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Weighty subjects:

The biopolitics of the U.S. war on fat

ABSTRACT

The United States has declared a war on fat. I examine this campaign as a biopolitical field of science and governance that has emerged to manage the “obesity epidemic” by remaking overweight and obese subjects into thin, fit, proper Americans. Drawing on research in Southern California, I examine the impact of the campaign on the bodies, selves, and lives of the heavysset young people who are its main targets. At least in this corner of the country, I argue, the war on fat, far from alleviating the problem of fatness, is creating a new fat problem by expanding the number of weight-obsessed, self-identified “abnormal” “fat subjects,” who may not be technically obese but whose desperate efforts to lower their weight endanger their health and bring intense socioemotional suffering. These developments have implications for larger issues of social suffering and social justice. [*obesity epidemic, war on fat, biopolitics, subjectivity, youth, U.S.*]

By all accounts, the United States is in the midst of an “obesity epidemic” of catastrophic dimensions, in which rising proportions of the public—now fully 68 percent of adults and 32 percent of children and adolescents—are obese or overweight.¹ Although the rate of increase has slowed in recent years, the heavy burden of fat, according to the dominant narrative articulated by government, public-health, and media sources, is eroding the nation’s health, emptying its coffers, and even depriving the country of fit military recruits (Brownell and Horgen 2004; Carmona 2003; Satcher 2001). Launched by the U.S. surgeon general in 2001, the response has been an urgent, nationwide public-health campaign to get people—and especially the young, the campaign’s main target—to eat more healthfully and to be more active in an effort to achieve a “normal” Body Mass Index, or BMI (Satcher 2001).² First Lady Michelle Obama’s “Let’s Move!” campaign, announced in early 2010, is only the latest instantiation of what has been, for the last decade, the nation’s standard approach to naming, framing, and remedying the problem of growing girth (Stolberg 2010; Stolberg and Neuman 2011).

The intensified medicalization of the problem of weight since the mid-1990s—the now-routine definition of excess weight as a disease, the rapid growth in medical research and news on obesity and overweight, and so on—marks a major cultural shift in Americans’ concern about fatness, from “self-control” (or virtue) to “health.”³ No longer are fat people merely “lazy” (and “ugly”); in the current discourse, they are also biologically “abnormal,” “at risk of disease,” and “in need of medical treatment” (Boero 2007; Jutel 2006; Saguy and Almeling 2008; Saguy and Riley 2005; on the history, see Stearns 2002). The medical model has not replaced the moral model of body size but has built on it in ways that intensify the pressures to be thin (Boero 2007). The shift to health as the primary grounds for concern about adipose bodies has led to a dramatic expansion of the social forces seeking to intervene in the problem and, in turn, an explosion of “fat talk” of all sorts. In the political sphere, antifat legislation aimed at limiting food ads

that target children, requiring food labeling in restaurants, reengineering car-centric environments, and so forth, is advancing at the federal and state levels, producing noisy debates over the “nanny state’s” right to tell Americans what they should eat and over hefty officials’ ability to govern (e.g., Chapman 2009; Perez-Pena 2011). Corporate interests have been a major force behind the escalation of fat talk. After profiting handsomely from making Americans fat with its high-sugar, fat, and salt “drug foods,” big food, along with the pharmaceutical, biotech, fitness, restaurant, and other industries, has figured out how to use a rhetoric of medicine (“it’s good for your health”) to exploit people’s fear of the disease of fat to generate a further \$60 billion annually in profits (Rao 2010; cf. Jutel 2009; Kessler 2009; Nestle 2007; Simon 2006; on drug foods, see Nichter 2008). Building on an already deeply ingrained culture of valorizing thinness and abhorring fatness (Brumberg 1997; Fraser 1998), the new medically driven concern with weight loss has also propelled corpulence to the center of U.S. popular culture. The new genre of “Fat TV”—featuring weight-loss reality shows (e.g., *The Biggest Loser* [NBC], *I Used to Be Fat* [MTV]) that make the degradation of fat people a media ritual—is only the most conspicuous of these new forms of fat culture (Farrell 2011:119).

In this way, what started as an urgent public-health “call to action” in the early 2000s has grown into a multisectoral war on fat that leaves few domains of life untouched. The term *war on fat*, which was introduced by Surgeon General C. Everett Koop in the late 1990s, is apt because it underscores the antiobesity campaign’s militaristic character and because many of its targets feel like they are under perpetual attack (Koop 1997).⁴ The 21st-century war on fat is profoundly remaking the political, economic, and cultural worlds in which Americans live and producing a veritable epidemic of fat talk in which public and private discourse increasingly targets weight as a subject of concern, lament, ridicule, and much more. Although I deal here only with the United States,⁵ weights are rising around the world, producing what the WHO (2011) calls a “global pandemic of obesity,” and, in turn, urgent efforts by governments and transnational bodies to contain it.

I pen this article from Orange County, the wealthy coastal jewel in the crown of the Southern California megaregion (SoCal, for short) that is home to 21 million people—fully 57 percent of Californians and some 7 percent of all Americans.⁶ As any consumer of American popular culture knows, SoCal, with its hyped-up Hollywood celebrity culture and its laid-back OC beach culture, is the epicenter of the cult of the perfect body. For women and girls and, increasingly, for men and boys as well, the thin, toned, “beautiful” or “ripped” body (depending on one’s gender) is a central measure of human value and core currency of social success. The effortless product, apparently,

of all that outdoor living in the California sunshine, the denizens of the LA region inhabit slender, toned, healthy bodies that are the envy of the nation and the model for much of the world. The seductive images in *OC Riviera*, *Image Magazine*, and other regional lifestyle publications say it all: In SoCal, perfect bodies bring perfect lives.

From all appearances, there would seem to be no obesity epidemic here. Chunky people may be hard to find on the street (at least in coastal and upscale communities), but pressures to be thin and fit are intense. Head out of downtown LA on virtually any freeway, and you will encounter a veritable army of billboards (1-800-GET-THIN) advertising lap-band procedures that promise rapid weight loss on easy credit at virtually no medical risk. Visit any LA Fitness or 24-Hour Fitness gym, and you will find people who work out three to four hours a day to achieve their ideal bodies. Talk to young people about LA body culture, and you will discover an obsession with achieving “perfect” thin, toned celebrity bodies, a deep fear of fat, and buried layers of insecurity reflected in such comments as “LA is where it’s all about looks,” “in LA everyone looks like models and I can never live up,” “LA culture makes me feel inadequate and insecure” (field notes, March 2011). Thin, perhaps yes, but effortless? Hardly.

