary studies of culture, to ideas of citizenship. The connections between body size and citizenship are particularly salient today, when the concern about a national "obesity epidemic" garners extraordinary attention and resources, vying for front-page coverage against news of economic collapse, two wars, elections, and environmental disasters. Indeed, popular and scientific literature often argues that Americans' body size puts the United States at more risk than the failing economy, the ongoing wars, or problems of global warming, pollution, or other forms of ecological degradation. We are an extraordinarily "fat-aware" culture, yet little attention is given to the cultural meanings attributed to fatness or the fat person, or how these meanings might shape the experiences of the fat person or the discourse surrounding this "health crisis." This book attempts to address this silence by exploring the roots of our contemporary ideas about fatness, the ways these cultural narratives still percolate today, and the voices and actions of those who have rejected dominant ideas about the rights and identities of the fat person.

Prompted by intense student interest in eating disorders and thin body ideals, I began this project interested in the history of dieting in the United States. I regularly taught Joan Jacobs Brumberg's *Fasting Girls*, an important history of anorexia nervosa in the United States, and I was curious about the industrial and commercial apparatus that supported the cultural mandate for thinness. My research quickly led me to two discoveries. The first is that the date generally understood as the advent of the diet industries and a thin body ideal—1920—was incorrect. Periodicals like *Harper's Weekly* and *Life* included countless ads for diet products and numerous cartoons lampooning fat people throughout the late 19th century. It is more accurate to understand 1920, then, as the moment when the burgeoning advertising and consumer industries could tap into and exacerbate the fat denigration and early reduc-

ing industries that were clearly in existence by the second half of the 1800s. The second thing I discovered is that the endless parade of diets from the last decades of the 1800s to the present resemble one another in surprising ways. William Banting's 19th-century high-protein and no-starch diet became today's South Beach and Atkins diets. The milk diets of the early 20th century became today's Slim Fast and NutriSlim liquid diets. The incongruous mixture of whole grain foods and Christianity by Sylvester Graham, Horace Fletcher, and John Harvey Kellogg became today's wheat and fig "Bible Bar" marketed by Tom Ciola, the author of *Moses Wasn't Fat*. One-food fixes for obesity have remained a constant, though the specific item has changed: in the early 20th century it was the banana; in the 1960s, melba toast and cottage cheese; in the 1970s, grapefruit; in the 1990s, cabbage; in the first decade of the 21st century, olive oil. Mechanical "flesh reducers" have long remained popular, from the obesity belts of the 19th century to the French-originating "Bergonie" chairs of the early 20th century, to the recently marketed "Ab Energizers," the electric stimulating abdominal belts. Difficult as it is to mark a clean line between the dieting industries and the medical industries, one must include as well the long history of pharmaceutical products designed to suppress appetite (from arsenic to fen-phen and leptin) or "burn off" fat (from tapeworms to amphetamines to ephedra), as well as the surgical procedures focused on excising fat (the gynecologist Howard Kelly performed the first fat-removal surgeries in the late 1880s) to contemporary liposuction. Even reconfiguring the digestive tract has had a long history, from Kellogg's anal sphincter surgeries to the stomach stapling of the 1960s to the increasingly popular gastric bypass surgery of today.[2]

What began to interest me more than the particular permutations of weight loss methods was the formidable *meaning* attributed to fatness in these dieting tracts. The authors of weight loss tracts and the advertisements for weight loss products articulated anxiety, scorn, even outrage toward the fat they promised to eradicate. It is easy for us to assume today that the cultural stigma associated with fatness emerged simply as a result of our recognition of its apparent health dangers. What is clear from the historical documents, however, is that the connotations of fatness and of the fat person—lazy, gluttonous, greedy, immoral, uncontrolled, stupid, ugly, and lacking in will power—preceded and then were intertwined with explicit concern about health issues. Every diet that has emerged on the scene has come with a larger social agenda and cultural meaning. In all of them, fat is a social as well as physical problem; in most of them, the social stigma of fatness—and the fantasy of freeing oneself from this stigma—coincides with or even takes priority over issues of health.

I began this project interested in the history of dieting in the United States, then, but the sources I discovered transformed my work into an exploration of the *meaning* of fat. As I read political cartoons, advertisements for commercial reducing methods and products, doctors' manuals, and popular articles, I realized that *fat* was neither neutral nor insignificant, but was a central protagonist in the cultural development of what constituted a proper American body. The development of fat stigma, I realized, related both to cultural anxieties that emerged during the modern period over consumer excess *and*, importantly, to prevailing ideas about race, civilization, and evolution. This book argues, then, that fat denigration is intricately related to gender as well as racial hierarchies, in particular the historical development of "whiteness."

In the fall of 2008 the *New York Times* published a poster titled "Measure of a Man" that listed the height and weight of each presidential candidate since the late 1800s to identify whether taller, thinner, shorter, or fatter men are more likely to be elected to the highest office a citizen in the United States can hold.[3] Only in a culture that is fixated on the significance of body size could such a poster—which linked weight and the privileges of citizenship—be imagined, even in a comic way. As I conducted this research over the last ten years, during a time of heightened concern about the fatness of the American public, I have been keenly aware of the interplay between these earlier ideas of fat denigration and the contemporary manifestations of fat stigma, whether they emerged in popular culture portrayals that explicitly mocked fat people or in the language of physicians and government documents that couched fat denigration simply as concern over people's health or well-being. In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, physicians, politicians, and academics used body size as one important marker—along with gender, race, ethnicity, and sexuality—to measure one's suitability for the privileges and power of full citizenship. These ideas about body size continue to have salience, as fat stigma divides people into those who belong and those who don't, those who are praised and those who are mocked, those who merit first-class treatment and those who are expected to accept second-class, inferior status, those who might become president and those who, as the poster suggested, might not.

