Introduction

The Original Epidemic

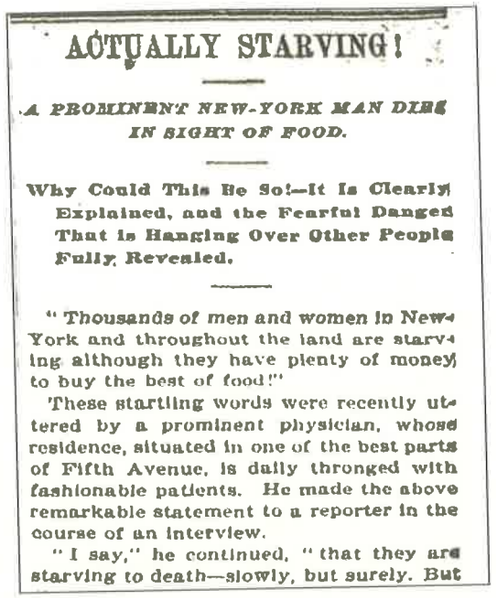
"Actually Starving! A Prominent New York Man Dies in Sight of Food. Why Could This Be So!" This dramatic if slightly awkward headline appeared in the February 16, 1894, edition of the *New York Times*, atop an article that began, "Thousands of men and women in New York are starving, although they have plenty of money to buy the best food!"

The unnamed author of the article went on to quote what was described as a "prominent physician" on the state of the American diet and physique. According to the doctor, the situation was dire. "I say . . . that they are starving to death—slowly, but surely," he stated, adding that although many of those afflicted were members of the middle and upper classes, they nevertheless looked "emaciated [and] appear to be consumptives."[1]

This article underscored the deep anxiety felt by many in the nineteenth-century regarding the state of the American physique. Doctors in particular agonized over what they described as the "pale, thin, and puny" forms that were apparently proliferating around the country. Several described with horror the "narrow chests, and lank limbs, and flabby muscles, and tottering steps [that] meet us at every corner."[2] Thinness, it seems, was nothing short of an epidemic.

If in those years slenderness was considered a general American failing, the paleness, leanness, and malnutrition of women was particularly troubling. Prompted by the fragile state of their bodies, esteemed doctors wrote disquieting manifestos on the question of their frailty.

The writings of the prolific and well-regarded New Englander Dr. William Alcott, a distant relative of the novelist Louisa May Alcott, were typical. In his 1855 treatise *The Young Woman's Book of Health*, Alcott lamented the reality that "our children, females among the rest, are trained



ACTUALLY STARVING!

A PROMINENT NEW-YORK MAN DIES IN SIGHT OF FOOD.

Why Could This Be So?—It Is Clearly Explained, and the Fearful Danger That Is Hanging Over Other People Fully Revealed.

"Thousands of men and women in New-York and throughout the land are starving although they have plenty of money to buy the best of food!"

These startling words were recently uttered by a prominent physician, whose residence, situated in one of the best parts of Fifth Avenue, is daily thronged with fashionable patients. He made the above remarkable statement to a reporter in the course of an interview.

"I say," he continued, "that they are starving to death—slowly, but surely. But

Figure I.1. "Actually Starving," *New York Times*, Feb. 16, 1894.

by a community which is thus destitute of a true appetite."[3] He warned Americans to take heed of what he described as the "whole generation of women trained as a whole to tenderness, delicacy, nervousness, feebleness of muscle [and] want of appetite."[4] Being "tall, slender and delicate," he claimed, did not prepare a young woman for the vicissitudes of life.[5]

Dr. John Harvey Kellogg, the famed Seventh-day Adventist already known for his sanitarium in Battle Creek, Michigan, but not yet known as a purveyor of breakfast cereals, concluded in his *Ladies' Guide in Health and Disease*, "Particularly in this country, and especially in the cities and towns, girls as a rule are found to be decidedly lacking in physical development."[6] What the fair sex in America needed, Kellogg contended, was a nutritional revolution because their poor eating habits produced bodies that were "scrawny" and "waspish."[7]

It was more than a simple question of health or even aesthetics. The slenderness of American girls was regarded as nothing less than a threat to the nation. An 1888 article from the *Washington Post* that appeared

under the headline "Are Girls Growing Smaller?" exclaimed, "The girl of the period ranges from 140 pounds down in some cases to 80 pounds or less. . . . In England and Germany the figures are higher. . . . Eighty pounds of femininity is of course, not much." And, the writer added, "our women will go on getting thinner and thinner until they disappear. It has happened in Boston already. The American stock . . . can't hold its own against the big-boned strong-built foreigner. The Irish have crowded the Yankee out of New England."[8]

The weight of American women represented, to many, a national black eye. But was it truly the case, as was often suggested, that these women were simply nutritionally uninformed? Given the right information, would they gain in flesh and, by proxy, in health, strength, and beauty?