For such a big and morally and politically freighted part of American life, corpulence and its control has garnered remarkably little attention from sociocultural anthropologists. In recent years, medical and biocultural anthropologists have shown a growing interest in cultural and biocultural aspects of obesity (Brewis 2011; Nichter 2000; Taylor 2011; Ulijaszek and Lofink 2006). Yet there is virtually no work that takes the larger governmental, public-health, and cultural campaign against fat itself as a point of ethnographic departure.⁷ For a discipline seeking greater engagement with the contemporary world, however, there are compelling reasons to do so. At least in one corner of the United States, I argue, the war on fat is intensifying already-existing cultural anxieties about weight. For those whose biologies refuse to cooperate, it is producing dangerous body practices, tormented selves, and socioemotional suffering on a vast scale. SoCal is far from typical, but it is important because it represents the cultural cutting edge that, through the power of the Hollywood media, exports its dreams of perfect bodies and perfect lives to the rest of the world.

The “war on fat” as biopolitical science and governance

This article is part of a larger project that examines the governance of weight in the United States through the “war on fat.” I view the war on fat as a biopolitical field of science and governance that has emerged to name, study,

measure, and manage the “obesity epidemic”—a newly threatening flaw in the biological and social body of the nation—by remaking overweight and obese subjects into thin, fit, proper Americans. Reframing the question of obesity as one of biopolitical governance—that is, a field of politics and governance aimed at administering and optimizing the vital characteristics of human life at individual and, especially, population levels—allows us to move beyond the issue of weight to pose important questions about discourse, subjectivity and, ultimately, power.⁸ In this article, I neither judge the campaign nor seek to intervene in the scientific debates about overweight, including what causes it, a subject about which much has been written, and whether fatness is a disease.⁹ Instead, I tease out some of the campaign’s unexplored consequences. Focusing on those who are its prime targets, I examine how the public-health, corporate, and broadly cultural war on fat is playing out in the lives of heavysset young people, and with what effects on their bodies, subjectivities, and lives. What, I ask, is the crusade against fat producing in addition to thin, fit bodies (if, indeed, it is even producing those)?

In the dominant view, the public-health campaign is helpfully responding to the problem of rising numbers of hefty Americans by urging them to modify their dietary and exercise behaviors in order to lose weight, thereby avoiding both serious health problems and the heavy stigma and social disadvantage associated with being overweight (Brownell et al. 2005; Solvay 2000; on “fat oppression,” see Royce 2009). In this article, I argue that this now-commonsense view has things backward. On the basis of in-depth research in Southern California, I suggest that the war on fat, far from reducing the number of fat people, is itself producing a large and growing number of self-identified “abnormal” and “irresponsible” “fat subjects” whom it seeks to transform into thin, fit, responsible persons.¹⁰ Though not technically fat (“obese”) according to the BMI, these weight-obsessed subjects’ desperate efforts to lower their weight may actually be endangering their health, a trend with implications for larger issues of social suffering and social justice. As used here, a “fat subject” is not the same as an overweight or fat person. An overweight or a fat or obese person is someone with an elevated BMI. A fat subject, by contrast, is someone who may have an only slightly higher than normal weight but who identifies as fat and takes on the fat subject’s characteristics (described below). My argument aligns with the critiques of the fat-acceptance movement, which stress the dangers of weight-loss treatments and the further stigmatization of fat people inherent in the “crisis” framing (Royce 2009; Wann 2009). Yet it goes beyond the fat-acceptance scholarship to systematically document the impacts of the war on fat on heavy individuals and to frame these effects within a larger analysis of the contemporary biopolitics of the weighty body.¹¹

Fat discourse and fat science

Understanding this troubling outcome requires examining the campaign’s effects on discourse and, in turn, subjectivity. As noted above, my research in SoCal suggests that, at least in this corner of the country, the noisy public-health campaign against fat is producing a veritable epidemic of fat talk. In her pioneering study *Fat Talk: What Girls and Their Parents Say about Dieting*, Mimi Nichter (2000) uses the term *fat talk* to refer to a pervasive speech performance in which teen girls verbalize the inadequacies of their body shapes, typically by declaring, “I’m so fat!” I preserve the sense of “fat talk” as the everyday conversations about weight (conversations of all sorts, not just declarations of fatness) that circulate in popular culture. At the same time, I adopt a more Foucauldian perspective in which fat talk is but the conversational component of fat discourse—a complex, internally structured, historically specific body of knowledge that structures how weight and weight-related behavior can be talked about and that does things, that produces effects (cf. Ferguson 1990).

As many have noted, in U.S. culture, fat talk has long been a moralizing discourse—what Christine Halse (2009) calls a “virtue discourse”—in which thinness is deemed a worthy, desirable, and necessary state, and thinness and fatness are associated with traits representing opposite ends of the moral spectrum (from the highly valued self-discipline and self-control, at the one end, to the moral failings of self-indulgence and lack of self-discipline, at the other). Now, however, with the medicalization of weight and the scientization of fat discourse, the discourse on fat is also a scientifically based biopolitical discourse aimed at optimizing a biological dimension of human existence. In this discourse, the science does critically important political work.

Today’s fat discourse establishes weight categories based on the science of weight, specifically the BMI. In this classification scheme, a BMI of 18.5 to 24.9 is “normal,” 25 to 29.9 is “overweight,” 30 and higher is “obese,” and under 18.5 is “underweight.” The BMI discourse is thus both normalizing, specifying an ideal or norm and urging people to normalize their status, and subjectifying, setting out weight-based subject positions into which people are supposed to fit themselves. Although slender bodies have been a cultural obsession in the United States for roughly a century, today, overweight and obese people—the main targets of the discourse—are no longer deemed simply unattractive (and morally flawed); they are also “abnormal,” “defective,” or “flawed” in some essential, biological sense and in need of remediation. Because fat discourse is a biomedical discourse, the abnormal categories are “diseases,” chronic in nature, that must be treated according to the best medical practice, primarily diet and exercise (Barlow and Expert Committee 2007). It is now a physician’s professional duty to regularly measure weight and diagnose and treat

weight-based “disease” in all of his or her patients, adult and pediatric (Barlow and Expert Committee 2007; National Institutes of Health and National Heart, Lung, and Blood Institute 1998). Thus, fat discourse identifies fat targets to be normalized and instructs them to follow diet, exercise, and other regimens to reach normal weight and become biologically normal subjects.