As I explored the links between body size and citizenship, I also quickly became attentive to the voices and activism of those who have resisted dominant ideas about fat stigma. Cultural denigration of fatness is powerful today, drawing on over a century's development of fat stigma, but it is not monolithic. That is, people have resisted and challenged fat stigma, most explicitly since the late 1960s. Through novels and poems, "big-only" dances and swim clubs, Internet chat rooms, online magazines, and organizations like the

National Association to Advance Fat Acceptance and the International Size Acceptance Association, these activists have worked to "rewrite the fat body" and to claim their full rights as citizens. That is, they challenged the connotations of fat as ugly, as lazy, and as unhealthy. The ousted sisters of Delta Zeta may not have recognized themselves as fat activists, but their vocal rejection and organized reaction to the discrimination they faced as fat women was an important form of fat acceptance work. Just as the sisters of Delta Zeta supported one another, fat activists over the last four decades have challenged both explicit discrimination and more subtle fat denigration. Their work and voices are important to understand both for the light they shed on the manifestations of fat stigma and its limits.

Stigma and Fatness

The May 2010 cover of the *Atlantic* pictures a bloated Statue of Liberty, whose triple chins rest heavily on a distended robe that looks more like fat rolls than draped cloth. "FAT NATION," the headlines read, continuing, "IT'S WORSE THAN YOU THINK. HOW TO BEAT OBESITY." The visual image of this cover story by Marc Ambinder speaks to the shame and anxiety evoked by the contemporary "obesity epidemic," of a nation trying to shed what Erving Goffman called a "discrediting attribute." Published in 1963, Goffman's *Stigma: Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity* still serves at the classic study of how stigma works.[4] While his study does not focus on fatness, his concepts allow us to understand the implications of fat denigration for both individuals and an entire culture. Clearly, fatness is a *discrediting attribute*, for which people will go to *extraordinary extremes* to eliminate. One has only to think of the tapeworms and arsenic of the early 20th century or the digitalis/ amphetamines of the middle 20th century or the debilitating gastric bypass surgery of today to recognize these extreme measures. It is a *physical* stigma, or what Goffman calls an "abomination of the body," one that is clearly *visible*. Fat people cannot hide their stigma, though marketers of bathing suits and clothing certainly attempt to convince consumers that their product will make the person look ten pounds slimmer. Because our culture assigns many meanings to fatness beyond the actual physical trait—that a person is gluttonous, or filling a deeply disturbed psychological need, or irresponsible and unable to control primitive urges—it also has many traits of what Goffman calls a *character* stigma. As the essays of writers like Susan Stinson and Marilyn Wann demonstrate, fat people are often treated as *not quite human*, entities to whom the normal standards of polite and respectful behavior do not

seem to apply. They might be accepted in certain circumstances, but, as the fat protagonist in Neil LaBute's 2004 play *Fat Pig* finds out when she begins to date a thin man who consistently hides their relationship and then rejects her because of her weight, that acceptance will only go so far.[5] Often that tolerance is only extended as long as the fat person does not expect too much—an actual romantic relationship or a decent, well-paying job, for instance—and also consistently puts on a self-deprecating mask. The various forms of *discrimination* that fat people experience, in schools, at doctors' offices, in the job market, in housing, and in their social lives, means that, effectively, their *life chances*—for a good education, for fair and excellent health care, for job promotion and security, for pleasant housing, for friends, lovers, and life partners . . . in other words, for a good and safe life—are *effectively reduced*.

Like all other forms of stigma, fat stigma is *relative*, dependent on the historical and cultural context. Perceptions about fat—whether it's considered beautiful or ugly, dangerous or healthy, a sign of wealth or a sign of poverty—differ from place to place and from time to time. Women in the United States today face a far different standard regarding body size than those of other times or other cultures. In 1825, the French writer Jean Anthelme Brillat-Savarin exclaimed that "thinness is a horrible calamity for women." "A scrawny woman," he continued, "no matter how pretty she may look, loses something of her charm with every fastening she undoes."[6] From the perspective of an American woman in the 21st century, it's difficult to imagine a world where being thin would be a calamity. The ways that a fat American colonist would have experienced his body in the 18th century, probably as a sign of prosperity and health, differs greatly from those of a man living in the context of the 21st century, when his body is a sign of our contemporary "obesity epidemic." Even today, however, body size standards in some cultures are far different from those in the United States. Young women in Namibia, for instance, describe themselves in positive terms as "fat and attractive." Among the Arab population in Mauritania, "plumping up" is the goal for marriageable young women.[7] And it was only with the introduction of American television in the 1990s that the Fijians in the South Pacific began to experience eating problems on any significant level. Until then, a plump, rounded body meant the epitome of social approval.[8]

Drawing from Goffman's taxonomy, fat is both a clearly visible *physical* stigma and a *character* stigma insofar as people assume the presence of fat means something negative about the person. Fatness has become a sort of *tribal* stigma for the United States at large, as the *Atlantic* cover indicated. More fundamentally, however, the political cartoons, advertisements, and physicians' writings I explored from the 19th century suggest that fat stigma

is deeply rooted in the development of ideas about race, gender, and civilization. Fatness was a motif used to identify "inferior bodies"—those of immigrants, former slaves, and women—and it became a telltale sign of a "superior" person falling from grace. In today's terms, fat, if it had a color, would be black, and if it had a national origin, it would be illegal immigrant, non-U.S., and non-Western.