The evidence suggests otherwise. Many well-to-do women it seems were trying to be slender at a moment when doctors routinely attacked slenderness as unhealthy.[9] The historian Adele Clarke noted that women of the fashionable classes were "wasting in style."[10] The svelte style, being contrary to conventional medical wisdom, had clearly been motivated by other factors.

Indeed, while many considered thinness an American shortcoming, for the adherents of the style, slenderness served as a marker of moral, racial, and national superiority. This attitude is on full dsiplay in an 1896 article from *Harper's Bazaar* titled "Are Our Women Scrawny?" It begins with a reflection on the slenderness of American women: "American women in general are still thought to be sallow and scrawny." The article's anonymous author contests this assertion, claiming that while poorer women may be malnourished, few women of the privileged classes are so slim as to look peaked, as may have been the case with their foremothers. Today, the author asserts, American women have a "wholesome glow in their cheek" and a bit more flesh on their bones, both of which are a testament to the "wholly unmeasured success" of the American experiment.[11]

Yet, while praising a new and laudable "roundness" to the figure of the modern girl, the author nevertheless betrays a preference for traditional American slenderness. Of the shifting outlines of the nation's women, the author wrote, "One cannot help noticing in every metropolitan assembly that the feminine litheness and flexibility for

Figure I.2. "Are Our Women Scrawny?," *Harper's Bazaar*, Nov. 1896.

which the republic has been famous is already on the wane, and that the opposite extreme is menacing."[12]

That fatness is described as "menacing" is telling. The author provides a sense of the foreboding associated with excess weight. Not only does stoutness supposedly sabotage the nation's aesthetic identity, it also evokes the poor eating habits and immorality of the European elite. Worse still, extreme or "gross" corpulence slides into an association with primitive Africans. The author spells this out for the reader: "Stoutness, corpulence, and surplusage of flesh" are never desirable "except among African savages."[13]

This raises several questions. First, what led some well-to-do Americans to believe that slenderness, especially among women, was both aesthetically preferable and a sign of national identity? How did fatness become a sign of immorality? How did fatness become linked to

"Africanity" or blackness? And finally, if the medical establishment just over a century ago feared the meagerness of the physiques of (elite white) women, when and how did they come to view fatness, especially among black women, as the greater threat to public health, as they would in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries with the "obesity epidemic"?

In this book, I examine the history and legacy of the preference for slimness and aversion to fatness, with attention to their racial, gender, class, and medical contours. This book enters a decades-long conversation about the preference for slenderness and the phobia about fatness in the United States. Much of this research describes the emphasis on slenderness for "women."[14] But while most authors show that an aversion to fatness and a preference for slenderness has been most evident among middle- and upper-class white women, few have addressed the role of race and class status in the development of these dispositions.

Relatedly, scholars have shown that the fear of fatness commonly targets low-income women of color, and especially black women.[15] These and other scholars, including Sander Gilman, Jennifer Morgan, and Janell Hobson, have shown that black women's bodies have long been treated as being in "excess."[16] Still, few have attempted to explain how, historically, fatness became linked to blackness. Amy Farrell's 2011 book *Fat Shame* stands out in that it underscores the entwined racial past of fat stigma and the thin ideal. The book does not explore, however, how these racial connotations developed, nor does it explain the centrality of anti-blackness within them.

We also learn little about the role of morality in much of the existing literature. R. Marie Griffith's landmark 2004 text *Born Again Bodies: Flesh and Spirit in American Christianity* shines in this respect, offering a compellingly deep dive into the admonitions against gluttony and fatness in Christianity. Nevertheless, though it reveals that during the nineteenth century the fit body was used to buttress claims of racial and ethnic superiority, questions remain about how these relationships developed and were popularized within the American mainstream.

This work departs from much of the existing scholarship in that it provides a historiography of the development of pro-thin, anti-fat biases. That is, while several studies have explored the historical antecedents of our contemporary size biases, none, to my knowledge, have

endeavored a historical analysis that examines the key figures involved in their propagation, as well as the sociocultural and political factors contributing to their reinforcement. This book seeks to address this gap as possibly the first historical study of fat phobia and thin fetishism in the West, with an emphasis on the intertwined racial, gender, and moral issues involved in their advancement.

I argue that two critical historical developments contributed to a fetish for svelteness and a phobia about fatness: the rise of the transatlantic slave trade and the spread of Protestantism. Racial scientific rhetoric about slavery linked fatness to "greedy" Africans. And religious discourse suggested that overeating was ungodly.