As a biodiscourse, fat talk makes scientific experts (doctors, physical education teachers, etc.) the authorities on body weight and its management. Drawing on the still-enormous cultural authority of bioscience and biomedicine among the general public, these experts speak in the name of “the truth,” and few challenge their authority. As Paul Campos (2004; Campos et al. 2006) and other critics (Gaesser 2002; Gard and Wright 2005; Oliver 2006; Ross 2005) have stressed, the war on fat embeds many assumptions that the scientific community itself considers dubious or controversial yet embraces as pragmatic compromises in the interests of “doing something about the urgent problem of obesity.” Among these areas of scientific uncertainty, three are particularly important here. The first is the assumption that the BMI is a good measure of body fat and predictor of future disease. The second is the claim that obesity and overweight are “diseases.” The third is the assumption that weight is under individual control and that virtually anyone can lose weight through diet and exercise. This is not the place to review the science; suffice it to say that a large body of work suggests that each of these premises is problematic. The BMI is a poor measure of fat and predictor of disease. Heavy weights are neither diseases in themselves nor consistent predictors of other disease. Finally, given the significant role of genetics in obesity, it is not surprising that the field of bioscience has not yet found a cure for fatness. Indeed, the literature suggests that, for most individuals, there are no safe and reliable ways to achieve long-term weight loss. Diets rarely work, exercise promotes fitness but not weight loss, and diet pills have been associated with serious health problems such as heart attack and stroke. Even surgical solutions—lap-band and other bariatric surgeries—pose serious health risks and have poor long-term outcomes (for the latest, see Pfeifer 2011). No wonder the campaign against fat has claimed few successes.

Despite the problematic nature of these premises underlying the war on fat, the cultural authority of the scientific experts allows them to confine controversies over the science largely to the expert literature, keeping them out of public consciousness.¹² The building of the antiobesity campaign on such problematic foundations raises troubling ethical issues, as heavysset people are labeled diseased and insistently urged to lose weight through techniques that do not work for most people or work at serious risk to people's health. They are, in effect, asked to do the impossible and then socially punished for failing.

Making subjects fat

How then might today's epidemic of fat talk be fostering the making of fat subjects? Feminist poststructuralist work has explored how bodily selves are shaped through dialogic interaction with social discourses, and how women are more tyrannized by the cultural ideal of the fit, slender, well-managed body than are men (Bordo 1993; Butler 1990; Davis 1995). To understand how fat subjects are being created, we need to examine the social discourses circulating around fatness and how individual subjects are interacting with them. My research (described in the next section) suggests that there are two kinds of fat talk. In the first, bio-pedagogical fat talk, the discourse on weight serves to inform people of their weight status (“too fat,” “too skinny,” etc.) and to instruct them on what practices they must adopt to achieve a normative body weight (the term *bio-pedagogy* comes from Evans et al. 2008). The second is fat abuse, delivered through bio-bullying of various sorts (the term *fat abuse* comes from Royce 2009; *bio-bullying* is my term).¹³ As cultural historian Amy Farrell (2011) shows, in the United States today, fat is a mark of shame, a character stigma so discrediting that fat people are often treated as not quite human. Heavy young people are targets of often-cruel verbal abuse, and the heavier the child, the greater the abuse (Lumeng et al. 2010; Taylor 2011). These two types of fat talk have differing effects on subjectivity. I tease these out below.

The process of becoming a fat subject generally unfolds in three analytically distinct (though empirically entwined) steps. A fat subject is born when an above-average-weight young person, often in late grade school or middle school, is subjected to a growing din of derogatory fat talk telling her that her weight is excessive and that weight is the identity most crucial to social acceptance. In the second step, her growing self-consciousness and shame about her weight gradually develops into a weight obsession, as efforts to lose weight fail. In the third, as weight struggles come to dominate her life, she gradually takes on the identity of a fat subject and the constellation of emotions, social behaviors, and bodily practices that go with it. Below, I explore this process of subject making ethnographically and ask a series of related questions: How do bio-pedagogical and abusive fat talk affect subject making? What are the attributes of a fat subject? Who becomes a fat subject and who resists that identity? Finally, what are the larger consequences of fat subjectivity for young people's health and lives more generally?

The SoCal body politics project

For roughly fifteen years (1995–2011), I taught a large course at the University of California, Irvine—located in the very heart of “the OC”—on the culture and politics of the

gendered–raced–classed–sexed body in the United States today. Not just another course, *The Woman and the Body* became a major intellectual and political project for me and a space for intense conversations about the politics of the trim, toned body in SoCal, where some 78 percent of the students I taught grew up. The course quickly became a virtual ethnographic field site and a springboard for further fieldwork in SoCal more generally.

Given the opprobrium heaped on heavy Americans, for many young people the subject of weight evokes feelings of intense shame and personal failure, feelings too humiliating to share with anyone. Classic anthropological methods—personal interviews, participant-observation—are not very effective at eliciting feelings of this sort. In 2010 and 2011, I offered students extra credit for writing a three- to five-page ethnographic essay on how issues of diet, weight, and the BMI played out in the life of a person they knew well. Roughly half the class (of 274 in 2010 and 332 in 2011) wrote essays. The majority (three-quarters) wrote autoethnographies about their own experiences; the rest wrote about siblings, parents, or close friends. Assigning these essays as a pedagogical tool, I was not prepared for what I would receive. Full of tales of California childhoods dominated—and often devastated—by battles over weight, the essays were eye-opening, disturbing, and, in cases, heartbreaking to read.

For the cultural analyst, these autoethnographic essays from those targeted by the fat talk for bodily reform provide extraordinary insight into how the broader war on fat had shaped their authors' practices, identities, and lives for twenty-some years—a relatively long time frame in this field of research. Just as a diarist can write about shameful things she would not be comfortable telling anyone in person, the autoethnographer can write about feelings he would be too embarrassed to openly admit or talk about in an interview. The young essayists were keen observers—and, in many cases, also analyzers—of the micropolitics of weight in their social worlds.