While a fat person thus faces the formidable consequences of this physical, character, and tribal stigma, this is not to say, of course, that all will suffer to the same extent or in the same way. Indeed, Goffman points out the various forms of *resistance* that a person with a stigmatized identity will enact, and the many ways that other non-stigmatized individuals might serve as their allies.[9] In other words, fat people, just as thin people, will vary in their resilience to threats to their self-esteem. One of the key ways that people cope with adversity is to connect with others who face similar problems. For some, this has meant joining support groups for weight loss, such as Overeaters Anonymous and Weight Watchers. While these groups do allow fat people to meet and commiserate with others, they certainly do not address the fundamental *stigma* of fatness. In contrast, many fat people beginning in the late 1960s began to organize themselves into fat acceptance and fat activist groups such as the National Association to Aid Fat Americans (now known as the National Association to Advance Fat Acceptance). While these groups bolster members' self-esteem through friendships and survival tips, they also challenge fat stigma itself. In their radical acceptance of their fat bodies, these activists become what Ophira Edut has called in a different context, "body outlaws."[10] The kind of dubious media attention these groups have received suggests that mainstream culture is reluctant to provide any but the most circumscribed acceptance of these groups, or what Goffman calls *tolerance* only if the deviant group stays within the *ecological boundaries of their community*. An example of this might be the willingness of hotels to host fat-only swim nights and social events, but the unwillingness of most Americans to support legislation to ensure the fair treatment of fat people in education, work, housing, and health care. Nevertheless, the voices and work of fat activists, mobilizing into a social movement, certainly hold the potential to radically transform fat stigma.

Contextualizing Fat Shame

As I was researching and writing *Fat Shame*, two intertwining developments exacerbated the stigma surrounding fatness: the mainstream anti-obesity movement and food activism. According to the National Institutes

of Health, two-thirds of the U.S. population are currently medically defined as "overweight" or "obese," constituting what has become popularly known as an "obesity epidemic." With its connotations of disease, contagion, and proliferation, the choice of the term "epidemic" is deliberately alarmist, suggesting imminent danger and sure catastrophe if not addressed.[11] American journalists, medical practitioners, and educators regularly claim that fatness is our number one public enemy. Journalist Frank Deford's March 2003 commentary, delivered just prior to the United States' declaration of war against Iraq, demonstrates the popular perception of obesity as a national threat. "For the long term," he wrote, "the greatest threat to our society is not al-Qaeda and it is not North Korea and it is not Iraq. It is the way we choose to live. How much we choose to sit, how much we choose to eat."[12] Identifying fat as a threat greater to the United States than any political enemy or terrorist is perhaps uncommon, but the note of alarm is not. Certainly it became commonplace in the 1990s and the first decade of the 21st century to refer to obesity as the principal public health enemy facing the United States, and, increasingly, the global population. Nearly every day some newspaper headline highlights our "obesity epidemic," featuring articles about new diets, weight loss surgery, exercise plans, proposed taxes on junk foods, and lawsuits against fast-food corporations. Distressing booklets like the American Heart Association's 2007 "A NATION AT RISK: Obesity in the United States" lay out statistics about body size and focus on the dangers of too much fat: high blood pressure, heart disease, arthritis, and so on. Worries about children and weight are particularly disturbing, as the headline of one article attested: "Child Obesity Taken Too Lightly, Experts Say."[13] Medical conclusions quoted in the William J. Clinton Foundation's Alliance for a Healthier Generation claim that "if childhood obesity continues to increase, it could cut two to five years from the average lifespan." This would mean, the experts continue, that "for the first time in American history, our current generation of children could live shorter lives than their parents."[14]

Taken as a whole, these kind of troubling, alarming headlines constitute what other scholars, in their work on AIDS and the HIV virus, describe as apocalyptic thinking.[15] Such thinking not only clouds judgment, it also induces a moral panic about the "guilt" of the one who "causes" such a catastrophe, often leading to extraordinary and discriminatory actions on the basis of "health" and "well-being." This kind of apocalyptic thinking has justified our national "war on fat," which began with Surgeon General C. Everett Koop in the 1990s.[16] Unlike earlier campaigns such as President Kennedy's Presidential Council on Physical Fitness and Sports, which, as its name

implies, focused on overall issues of fitness, the war on fat zeroes in on bodily fat as the health problem. And just as the term "epidemic" merits attention, so does the military metaphor for the public health campaign designed to halt it. It is difficult—perhaps impossible—to think clearly about fatness and our bodies once we are engaged in a "war against fat," for if we are at war, then fat must be the enemy. And, by definition, we seek to destroy enemies in a war, not to engage in diplomatic missions of understanding or research. Calling for a war presumes we have clear and uncontested evidence of the danger the enemy poses sufficient to justify the tremendous expense and risk that a war entails.

This returns us to the Delta Zeta story, which, considering it is largely a saga of appearance-based snobbery, may seem to have little to do with the national concern over disease and fatness. These situations do seem to differ: the first is about looks and discrimination, the second is about the health of our citizens and future generations. One perspective is abhorrent, the other may be perceived as more justified. One is based on a subjective, aesthetic point of view, the other on supposed objective, factual evidence. Thinking about these two perspectives in tandem, however, one realizes how deeply intertwined they actually are. As many scholars have pointed out, all biological crises are also cultural crises. From the plague in the Middle Ages, to hysteria in the 19th century, to AIDS in the 20th century, biological and medical problems are also cultural sites where social power and ideological meanings are played out, contested, and transformed. The "obesity crisis" is no different. For the most part, however, the journalistic accounts, the public health warnings, and the medical discourse take at face value the biological significance of the "obesity epidemic," ignoring both its cultural implications and the need to interrogate the definition of the "problem" itself.