These rationales for anti-fat bias had been circulating relatively independently in parts of western Europe for more than two centuries. Not until the early nineteenth century in the United States, in the context of slavery, religious revivals, and the massive immigration of persons deemed "part-Africanoid," did these notions come together under a coherent ideology. In the United States, fatness became stigmatized as both black and sinful. And by the early twentieth century, slenderness was increasingly promoted in the popular media as the correct embodiment for white Anglo-Saxon Protestant women. Not until after these associations were already in place did the medical establishment begin its concerted effort to combat "excess" fat tissue as a major public health initiative. In this way, the phobia about fatness and the preference for thinness have not, principally or historically, been about health. Instead, they have been one way the body has been used to craft and legitimate race, sex, and class hierarchies.

These findings further reveal that the slender ideal and fat phobia are not distinct developments—as they are often treated in the literature. The fear of the imagined "fat black woman" was created by racial and religious ideologies that have been used to both degrade black women *and* discipline white women. This is critical, since most analyses of race and aesthetics describe the experiences of either black people (and other people of color) or white people. This book reveals race to be a double agent. It entails the synchronized repression of "savage" blackness and the generation of disciplined whiteness. The discourse of fatness as "coarse," "immoral," and "black" worked to denigrate black women, and it concomitantly became the impetus for the promulgation of slender

figures as the proper form of embodiment for elite white Christian women.

For my analysis, I draw on the work of two eminent social theorists, Pierre Bourdieu and Michel Foucault. According to Bourdieu, elites are constantly working to differentiate themselves from the lower classes. In so doing, they often distinguish themselves by cultivating tastes, diets, and physical appearances that are in opposition to those of the subordinated groups. These "social distinctions" serve to naturalize and normalize social hierarchies.[17]

Building on this work, I show how racial discourse was deployed by elite Europeans and white Americans to create social distinctions between themselves and so-called greedy and fat racial Others. Black people, as well as so-called degraded or hybrid whites (e.g., Celtic Irish, southern Italians, Russians), were primary targets of these arguments. Elite white people also used Protestant discourse to claim a moral superiority over these same poor, immigrant, and racial Others. I rely on the work of gender scholars to show that since women have long been evaluated based largely on their physical appearance, racial-moral social distinctions primarily targeted the women in each racial/ethnic group.[18]

If Bourdieu can help us understand the racial-moral dimension of the spread of fat aversion and thin preoccupation, Michel Foucault gives us insight into the centrality of medicine in the propagation of these dispositions. According to Foucault, medicine intervenes as a key institution of the twentieth century, providing information on "how to live" for health and longevity. Its dictates inform what Foucault calls the "biopolitics" of health management, which include disciplinary practices that one must perform to be considered a healthy and thereby good citizen. However, the medical disciplinary regime has not been objectively applied to all persons. Instead, it is treated as an imperative for dominant groups, to the exclusion of poor, racially Othered groups. This approach helps to maintain social and in many instances specifically racialized and gendered hierarchies.[19]

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Researching the aesthetic, moral, and racial underpinnings of the American fear of fat required an eclectic approach. I began by reading the landmark texts by historians and feminist scholars on the history of fat

phobia and the slender ideal.[20] In doing so, I discovered three points of agreement. First, there was a general consensus among historians and prominent feminist scholars that the fear of fat and glorification of thinness first gained widespread appeal in the United States. Second, these attitudes had more impact on elite and white women than on men, working-class persons, or people of color. Third, little is known about the factors contributing to the development of these attitudes.

In an effort to discover what led to the consolidation of these attitudes around the turn of the twentieth century, I used two comparative historical methods: process tracing and historical narrative. In process tracing, I used multiple sources of data to shed light on key individuals and events contributing to the growing anti-fat, pro-thin biases in the West. I used historical narrative to weave a tapestry illustrating the impact and interrelationship of these events.

I began with the Renaissance, a period in which, as sociologists and historians have shown, voluptuous physiques were in vogue throughout much of the Western world.[21] I traced developments in art and philosophy from the Renaissance through the Enlightenment in Europe, the period in which, scholars have shown, svelte aristocratic women and courtiers were commonly depicted by renowned artists and thinkers. I studied the writings of artists and philosophers in an effort to describe the sociohistorical and intellectual context for the association of race, weight, and beauty between the early fifteenth and late eighteenth centuries.

Questions concerning the purported racial origin of fatness appeared in many philosophical treatises, as did questions about its (im)morality. Therefore, I returned to explorations of the body and the oral appetite in the ascendant branch of Christianity: Protestantism. I examined key texts by prominent Protestant proselytizers, especially those who made public pronouncements against overfeeding and fatness.

To weave a historical narrative of these many related developments in art, philosophy, and religion, I needed to understand how they were being transmitted to the public. The eighteenth century marked the rise of newspapers and magazines in Europe, and so I examined influential early publications, such as *The Spectator*, to understand how ideas in high art and philosophy about body size, race, attractiveness, and morality were represented.