For many of the young authors, writing the essays provided a positive, even therapeutic and empowering, experience. Writing about difficult issues that might never before have risen to consciousness helped them organize their thoughts and feelings and make sense of them, often for the first time in their lives. Through writing, some were able to acknowledge a difficult truth for the first time—that they suffered from an eating disorder, for example, or that intimate partners were fat abusive toward them—and come to terms with it. Acknowledging such problems is often a first step in the process of healing. Perhaps just as important, writing about these matters enabled these young people to find their voice. In a society in which fat seems to be the last socially acceptable grounds “justifying” prejudice, fat individuals are some of the most stigmatized and silenced people in America today. Although there is a growing push-back

against the excesses of the fat-is-bad mantra in the expert literature and within the fat-acceptance movement, rarely does this critique spill over into the domain of popular culture, where fat people are supposed to feel shamed into extreme dieting and exercising, not complain about fat abuse. Television shows like *The Biggest Loser* provide the script—and there are few others.

Realizing the extraordinary power of these essays as personal testimony and cultural evidence, I sought institutional review board approval to use them in my research, and then I obtained the permission of each student to use his or her essay. In their e-mailed go-aheads, many of the students added personal notes saying that they felt grateful to have someone bear witness to their suffering and honored to be included in the research.

To see how young people become—or, in a few cases, resist becoming—fat subjects, I turn now to the essays of four young Californians who have been labeled “fat” and subjected to fat talk—fat abuse their whole young lives. These are not, of course, representative cases, but the stories are ordinary ones, typical of the accounts of the roughly one hundred twenty-five heavier young people whose essays I collected.¹⁴ Until recently, most of the research on the micropolitics of weight focused on white girls. Yet the United States is fast becoming a minority-dominant nation. In 2010, people of color made up 46.5 percent of Americans under 18. In the high-immigrant LA–Long Beach–Santa Ana metropolitan area, nonwhites made up an astonishing 79 percent of the youth population (Frey 2011; the figure for all of California was 73 percent). People of nonwhite ethnicities are just as vulnerable to fat abuse as whites, and the impact on them can be equally if not more devastating, as the achievement of a normative body may be essential to their acceptance into mainstream society. Moreover, it is not just girls and young women whose worlds are full of fat talk. The research of Nichter (2000) and Nicole Taylor (2011) in the Southwest suggests that, compared to teenage girls, boys are less closely monitored and criticized for their weight, in part because their self-worth is tied more to their abilities and achievements than to their looks. Yet, clearly, fat (and skinny) boys are subject to weight abuse. How does this affect them? Nichter found that boys were relatively immune to the feelings of personal failure that girls endured. In Taylor's research, boys were hurt by the harsh critiques but, following codes of masculinity, had to “play it cool” and hide the pain. In SoCal, fat boys are mercilessly teased, a behavior that may be on the increase. How that bio-bullying affects their sense of self is an important question for study.

In this article, I focus on traditionally silenced, subordinated groups whose struggles with weight have remained largely hidden. I have selected for analysis four nonwhite young people of diverse cultural backgrounds whose stories are particularly compelling or affecting. All but one grew up in the greater LA area. Two grew up in financially struggling

families, and two were raised in middle-class families. Except at the extremes, perhaps, economic level seemed to have little effect on the amount of bullying a young person had to endure or how she or he reacted. April is African American, Tiffany is Chinese American, Anahid is Armenian American, and Binh, the only man in the group, is Vietnamese American (all names are fictitious). In featuring one informant of each ethnicity, my aim is not to draw generalizations about ethnicity and the politics of weight but simply to illustrate that in the multiethnic jumble that is So-Cal, bio-bullying leaves no group unscathed.

I have preserved the essays in their original form and language, correcting only spelling and grammatical errors. In a few places, to clarify the meaning, I have changed a word or two or slightly reworked the text. My alterations are in brackets. I have also added subheadings to structure the text. Because of space limitations, I have omitted portions of text that do not deal with weight.

Weight: A ghost haunting me my entire life—April's story

April is a 19- to 20-year-old African American who grew up in Los Angeles's San Fernando Valley and Orange County. In her autoethnography, she documents a series of life-changing incidents through which she gradually picked up and internalized society's bio-pedagogical message that, for girls and women, a beautiful body is the source of happiness and power, especially sexual power, and that beauty comes from—and only from—being thin.

Weight has affected me [since] I was in elementary school . . . I was never really interested in relationships; I was a tomboy of sorts . . . However, when I saw that all my friends had "crushes" and "boyfriends," I almost felt obligated to get a little boy to like me—but was never successful. That's when I learned that body image played a large [role] in attracting the opposite sex.

Bio-bullies in school

The two most popular girls in school were one of my best friends and my cousin. My best friend was extremely slender and athletic; she was a White girl with long brown hair. She could do pull-ups with four fingers and the boys simply adored her nature. My cousin, although chubbier than my friend and Black, experienced early puberty and sported a B-sized chest and curvy hips—rather large for a 9 year-old—and the boys couldn't keep their eyes off her. Where was I in this system of body image? I was chubby and flat-chested, with no sensual appeal and a tomboy dressing style—I was nowhere but at the very bottom . . . Realizing this, I became incredibly depressed and often found myself feeling alone . . . Society's standard punched me in the face, and it hurt.

Growing up and going to middle school, I began to learn more about dieting. My best friend at the time was very big, and I remember her always talking about avoiding certain foods [since] she wanted to lose weight. I always thought she was beautiful; she had large breasts, light skin, beautiful hazel eyes, and a funny personality. In reality, my friend was very overweight, but I thought people would overlook that because she had such large breasts and curvaceous hips. However, that image was destroyed when a boy, who was upset at something my friend had done . . . called her a "fat, ugly piece of shit" right in front of me. My friend ran away in tears. It was the first time I realized that weight was a huge issue, even for curvaceous girls. I could only comfort my friend with my company as she sobbed hysterically on a classroom desk.