In her pathbreaking book *Illness as Metaphor*, Susan Sontag describes the harmful meanings our culture has imposed on tuberculosis, cancer, and AIDS. She points out that we often associate certain diseases with specific types of personalities, blaming the victims and shaming them into silence. In a similar vein, I would argue that we have imposed equally dangerous cultural meanings onto fatness.[17] Fatness in the United States "means" excess of desire, of bodily urges not controlled, of immoral, lazy, and sinful habits. Much more than a neutral description of a type of flesh, fatness carries with it such stigma that it propels us to take drastic, extreme measures to remove it.

The same stigma that propels the Delta Zeta officers to single out the fat members for exclusion also infuses medical research, physicians' expert advice, public health policies, commercial weight loss programs, and, of

course, the complex ways that individuals understand and experience their own bodies. The cultural stigma surrounding fatness inhibits our ability to think clearly about health issues, so that it is difficult for most people to recognize the difference between our aesthetic and our medical concerns. Heightened national health concerns regarding weight, articulated so clearly and loudly in the headlines that scream "obesity epidemic," can quickly become justification for discrimination against fat people. The war against fat can become, too easily and too rapidly, a war against fat people.

While references to the "obesity epidemic" are themselves pandemic, not all health experts agree on the physical dangers of fatness. As Eric Oliver discusses in *Fat Politics*, it was not until the 1990s that U.S. agencies and medical organizations began to discuss obesity as a "disease," a designation that legitimated tremendous amounts of money spent in research and treatment. Indeed, most reports arguing for the status of "disease," it turns out, were written—or ghostwritten—by those with a large financial stake in research: pharmaceutical and medical firms that focus on eradicating obesity.[18] The definition of obesity as a "disease" has come under debate by many important health researchers, particularly those within the Health at Every Size movement. The HAES movement draws from medical and social research of scholars such as Paul Campos and Glenn Gaesser to offer an alternative paradigm to that of conventional medical and public policy, shifting our perspective from "How do we make fat people thin?" to "How do we make fat people healthy?" Much of the work of HAES points out the connections between discrimination, stigma, and ill health, arguing that one of the main reasons *the life chances of fat people are limited* is because of the unfair treatment they receive in employment, medical care, and social life. HAES advocates challenge the conventional medical understanding of fatness, pointing to studies that suggest fatness is not particularly malleable, and that restrictive dieting causes only short-term weight loss but results in long-term metabolic disturbances. They argue that studies with headlines that tout the "dangers of obesity" usually demonstrate that a sedentary lifestyle and a diet of processed foods result in ill health; and that a diet rich in fruits and vegetables and an active lifestyle will improve health, but it *may or may not* result in weight loss.[19]

The two-year study completed by Linda Bacon and other nutrition researchers at the University of California, Davis, challenges the dominant perspective that dieting for weight loss will improve health. In this study, a group of fat women was divided into two groups, one receiving coaching in restrictive eating (dieting) and exercise, the other being encouraged to eat a healthy diet, to listen to their body's cues, to foster ways to engage in fun exer-

cise, and to take part in a fat acceptance discussion group. Significantly, group 1—the traditional diet/exercise group—initially lost weight, but by the end of the two-year study half had dropped out; most had regained weight; blood pressure, cholesterol, and other metabolic measures had not improved; and self-esteem levels dropped. In contrast, group 2 hadn't lost any weight, but most stayed with the two-year program; their blood pressure, cholesterol, and other metabolic measures had improved dramatically; their self-esteem levels increased substantially; and they exercised regularly. Encouraged to pay attention to their bodies, to stop restricting calories, to fight the discrimination they experienced as fat people, and to *enjoy* their bodies through physical movement and eating well—with more fruits and vegetables and fewer processed foods—the non-dieters showed significant health improvements. But, and this is the key point, they never became thin.[20]

According to HAES advocates, the conventional focus on weight loss, rather than healthy living, fuels a dangerous and profitable diet industry as well as the growing field of weight loss surgery. In 1992, the American Society for Bariatric Surgery (today the American Society for Metabolic and Bariatric Surgery) estimated that physicians performed 16,200 weight loss surgeries. In 2003, the ASBS reported 103,200 weight loss surgeries; that number jumped phenomenally to 140,640 procedures by 2004, 177,600 by 2006, and 220,000 by 2008, with an average cost ranging from $17,000 to $50,000 per procedure. Health at Every Size advocates point out that the rationale for weight loss surgery is as much about "culture" as it is about health. That is, experts acknowledge that modest changes in diet and exercise will improve a patient's health but will not necessarily make the patient *look* healthier—that is, thinner. In a culture permeated by fat stigma, a thinner body provides the illusion of health, despite the fact that the person who has undergone weight loss surgery now has a massively debilitated digestive system and will experience lifelong digestive problems, chronic malnutrition, and uncertainty about how the surgically malformed body will be able to withstand the processes of aging.[21]

HAES advocates, then, focus on challenging discrimination against fat people, on encouraging fat people to exercise in pleasurable ways (and within environments that are conducive to movement and free from harassment), and on supporting a fat person's ability to take pleasure in eating, to listen to his or her own bodily cues, and to eat healthful food. HAES advocates reject and critique the food, diet, and medical industries' focus on "special" diet foods (usually highly processed, expensive items), dieting products, and pharmaceutical and surgical cures for "obesity." They argue that, contrary to

their well-funded and publicized advertising campaigns, the diet industries hurt human beings.