Scholars have identified the United States as the country in which the pro-thin, anti-fat bias was gaining strength among elite, morally upright white Americans (especially women) by the nineteenth century and crystallized into a mainstream position by the early twentieth century. Therefore, I also examined American magazines and newspapers published between 1830 and 1920, among them *Cosmopolitan* (originally a magazine designed to appeal to families), the *New York Times*, and the *Washington Post*, to look for evidence of these connections.

Finally, I discovered that many of the popular periodicals cited concerns about health and illness purportedly associated with corpulence. By the late nineteenth century, these publications relied increasingly on doctors' advice to make their claims. Therefore, I researched the depictions of overweight and obesity in the medical literature from 1880 to 1930. I chose materials that appeared in authoritative books or medical journals, such as the *Journal of the American Medical Association* (*JAMA*), or works written by recognized medical authorities.[22]

This book has three parts. Part 1, "The Beauty of the Robust," offers a retrospective view of the exaltation of plump feminine physiques that existed throughout much of Western history. I also note signs of a shift in the seventeenth century as European men of learning began to degrade fatness as evidence of insipidity. In chapter 1, "Being Venus," I describe Western aesthetic ideals of the sixteenth century and show that key artists and philosophers during the High Renaissance described "plump" and "proportionate" women as beautiful, following Christian and neoclassical conventions of beauty. I argue that contact with African women during the rise of the slave trade did not change these standards. Moreover, I show that black women were incorporated into the High Renaissance rhetoric and imagery of beauty as equally voluptuous, if socially inferior, counterparts to European women. In chapter 2, "Plump Women and Thin, Fine Men," I describe the rise of the robust "snow-white" female body as desirable. I also show that the fat male body became a sign of poor moral character and mental incapacity. That is, alongside the exaltation of fat and curvy (white) women, fat men were lambasted among intellectuals as being of "poor constitution." English philosophers claimed that a fat male body was indicative of a "dull mind." Thus, a philosopher's slim ideal was born.

Part 2, "Race, Weight, God, and Country," describes how body size became a sign of race, morality, and national identity during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. In chapter 3, "The Rise of the Big Black Woman," I detail how philosophers and race scientists made the case for intellectual and physical differences between whites and the "colored races." In this period we see some of the earliest examples of learned men denigrating a so-called "black" fatness. In chapter 4, "Birth of the Ascetic Aesthetic," I focus on the developing relationship between Protestant Christian identity and self-abnegation. I show that abstemiousness in England during the eighteenth century laid the groundwork for moralizing surrounding the oral appetites that would be seen in subsequent eras, particularly in the United States. I also show that some devout Protestants viewed fatness—the purported evidence of intemperate eating—as immoral. Slenderness, by contrast, was viewed as closer to godliness. In chapter 5, "American Beauty: The Reign of the Slender Aesthetic," I show that American Anglo-Saxon women adopted the ideals surrounding eating and embodiment that were popularized in eighteenth-century England. In the context of religious health reform movements and the massive immigration of Irish racial Others, Anglo-Saxon women used strict diets and slimness to convey religious enlightenment and racial uplift. In chapter 6, "Thinness as American Exceptionalism," I reveal how the presence of the next wave of immigrants—southern and eastern Europeans—contributed to the mainstream consolidation of the aesthetic of slenderness. Following the trail of race science, I show that a new eugenic discourse of racial amalgamation among northern and western Europeans circulated widely in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. This rhetoric promoted the desirability of women from these racial groups. It also intimated that the American melting pot created exceptional svelte beauties drawn from these superior races.

Part 3, "Doctors Weigh In," examines how the American medical establishment viewed fatness and thinness from the late nineteenth to the late twentieth centuries. In chapter 7, "Good Health to Uplift the Race," I profile the life and works of the esteemed Dr. John Harvey Kellogg. I show that he, like many medical men of his day, regarded poor diet and excessive slimness, especially among elite American women, as a threat to the nation. Kellogg and others hoped to encourage women to gain weight to demonstrate the vigor of the nation. In chapter 8, "Fat,

Revisited," I explain the growth of anti-fat attitudes in the medical field. Due to the rise of actuarial tables that identified excess weight as a health risk, doctors became increasingly concerned about overweight. While the transition was slow at first, the standardization of "normal weight" and an intensified concern about "obesity," especially among women, were firmly established within the mainstream of medical science by the turn of the twenty-first century. In the book's epilogue, "The Obesity Epidemic," I highlight the swing from one epidemic, that of the too-thin American woman, to the other, that of the too-fat American woman, in the span of a century. And I underscore the role that race, aesthetics, morality, and medicine continue to play in the so-called obesity epidemic.