The warnings of a concerned brother

It wasn't long after that that I started getting the critiques from my family. While my mother [and] father never spoke about my weight, my brother did. He constantly told me that I ate too much and that I was going to be a fat girl and that men would throw things at me. I became scared and started dieting. My dieting consisted of starving myself. I would eat a bowl of cereal at 7:00 a.m., then refuse to eat again until I got home about 4:00 p.m. and had dinner. I continued to do this . . . every day and eventually I started to get food headaches. I would have to endure a pounding head all day long until dinner time, often crying alone in my room because the pain hurt so much. However, I had convinced myself that in the end, this pain was worth [it to keep] boys from throwing things at me. As a result, when dinner came around, I would often binge on two large plates because I was so hungry, and my headache immediately [disappeared]. As a result, my metabolism dropped and I actually ended up gaining weight . . .

Ultimately, though, I felt fat. I remember looking in the mirror, gripping the excess fat on my stomach in my hands and imagining ripping it from my body. I imagined blowing all the fat from my nose into a trash can and immediately becoming slender and beautiful. All these fantasies haunted me like a ghost, and my confidence continued to drop as the years drifted into high school.

In high school I hit puberty when I was 14, and started to develop breasts and curves. Although I was only an A cup, I slendored out and my hips became the center of attention to boys. I entered a dance class and became very active. I dropped from 140 at 5'3" to 130. As if my new body [had] triggered a reaction, boys started asking me out. I never felt more accepted in life than I did at that moment . . .

My family and I went to Jamaica [the next] summer, and there I went through an experience I will never

forget . . . My brother was constantly annoyed with me for parading around the resort in my bathing suit . . . because the boys . . . kept looking at me. My pride burst at this; I was getting so much attention because of my new body and new lifestyle that I only wished to flaunt it more to the world . . . However, this in the end had negative effects. During a boat cruise, one of the Jamaican hosts took me under deck and sexually assaulted me by forcing me to touch his privates while my parents were on deck enjoying the party. He was supposed to be giving me a foot massage. When I returned to my parents, they joked and laughed about my receiving a foot massage by a man, marking it as my first experience as a woman. It was a traumatizing experience that I ended up crying to my brother about . . . He told me that “when you’re pretty, a lot of guys are going to come on to you like that and you’re going to have to deal with much bigger things later.” While I didn’t particularly enjoy being abused, I learned that a beautiful body really did have power over men . . .

While the experience in Jamaica didn’t affect me too much psychologically . . . high school provided a much more violent experience. One of my best friends at the time . . . started to . . . spread rumors about me . . . I was suddenly hated by the Black community in my school; I was called weird, dyke, and White all at once by people who were once my friends. This caused serious depression and I began to turn to food for comfort. I went from 120 to 135 and fluctuated up to 140 pounds. I was lonely and felt more fat than ever. I often told myself that I would kill myself if I allowed myself to reach over 140, and starved myself every time I got close . . .

From self-starvation to bingeing and purging: Weight loss at any cost

When I graduated from high school . . . food became a pleasure . . . and I stopped dancing . . . During freshman year [in college], adjusting to a new lifestyle, I [rose to] 156 pounds by winter quarter—I was fat. At the end of winter quarter, I began to starve myself to lose the weight. I ate once a day at 5:00 p.m. for dinner; usually about a 300-calorie meal. I became very weak, sleeping most of the time when I made it home from school so I would not have to think about the hunger . . . On the fourth day I didn’t eat anything. That night the ambulance was called when I fainted in Starbucks . . . My blood sugar was at a dangerously low level . . . and it took about 30 minutes to revitalize it.

I can’t quite understand why I did it. I think [perhaps] because my roommates were always so skinny and fit—seeing their perfect bodies tormented me. I had learned that everyone met their sweethearts in college, and wondered why no one was interested in me. I blamed my weight. I remember my roommate and I decided to take pictures in our bikinis for the spring quarter. I was so utterly disgusted with myself that when I walked to

the grocery store that day, I considered throwing myself into traffic and praying that the biggest car would hit me, so that for once I could worry about some other type of pain than the one I was going through, which felt so horrible . . .

[After] freshman year, I became active and began swimming laps and lost 15 pounds, then started dieting at a healthier rate. Now I stand at about 140 pounds, but am still not satisfied with my weight. I wake up every morning and the first thing I do is look at the size of my stomach. Unfortunately, I fear that I may have an eating disorder developing—[some] mixture of starving/bingeing/purging. Not but 2 or 3 weeks ago, I binged on trail mix and was so disgusted with myself that I purged it out—then I did the same with a piece of cake later. Though [I know] it’s impossible to be perfect, I still strive to be more beautiful than I am . . . Everything in my life has told me that power and happiness come from beauty, and now I feel as if I am conditioned to pursue it. Weight has become a ghost that doesn’t leave me no matter what I do. It has haunted me throughout my life.

April: From carefree tomboy to weight-obsessed “fat subject”

Throughout her whole young life, April has heard a steady stream of bio-pedagogical fat talk that has taught her the essentials of femininity: A thin body is essential to social acceptance, she is fat, and the way to become thin is starvation dieting supplemented by exercise. A key agent in April’s growing body consciousness, her brother began critiquing her weight when she was in middle school. Taking him as the authority on her body’s appeal to boys, for the first time in her life April began to see herself as fat. As she took on this despised identity, her confidence dropped and she began to harbor transformation fantasies of sucking out all the fat and becoming, Cinderella-like, the beautiful thin girl of her dreams. Following the script she had learned, April went on a diet but, ignorant of the basics of nutrition, unwittingly began a lifelong pattern of starvation dieting that posed severe risks to her health.

In high school, a growth spurt and a more active lifestyle brought April weight loss and social acceptance, popularity, and self-confidence at last. Like many Americans, however, April fell victim to the contradictory messages our ad-saturated culture sends about food: We must limit our intake to stay thin, yet food is an incomparable source of comfort in times of distress. Deeply depressed by rumors being circulated about her, April turned to food for comfort, leading to rapid weight gain and another bout of starvation dieting that landed her in the hospital.

Throughout all her body-centered experiences, April has internalized the dominant virtue discourse, according to which a good body means a good self. She has not challenged the equation of weight with selfhood, nor has she

sought to craft an identity outside that dominant subjectivity. Instead she has made this the basis of her narrative about her self and her life. Between grade school and college, April, once a carefree tomboy, became a “fat subject,” someone who now sees herself as fat, believes that fat people can lose weight, anxiously exercises and diets in a never-ending quest for the “perfect” slim body, and berates herself for always failing to achieve her impossible goal. She has arrived at this point even though, at her heaviest, April was no more than mildly “overweight” by the BMI scale (26.8, with overweight defined as 25.0 to 29.9).