But the ideas promoted by HAES advocates regarding the deleterious effects of fat stigma and the complexity of medical research regarding body size and health are rarely addressed. The extent to which the complexities surrounding health and weight get lost within the rhetoric of the "obesity epidemic" and the "war on fat" is often dramatic. Evidence about the dangers of anti-fat measures, from weight loss drugs to bariatric surgery, is often dismissed or discounted. In 1997, when Wyeth-Ayerst Laboratories withdrew their drugs Pondimin (fenfluramine chloride) and Redux (dexfenfluramine hydrocholoride) because of heart valve problems, C. Everett Koop urged Americans "not to give up on the war against obesity because the stakes—in terms of disability and disease—are much too high." The "war on obesity," he said, "must continue unabated."[22] Government literature regularly touts the statistic that obesity causes three hundred thousand deaths a year, despite the fact that the research on which this figure is based suggests a "link," as opposed to a "cause"; and that many reputable scientists challenge the validity of this study. Indeed, the top editors at the *New England Journal of Medicine* called the three-hundred-thousand figure "by no means well established" and "derived from weak or inconclusive data."[23] In May 2005, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention published a refined study that called into dispute the 300,000 figure, estimating the deaths linked to obesity at a much-lower 112,000 per year and indicating that being moderately overweight actually was linked with improved longevity. Outcry about this study was so great, however, that the CDC backpedaled, not with any data, but with a firm statement that "what we don't want is for this debate to continue to confuse people. We need to be absolutely explicitly clear about one thing: obesity and overweight are critically important health threats in this country." In other words, even when the scientific data looked challenging to the earlier statistics, the CDC was going to stick firmly to its war against obesity.[24]

Certainly the national stigma of fat helps to explain this stubborn unwillingness to listen to the *possibility* that the "war on fat" is misguided. Importantly, there is also significant financial investment at stake in maintaining this war on fat. Just as Dwight D. Eisenhower in his 1961 Farewell Address called on Americans to be wary of the military-industrial complex, we need, I argue, to be just as wary of the diet-industrial complex. Eisenhower coined the phrase to point to the "total influence—economic, political, even spiritual" of a massive military establishment enmeshed with a large arms industry whose point becomes more about maintaining itself than about the

ultimate purpose of the government—to maintain peace. Maintaining the giant military-industrial complex actually precludes the push for peace, as it requires that our nation maintain a constant state of war.[25] Our national "war on fat" has created a colossal health and diet industry closely enmeshed with government agencies. Profit motives for our sixty-billion-dollar diet industries and fat stigma have become so entangled that it has become difficult, perhaps impossible, to even entertain the possibility that we are fighting the "wrong war." In a profit-driven, consumer society, diet product manufacturers, pharmaceutical corporations, the advertising industry, and medical practitioners all benefit financially from fat stigma. Through their lobbying efforts, these entities influence our government agencies and public health campaigns; many in the corporate and medical world also serve as consultants or members of government offices and agencies. It is difficult to challenge this arrangement as our powerful fat-denigrating ideology means that it "makes sense" to fight fat. Yet just as the purpose of the military-industrial complex is to maintain itself, not to seek peace, the purpose of the diet-industrial complex is to keep people dieting (or choosing surgery, diet pills, or membership in clubs) rather than to seek health.

Dovetailing with the antiobesity efforts of the last decade, the food activist movement also provided additional fuel to the power of fat stigma. The growth of the Slow Food movement, farmers' markets, Community Supported Agriculture memberships, organic foods available in Wal-Mart as well as Whole Foods, and a host of books and films on the best-seller lists—from *The Omnivore's Dilemma* to the *Skinny Bitch* series—all point to the explosion of a food counterculture. Food activists work to educate the public about the problems of a food-industrial system that are quite complex and largely invisible to most American consumers: the environmental degradation caused by intensive mono-agriculture and genetically modified foods; the animal brutality of concentrated animal feeding operations; the tremendous carbon footprint of conventional agriculture and the global system of distribution; the malnutrition caused by the lack of a varied diet that is too high in processed, pesticide-filled, "empty" food products and too low in fresh fruits and vegetables; and the loss of a food system that sustains local communities both economically and culturally. Finally, of course, what concerns food activists is what links their work to mine: fat.

Indeed, what I have found in my exploration of food activism is that frequently all these more complicated—and often invisible—problems regarding our food system are reduced to the problem of obesity in the United States. To be sure, many of the writers and activists appear sincerely con-

cerned with people's health and well-being, and they argue that our food system has made us fat and thus sick. Unfortunately, though, their unwavering acceptance of the language and medical evidence touted within the discourse of the "obesity epidemic" falls far short of the complexities they evoke in other aspects of their work. Other food activists' use of the catastrophic language of the "obesity epidemic" and the motif of the fat person, however, seems to be less concerned about health and well-being than a means to gain the public's attention and to condense and simplify their more complicated messages regarding the food system.

One of the most glaring uses of fat stigma by food activists is the billboard campaign by PETA (People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals). Like much of PETA's publicity, this "Obese in the U.S.A.? Go Vegetarian" ad is both witty and has shock value. Clearly a takeoff on Bruce Springsteen's "Born in the U.S.A.," this ad shows the backside of a white man against the backdrop of an American flag. Unlike Springsteen's ultra-masculinity, his taut buns encased in skin-skimming jeans, however, we see butt cleavage, fat hanging over a belt, hairy arms, and small hands. The tagline plays to one of PETA's most common themes, that vegetarians are never fat.[26] PETA's "Obese in the U.S.A." ad obviously draws on prevalent fat stigma to arouse interest in its larger cause of animal treatment and vegetarianism. The overall cultural discourse on the "obesity epidemic" supports their advertising campaign, but PETA doesn't deliberately or actively invoke concerns about health; instead, the aesthetic contempt for the fat body is all that is clearly denoted. In this billboard, PETA reduces their larger, and much more complicated, argument about animal ethics to an abhorrence of the fat body. More specifically, this fat, meat-eating man is insufficiently masculine (unlike Springsteen), simultaneously typical of Americans but also an affront to the flag itself.