What began as a weight consciousness in childhood has become a weight obsession in young adulthood. Now a college sophomore surrounded by mostly thin co-eds, April has created a weight-centric narrative about her life, in which her problems—including the absence of male attention—are caused by her heaviness. For April, as for many large-bodied people in the upscale, thin-worshipping areas of SoCal, the feeling of being “too big” and “out of place” amounts to a kind of daily torment. Today she struggles with her weight constantly, engaging in eating practices so close to anorexia and bulimia that they pose dangers to her health. By altering her metabolism, they may undermine her efforts to ever achieve a healthy weight.

“We don’t like ugly Asian girls”: A hidden struggle—Tiffany’s story

Tiffany is a 22-year-old Chinese American from Orange County’s Fountain Valley, whose municipal motto is, ironically, “a nice place to live.” Unlike April, who experiences the cultural commentary about the body as an informative bio-pedagogy she must adhere to so she can fit in, Tiffany is the victim of bio-bullying so vicious it leaves her traumatized, with no idea of how she might gain social acceptance, let alone happiness or power.

Mean girls on the attack

[As a young child], weight and body image were not important to me . . . It wasn’t until I transferred to a public school that the notion of body image began to affect me. I remember in fifth grade, I was always bullied by the other students and I was never sure why . . . One day, while I was waiting in line to get into class, I finally confronted two of the girls who were picking on me. When I asked them why they were being so mean to me, they responded, “Well, we don’t like ugly Asian girls with your *hair* and ugly *face*. So you can’t be our friend. No one likes you.” . . . I was devastated by their words. However, it got worse. I asked why they liked this other girl who had the same hair . . . and they said, “She’s cute, and you are *fat and ugly*.” I still remember those words; they stuck with me, always in the back of my mind. I

never told my mom about what happened; neither did I share this with my sister. I was scared that they would laugh at me or even agree with what those girls said . . .

Going on into middle school, I remember I went on a diet. At that time, I did not know what calories were . . . all I wanted was to not be fat like those girls accused me of in elementary school. My diet was simple. Since I am Chinese, I would eat rice every evening. So I measured how [much] I ate by only having one bowl of rice, and when I finished with the rice I would not eat any more food . . . I followed that diet for a year, and I remember running into [former] school teachers who would comment, “Wow, you have lost a lot of weight! You look so much better.” That simple phrase just boosted my confidence. I was so happy that people were noticing that I was losing weight.

Middle school went by much better than elementary school . . . I was not picked on by people, and no one would say anything negative about my body image. If I commented on my image, my friends would always coo, saying “Nooooo! You are so pretty and not fat at all” . . .

The transition into high school was easy and smooth. Everything ran well in my freshman year until midway through and my “best friend” at the time came up to me and said she had something important to say. What she had to say was that all throughout middle school, one girl whom I considered a “best friend” was just using me, and thought I was a “fat and ugly bitch.” That one little comment brought back all the memories of my elementary school days. It sucked, honestly, hearing that being said about me. It really hurt. That one little statement made it really hard to not look at myself and wonder, “Am I really that ugly? Do I look that fat? What is everyone else thinking right now?” I became very paranoid from then on. I never wore anything tight, I hated clothes that showed the stomach, and I was afraid of the beach. I was so scared of being judged, I was terrified of other people’s opinion . . .

Accusing eyes all around

I remember the doctors. I hated to go . . . My doctors would always look at my weight and say, “Your weight is creeping up, but you are OK still. Just keep exercising.” I was OK with it in the beginning, but in the last three years it’s gotten worse. This year when I went for my annual check-up, my doctor specifically told me, “That one to two pounds may not look like much, but it all adds up. Watch your weight, exercise everyday, and watch what you eat.” She never said I was fat, but she implied it, which, I felt, was worse . . . After this incident, I felt my struggles really escalated . . . Now I felt like there were accusing eyes around me saying, “You are fat. No one likes fat.”

It hurts to admit it, but the most damage and problem came not from peers, it came from my own family. My mother was not the one who criticized me; instead, she was the one trying to boost my confidence and tell me that I was still young and anything can happen. It was my little brother and father who really made everything seem like a reality. At the dinner table, my little brother would always chant, "You are fat and ugly. No boy will want you." Before I would just take this as a jest and brush it off . . . Only in the past few months, it has all picked up in pace. Now when my little brother points at me and screams "you're FAT!," my father says, "He's not wrong." That is crushing. When I think about it, and as I'm typing, I'm trying my best not to cry. It really hurts and it makes me wonder if that is how everyone perceives me. Am I really that fat? Am I that unappealing? Is that why I'm so lonely and have barely any friends?

I always thought that family was supposed to be there for you and to support each other . . . All my life, I've believed in my father, always looked up to him, trusted him, and then he says something like that to me. I don't know how to react to his statements . . . I've tried to talk to my father but he claims it's a joke and brushes off what I say. He . . . continues to join my little brother in calling me fat and ugly. To me, I feel when someone says something repeatedly, it becomes a truth for them and eventually they will believe what they are saying . . .

I'm now a vegetarian and I tell people it's because I love animals. But to be completely honest, it's because of what they have said. Being a vegetarian means I eat much less, feel full much easier, and look healthy while I try to battle with my body image . . . I don't ever want to become anorexic, nor do I want to be stick thin, but it seems like I'm following [a common path from vegetarianism to anorexia]. It scares me . . . I'm just desperate for the name-calling and comments to disappear, and the only way, it seems, to become un-fat is to lose all the weight no matter [what the risk to my health].

Tiffany: Bio-bullying and a crushed sense of self

Unlike April, who becomes a target of bio-pedagogical commentary, Tiffany is the victim of bio-bullying so vicious and so traumatizing it simply crushes her sense of herself as a good, socially worthy person, leaving her vulnerable to others' judgments. Moving chronologically, Tiffany's essay tracks a series of incidents in which significant people in her life have called her "fat and ugly" in deliberately attacking, hurtful ways. The first assault, by two mean girls in grade school, is so savage that it scars her for life. Through their words, and the social ostracism that accompanies them, Tiffany learns that looks are essential to personal identity and social acceptance and that her looks—which she cannot control—are unacceptable. Not only is she unable to

get this upsetting view of herself out of her head, she is also afraid to tell even close family members about it, for fear they might say it is true. This leaves her alone with her horrible fears, which then grow and fester with time.