PETA's reduction of their complicated message regarding the ethical treatment of animals to a mockery of fat people is one of the most obvious examples of how those in the food activist movement use the motif of fatness to simplify, publicize, and garner support for their cause. Other food activist literature also relies on and exacerbates already-existing fat stigma, repeatedly drawing on the motif of the fat person as the symbol of a degraded food system. Morgan Spurlock's 2004 documentary *Super Size Me*, for instance, exposes the dangers of a fast-food diet. Everything in *Super Size Me*, however, reinforces the denigration of fat people, from the title, to the movie poster of him stuffing fries into his mouth, to the cartoons ridiculing fat people, to the camera shots of the fat woman's behind set against Queen's 1978 song "Fat Bottomed Girls." Rory Freedman and Kim Barnouin's *Skinny*

Bitch has remained on the *New York Times* best-seller list for more than a year, and, according to their website, has sold over a million copies. Freedman and Barnouin describe in graphic terms the animal cruelty that is part of our meat and dairy production; the lax oversight by the FDA and USDA as well as their corporate ties to our dairy, meat, and processed-food industries; and the dangers of pesticide residue on our foods. Indeed, they argue that their primary interest is in changing our food system and that the title *Skinny Bitch* is simply a "marketing ploy" to get readers' attention.[27] It's difficult to be convinced by their disclaimer, however, when they begin their introduction with "Are you sick and tired of being fat?" Describing fat as "lumpy shit," they promise to "empower" readers with the food knowledge necessary to become a "skinny bitch" (said with endearment and envy) in a "perfect, skinny world."[28] In other words, the fat denigration in *Skinny Bitch* is tightly bound to the discussion of food quality and purity.

Unlike PETA, the *Skinny Bitch* series, or Spurlock's *Super Size Me*, other popular food activist writers do not so blatantly rely on stigmatized and mocking images of fat people. They do, however, draw on the language of the "epidemic" to justify their ideas, and they ignore the complexities regarding nutrition, health, and body size. In the *Omnivore's Dilemma*, the detailed and nuanced best-selling book on the plethora of food options available to Americans, Michael Pollan refers to the United States as the "republic of fat" and relies heavily for his evidence on the scaremongering and chastising work of Greg Critser's *Fat Land: How Americans Became the Fattest People in the World*.[29] Likewise, in *Fast Food Nation* Eric Schlosser refers frequently to the "obesity epidemic," a loaded term with its connotation of sickness and contagion, and to our country as an "empire of fat."[30]

The orientation of food activists in this regard reminds me of the publication of Upton Sinclair's 1906 book *The Jungle*, which exposed the horrors of the Chicago meatpacking industries. Public outcry about the description of rancid meat, rat droppings, and human limbs churned into the sausage mix sped the passage of the Pure Food and Drug Act and the Meat Inspection Act of 1906. Somewhat disappointed, however, Sinclair famously quipped, "I aimed for the public's head, and I hit them in the stomach." That is, while he was not unconcerned about the quality of people's food, he was more concerned about the state of workers' lives—the child labor, the abuse of immigrants and black migrants from the South, and the violent and state-sanctioned squashing of protests and strikes. His vivid descriptions of food adulteration were there to lure readers to an understanding of the more abstract and radical tenets of socialism and workers' rights he advocated;

most readers, however, could never get past the nauseous feelings evoked by the grotesque descriptions of the meat factory.

Like Sinclair, food activists are aiming for one thing but have hit another. They want a complex overhaul of our food system, but they aim at readers' waistlines. It might just be a rhetorical device or a marketing ploy, but it is nevertheless significant.[31] With each image and reference like the "Obese in the U.S.A." billboard, the ideology of fat hatred and the realities of discrimination against fat people are reinforced. Moreover, the very diet-industrial system that food activists so abhor is strengthened, as fat denigration encourages people to turn to desperate measures to fight the stigma they experience. And, finally, by relying on the fat stigma motif, food activists alienate fat readers—it is almost as if they do not exist in the imagined readership of these texts. They are not, to use the language relevant to my overall argument on fat stigma, citizens of this reading republic.

Researching and Shaping Fat Shame

In order to write this book, I have drawn from a range of sources and texts. I've culled through hundreds of issues of *Harper's Weekly*, *Life*, and *Godey's Lady Book*, examining the first political cartoons about fat people and the first advertisements for weight loss products. I've spent time at the British Library and the Library of Congress, poring over the medical literature of the 19th and 20th century regarding "corpulence" and "obesity." I've studied hundreds of postcards depicting fat women, an odd but enlightening collection of ephemera found at a women's history archive. I've read in detail the work of Hilde Bruch, one of the first psychologists who identified eating disorders and considered obesity the result of a psychological drama within the family, particularly those of immigrant, ethnic, Jewish homes. I've examined in detail the suffrage propaganda published by both the pro– and anti–women's rights movements in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, and the ways that they both utilized "fatness" to mock their opponents. By searching the archives of the American Medical Association and attending Federal Trade Commission hearings, I've explored attempts to control the weight loss industries. I've spoken with physicians and personal trainers, experts on weight loss and body sculpting. Family, friends, and colleagues have provided an endless source of contemporary clippings about dieting and fatness all over the world. And, finally, I've read countless novels and essays by fat activists, and interviewed members of size acceptance organizations who have spoken movingly about their lives and their work.

Drawing from a wide range of medical and popular literature from the late 19th and early 20th centuries, chapter 2, "Fat, Modernity, and the Problem of Excess," explores the development of the stigma around fatness in the latter part of the 19th century through its full flowering in the 20th: the idea that fat is a mark of shame, a stain, something that discredits a person. It begins where Hillel Schwartz and Peter Stearns first pointed us, to the ways that anxiety over the fat body was linked to 19th-century cultural concerns about the excesses of industrialization and consumer culture within modernity. An exploration of cultural documents of the time—newspapers, magazines, political cartoons, and medical publications—suggests that the body became the site of struggle over other dilemmas that emerged during the modern period, particularly those surrounding consumer and political life.

Before the end of the 19th century, only the privileged—in terms of both wealth and health—could become fat. Just as industrialization and urbanization transformed every other aspect of life in the United States, it also transformed bodies. As the 20th century progressed, more people experienced sufficient wealth, lifestyles became more sedentary, the development of new farming methods and better transportation systems meant that food was more plentiful and relatively cheap, and health care improved. All of this meant that more people could gain weight and keep it on. At this point fatness became a marker dividing the rich and the poor, but now, unlike in earlier centuries, hefty weight connoted not high status but a person whose body was out of control, whose reason and intellect were dominated and overwhelmed by the weight of obesity. As the meanings of "fat" and "thin" shifted, moving up the socioeconomic ladder usually meant aspiring to a thinner body, even if that aspiration was unsuccessful.

This chapter explores the phenomenal shift, from fat being something associated with the rich and very prosperous to something associated with the middle class and then to the poor, an affliction of those who presumably could not control their bodies or their impulses. In the 19th and early 20th centuries, cultural representations of fat people shifted from the "fat cat"—the wealthy, powerful, and often greedy man—to the fat and undesirable ordinary person, who could not handle the riches and abundance of modernity. In exploring exactly who these "ordinary" people were, chapter 3, "Fat and the Un-Civilized Body," argues that the cultural hatred of fat emerged simultaneously with the construction of hierarchies of race, sexuality, gender, and class. Fat denigration was linked to overall processes of mapping political and social hierarchies onto bodies. The project of "civilization" meant not just racialization and gender and sexual hierarchies, but also the

construction of certain types of body types as superior and others as inferior. Fatness became a significant marker of inferiority within cultural texts of all sorts, either as prima facie evidence of an already-existing inferior status or as a harbinger of an impending fall for those presumed to be higher on the "civilized" scale. In the intense conversations in the last decades of the 19th and the early decades of the 20th century about what—and who—constituted the most civilized culture and the most civilized people, fatness became another divide marking the differences between white people and people of color, between native-born, white American citizens and new immigrants, between the wealthy and the poor, and between men and women.

Chapter 4, "Feminism, Citizenship, and Fat Stigma," explores what these emerging ideas of the "civilized body" and the stigmatization of fat meant for women and for feminism. The linking of thinness and control, thinness and progress, and thinness and self-help, has made the "body project" a natural ally with many avenues of feminism, particularly liberal feminism. One women's studies scholar, for instance, discussed with eloquence the pride she felt in losing sixty pounds, despite her knowledge that "dieting culture" takes up so much of women's financial and emotional resources.[32] As one of my feminist colleagues said when I introduced my research interest in fat acceptance, "But, of course, you can't mean REALLY fat people." It is as if an invisible line separates the thin-enough feminist who is allowed to critique the excesses of the diet industry from the fat "other" who resides outside the boundaries of normative citizenship. "Feminism, Citizenship, and Fat Stigma" considers contemporary feminism's fraught relationship with fat by exploring its roots within the development of modernity and the first wave of feminism. It explores the complex ways that "fatness" has had powerful meanings for feminists claiming the stakes of citizenship, from 19th- and early 20th-century suffragists who needed to prove theirs were indeed "civilized" bodies, to the workingwomen of the 1920s and 1930s who were seeking to carve out a space of upward mobility. By exploring the links between notions of the civilized body and feminism, this chapter helps us to understand why women continue to bear the particular brunt of our culture's disgust with fatness, as well as the ways that feminism is implicated in that very disgust and stigma.

Chapter 5, "Narrating Fat Shame," focuses on stories found primarily within contemporary popular culture in which "fat" serves as an important motif. Exploring the popular narratives of people like Britney Spears, Kirby Puckett, Monica Lewinsky, and Oprah Winfrey illuminates the striking way that fat both signifies the "moral corruption" of particular individuals and

reinforces hierarchies of race, sexuality, gender, and class. This chapter concludes with a discussion of Barack and Michelle Obama and the relentless media focus on their fitness and eating habits, exploring the ways that this attention is both typical and distinctive. As a sign of civilized behavior and inherent character, thinness is a desired—some would even argue necessary—trait for anyone reaching for the contemporary presidency. For the first African American with a serious chance at the office, and then for the first African American family living in the White House, thinness is, this chapter argues, particularly necessary.

The final chapter, "Refusing to Apologize," provides a compelling contrast to the saga of fat denigration told in the previous chapters. It takes as its title the words of Marilyn Wann's important and very funny book *FAT!SO? Because You Don't Have to Apologize for Your Size!* and explores the ways that fat activists have, since the late 1960s, challenged fat stigma and insisted on the full rights of citizenship. This chapter discusses the significance of fat activism's emergence in the early second wave of feminism, and the ways that this activism has dealt with the complex threads of race, sexuality, and class that are linked to fat denigration. Above all, it explores the ways that fat activists have rejected narratives of shame, often after years of dangerous attempts to lose weight, and pushed for an acceptance and celebration of the fat body, an end to fat discrimination, and the popularization of new health and medical perspectives on fat bodies. In their various campaigns and activisms, they have worked to "rewrite" the meaning of fatness. This chapter, then, brings us full circle, back to the earliest representations of the inferior fat body, as we see fat activists challenging dominant popular culture and medical discourse surrounding fatness.