Middle school provides temporary relief from the assaults. Already seeing herself as fat, like a proper "fat subject," Tiffany undertakes a diet. On this crude diet—like April's, nutritionally dangerous—Tiffany loses some weight and receives positive comments from teachers, who reinforce the dominant cultural message that looks are what count and weight is critical to looks.

The second attack comes in early high school, when a best friend betrays her with a terrible fat insult. After that, Tiffany's self-confidence plummets and she develops a paranoid fear that she is always being judged. With this, she slips into a mindset in which others' remarks determine her reality. Although Tiffany's weight falls far below "obese" levels, she increasingly sees herself as fat and, like the typical fat subject, withdraws socially, even avoiding the beach—a sign of serious social withdrawal in SoCal.

The third traumatic incident comes in college. After a doctor issues a mild warning about weight gain, Tiffany develops a profound fear of abusive fat talk, and begins to see "accusing eyes all around." When her brother and father take up the verbal abuse, her world falls apart. In the absence of supportive body comments from anyone, these verbal assaults, especially from her long-trusted father, have worn away Tiffany's self-esteem to the point that she now deeply believes they are true—she accepts the weight-centric narrative people are imposing on her—and that her "ugly fat body" explains why she has so few friends. Now desperate for the hostile comments to stop, Tiffany embarks on a drastic weight-loss program. Despite the serious risks to her health, a lifetime of verbal assaults has convinced her that it is better to be thin and eating disordered than "fat and ugly."

A failure to myself and others—Anahid's story

Anahid is a 20-year-old Armenian American woman from the San Fernando Valley. Her essay takes a different shape from the others; rather than a historical recounting of a growing body consciousness, its form is more that of a journal entry, composed of a congeries of jumbled emotions and ruminations on her struggles to define a positive subjectivity for herself, an overweight person, in a culture that equates thinness with goodness.

When I was a small kid, I was not the thinnest kid in school, and ever since then, weight has been [an issue in my life]. It is not my identity; I focus my identity on my personality more than anything. Even though one of my wishes is to be thin like the models or even some of my peers, weight has not controlled my life. I will not let a number control my life, but that does not

mean that my weight does not get me down because it does.

“With all this obesity talk, you feel bad about yourself as a person”

Everyone wants to look beautiful and I, for one, am no exception. I have tried to diet but I have never kept at it; I just seem to give up . . . I do not know how my weight rose, but getting it down has been a challenge. I randomly try diets when the pressure is too much. When there is so much talk about obesity, you feel bad about yourself as a person. Even if you are a kind person, you feel down because the whole nation is saying that excessive weight is bad and that’s it. It makes you look at yourself and think that there is something wrong with you. It is not a good feeling at all; it makes you feel like a failure and, more importantly, it makes you feel as if you have failed others.

When the BMI scale came out, I quickly went to look at my height [for] weight [number]. It turns out I was not in the normal range, which I knew, but the [use] of the BMI scale truly makes you feel horrible. It makes you feel as if you have failed your body and yourself . . . No one wants to be considered abnormal and with this obesity epidemic . . . I feel that people who are outside of the norm will definitely feel bad about themselves and this is in fact horrible, because a number is not supposed to define who we are . . . I blame myself for my weight and . . . I am now going on a diet where I am eating healthy food and exercising regularly in order to truly feel good about myself and possibly get my weight down. I am doing it for myself, to make myself feel better.

I do not have low self-esteem. I love my family and friends and I am so truly thankful for everything in my life . . . My self-esteem is truly based on my personality, I feel that I am a person who can get along with anybody and I take pride in that. It makes me feel bad when the rest of the world/the media is saying that excessive weight is bad and wrong . . . I feel that losing weight has become the right thing to do; if you don’t, there is something wrong with you. I am . . . trying to lose weight, but it is not for the nation but for myself . . .

“When I am thin, my real self will shine through”

I always had this dream that I would get skinny and be comfortable with my body and myself. There are a lot of things that I will not do because of my weight because I feel that people will judge . . . When I just meet a person I am on the shy side. I think that losing weight will allow me to feel more outgoing but I realize that this outlook is bad. Losing weight is not going to change anything; it will slightly make me more confident with myself and

perhaps [allow me to] buy clothes that look a lot nicer on me . . .

Whenever I see models in magazines, I envy how skinny and beautiful they are. They seem to have it all and reading articles on how attractive people lead happier lives, have more economic opportunity, etc . . . does not make me feel any better . . . So much of this world is based on looks and that is very sad to say. It truly hurts when people say that, but it is the complete truth and I believe it. For that reason, I feel that losing weight will make people see [me as] a person rather than just a body shape . . .

I never tried any weight loss programs or any diet pills. I feel that diet pills are hazardous to your health, and as for weight loss programs and . . . bariatric surgery, it is fairly too much money. Why spend that money when you can possibly do it on your own naturally? It will definitely take more effort and discipline but it teaches you healthy ways of living and how to live the right way for the rest of your life . . . It makes me mad that I haven’t changed my weight, but hopefully, this time around, I can make it work . . .

Anahid: Struggling to find a self beyond her weight

Unlike April and Tiffany, Anahid works hard to assert a positive identity for herself that is based on something other than her body weight. Challenging one of the core claims of the dominant discourse, she asserts bravely that “a number is not supposed to define who we are.” Anahid’s identity and self-esteem come from her personality, her ability to get along with anyone. Yet in a world where, she acknowledges ruefully, looks and weight are everything and the ubiquitous moralizing talk about the “obesity epidemic” tells us we are bad people if we cannot keep our weight within a normal range, it is a gigantic struggle for someone who is overweight to retain a positive identity. Confused about why her weight rose and unable to bring it down, yet seeing herself as responsible for her excess pounds, Anahid feels like a bad person, a flawed person, and a failure to herself and others. Translating her weight into the standardized terms of the BMI makes her feel even worse, because the truth of her abnormality is now quantified—and thus scientifically demonstrated—and because she is now classified along with other overweight people as a member of a medically abnormal category that is targeted for intervention and control. The emotional consequences of the medicalized war on fat could hardly be more starkly stated.