Writing Fat Shame

When I began my project on the history of fat stigma, there was no clearly defined area in which it resided. The topic spanned women's studies, American studies, African American studies, disability studies, the history of medicine, and U.S. cultural and social history, and it still does. In the last decade, however, there has emerged a newly defined field in which my exploration of fat stigma clearly rests: fat studies.

Certainly prior to the development of this new field, research existed on the body, dieting, and fat. For instance, Hillel Schwartz's 1986 book *Never Satisfied: A Cultural History of Diets, Fantasies, and Fat* remains one of the most detailed studies of dieting and weight reduction in the United

States.[33] Research on the body and dieting has played a significant role within women's studies and women's history since the 1970s, resulting in important research that both bolstered the political agendas of feminist activists and furthered crucial theoretical understandings of how gender has worked across time and place.[34] My early research and writing on fatness did not exist in a vacuum, then, but rather as part of a range of work focused on issues related to gender, bodies, and power. This research, however, primarily focused on the meanings of *thinness* (as opposed to *fatness*) and on the problems associated with dieting. In addition, works such as the ones identified above were not necessarily in dialogue with one another; it remained up to readers to pull together and compare studies and points of view. Soon after I began the project, however, scholarly interest in fat began to converge into the academic field of fat studies. Books like Kathleen LeBesco's *Revolting Bodies?* and the earlier collection she edited with Jana Evans Braziel, *Bodies Out of Bounds*, explored the cultural meanings—and challenges—posed by the fat body. Don Kulick and Anne Meneley's *Fat: The Anthropology of an Obsession* compared across time and place the cultural significances attached to fatness. Andrea Elizabeth Shaw's *The Embodiment of Disobedience: Fat Black Women's Unruly Political Bodies* illuminated the ways that women across the African diaspora rejected Western ideals of thinness. Other scholars such as Paul Campos in *The Obesity Myth*, Glenn Gaesser in *Big Fat Lies*, and Eric Oliver in *Fat Politics* challenged the medical and biological perspectives on fat and health and urged readers to rethink the "obesity epidemic." By 2006 there was sufficient scholarly interest on fat that the psychologist Esther Rothblum and the legal scholar Sondra Solovay put out a call for papers for the volume that would become *The Fat Studies Reader*.[35]

All of this new research has at its core a political perspective, informed by the work done simultaneously and previously by fat acceptance writers and activists such as Marilyn Wann, whose 1998 *FAT!SO?* became a kind of early "classic" within the field. Just as women's studies, queer studies, Native American studies, African American studies, Chicano studies, and working-class studies emerged out of political movements and maintained their ties to those movements even as the scholarly work gained a life of its own, fat studies has clearly grown out of a political movement that promotes the acceptance of fat bodies and the elimination of the discrimination and shame that plagues fat people's lives. Unlike "obesity studies," which generally presumes the social and biological pathology of fatness and which poses fat people as the objects *of* study rather than the subjects who are engaging in the work themselves, fat studies challenges notions of pathology and encourages

scholars to listen to the work and words of fat people themselves. The terminology itself is important. Rejecting the term "obesity" either as a euphemism or as a medical term that objectifies fat people, fat studies reclaims the term "fat," arguing that it should become a common term freed of negative connotation, no more controversial than describing someone as tall or brown haired. As I see my work as part of this larger field of fat studies, I too have chosen to use the term "fat" unless I am describing or analyzing the range of terminology—from "corpulent" to "heavyset" to "morbidly obese"—used in the primary texts I am exploring.

A friend recently asked me what all this research has done for my own body image. This was a fair question, and one that is certainly relevant to understanding my own "place" in this project. I've never been a thin person, nor have I ever been extremely fat. I hover in that gray area between "healthy" and "overweight" on those ubiquitous and dubious BMI charts. As a child I was chubby (though the pictures of me from that time don't really bear out how fat I felt), a victim of a lot of teasing and discomfort. As I grew older my weight evened out, or perhaps it was just that my cohort grew fatter, and my sense of self much less sensitive to teasing. As I've been immersed in this research I've experienced moments of great irony. When I was giving a talk on "Body Size/Body Image" for the opening of a women's health care clinic, and showed early cartoons mocking fat people, I looked over my shoulder to see that I was standing next to the Weight Loss Surgery wing. I am daily struck by the incongruity of the countless weight loss ads that pop up on my e-mail and Internet screen, even as I read the medical notices about the dangers of various pharmaceutical "cures." In a particularly poignant contrast, I once spent an evening speaking with a fat acceptance activist; the next day I watched as one of my neighbors was being helped out of her car by her parents after undergoing weight loss surgery.

I consider myself both a fat activist and a food activist, a pairing I hope will become more common in the future. I have been a "locavore" for nearly two decades, buying a share in a local organic farm when it was a tiny operation and purchasing grass-fed lamb and beef and locally raised chickens from our neighboring farmers. On the other hand, we don't own a bathroom scale, and I think it's much more important to encourage our kids to walk and exercise daily and to listen to their bodies than it is to weigh them. Yet my own awakening as a fat activist has not been without pain. Particularly in my interviews with fat activists I've had to swallow my pride many times as they have pointed out the manifestations of fat prejudice in my own thinking. In contrast, it has been very heartening for me to have family, friends,

students, and colleagues come to me with examples of fat denigration and fat activism in our culture that they hadn't recognized before they began sharing my research on fat stigma. It is my hope that after reading *Fat Shame*, readers too will be able to recognize the deeply historical and complex layers of fat stigma at work in our culture.

Ads selling weight loss drugs and diet regimes—like these speaking to "stout people" for products like Corpus Lean, found in *Life* magazine in 1887—indicate the emergence of cultural anxiety over fatness. (*Life*, June 30, 1887, 373.)