In her essay, which loops back around to the same topics again and again, Anahid struggles to reconcile some essentially irreconcilable positions. She tries to stand outside the fat talk and reject it, yet the fat talk so dominates the U.S. cultural and moral landscape that she is trapped inside it, holding fast to certain key tenets (that weight is

subject to individual control and she can bring hers down). She ends up arguing that she is not a fat subject. All the fat talk, nevertheless, makes her feel bad, so she resolves to try to achieve the normative slender body of the beautiful models but to do it “healthily.” Unless Anahid is biologically fortunate, which seems unlikely given her history, she, like April and Tiffany, has been set up for years of endless struggle and, in turn, feelings of being a failure.

All they can see is my fat—Binh’s story

Binh is a 22-year-old Vietnamese American male from the Silicon Valley city of San Jose. In his essay, Binh charts a long history of fat abuse and encounters with less-than-helpful purveyors of bio-pedagogical advice. Yet, unlike April and Tiffany, who internalize the dominant message about weight and selfhood, Binh sloughs it off, telling a different story about his life.

Mocked in middle school

During middle school, I was what a person would call “fat” or “chubby.” A combination of my overweightness as well as a penguin-like wobble in my walk resulted in mockery by my peers as well as members of my family. My brother and his friends would often walk up to me and call me “fat boy,” and tease me endlessly. My mother would hug me and joke, saying “oh, wow, my arms can’t reach around you; I can’t hug you all the way” . . . It made me sad because I knew I wasn’t bothering anyone, but at the same time [I] did not speak out against everyone’s criticisms and jokes.

The only one who tried to protect my feelings was my Aunt [Hue]. On Wednesday and Thursday afternoons, when she would drive me to my tutoring lessons . . . I would always ask her every time we sat in the car, “Auntie, am I fat?” She would always reply in a matter-of-fact tone, “No, honey, not at all,” like I had nothing to worry about. I was always grateful to her, because she was the only one who didn’t make me feel like crap, and [she] picked up on how everyone’s comments made me feel . . .

At thirteen years of age, during my period of puberty, I saw that I had gotten taller, and my clothes fit better. Everyone was looking at me differently. I was getting more compliments, and girls were actually, *actually* attracted to me as well as talking to me. This brought me joy, but my mentality and fear of looking fat stayed with me. I would often ask my friends: “Do I look fat?” . . . It was my worst fear, to return to that state where I wasn’t like everyone else, where just by looking different I was to be ostracized and mocked . . .

The freshman fifteen: My worst fear comes true

Slowly [but surely], the mentality and fear [receded] in my mind . . . Before coming home from my first year of

college, [however,] I gained the [infamous] “Freshman Fifteen.” People were looking at me much differently, much like how they were when I was younger. It was not my fault I had to sit on my butt every day to study and all there was to eat was fast food. I could not find time to go to the gym either, due to my struggles to stay afloat in the competitive sea that is the School of Biological Sciences . . . People from home would often come up to me, poke at my stomach, and tell me how fat I had gotten . . . My gain in weight was all they could see, not their old friend Binh who [had] treated them so nicely before college, but just some new random fatass coming home from college. The news spread, and I even received comments on pictures on my Facebook, stating how huge I had gotten.

Often when I am depressed or stressed, I find myself eating sweet and junky food because I seek some pleasantness or satisfaction, in this case . . . in tasty foods . . . I felt that I could eat what I wanted because I was upset and it was okay because it was all for making me feel better, but unfortunately that was not the outcome. The outcome was simply more weight gain and, in turn, more stares and criticism by those close to me . . .

The BMI: A chart that does not lie

My mother took my brother and me to see a doctor just for a check-up. I was already afraid the doctor would measure my weight, and he did so as he is required to in a normal [physical] check-up. He told my mother that according to the BMI, I was . . . just over the borderline of overweight. My mother had not thought so of me until she heard this from the doctor, and since then she has taken every moment with me to remind me to exercise and to lose weight. With this I can see the high regard she has of medical opinion, because she always tells me she did not [previously] think I had such a problem, but after going to the doctor she feels disappointed in me and my weight . . .

Intimidation and deviance: Bio-cops in the college dorm

Currently I am living with four other guys who all happen to be some kind of athlete. They always talk about how hard they work out or how much fun they have playing a sport. Unfortunately I don’t share their passion. Naturally, I try to fit in by working out at least once in a while to appease them . . . They always encourage me to go swim, play basketball, or bike ride with them, but at the same time they criticize what I eat.

I mostly eat food my mother buys and cooks for me and, being Vietnamese, our food is less than what most health fanatics would call healthy. One of my roommates mentioned that in order to lose weight I would need to throw out a lot of the food my mother cooked for me . . . She learned to cook through our Vietnamese culture, so who are they to tell me to throw away the

[only] kind of food [she] knows how to make? Living with these guys, I often feel like I have to eat in seclusion . . . because I know they like to compare my habits to theirs behind my back . . . They would often ask me why I don't find the time to exercise, and I reply because of my busy schedule I often don't have the time, but when I do have time I like to spend it relaxing and doing nothing. They often tell me that my way of thinking is weak and all I come up with are excuses . . .

A stealth attack on Christmas Day

On the morning of Christmas Day of 2009, I woke up to find that my family and relatives had all gathered in the kitchen. Groggily yet happily, I walked into the room and greeted everyone. From across the room, I received a friendly smile from my uncle's father-in-law. Naturally, I smiled back, [never guessing] what he was going to say. The old man smiled at me all warmly, and then yelled out to me: "You're fat!" My smiling ceased. I looked at him for five of what were probably the longest seconds in my entire life. My eyes turned to my uncle, who was looking at me already, and laughing wholeheartedly at what his father-in-law had said. Everyone heard it and laughed. My aunt who had tried to protect me all those years ago [now] said with a big smile, "You probably shouldn't eat so much junk, [Binh], heheh." It was the most embarrassing moment of my entire life . . . I was also very upset because my damn relatives just let me take it.

After that I didn't even eat, I just stayed up in my room, except to go on a walk with my uncle and his wife. We walked for a good thirty minutes or so, and he asked me if I was tired. I replied, "[Do you say that] because I'm fat?" "Well, no," [he replied,] "not at all, but clearly you are. I think you need to lose some weight too." [My comment] was very vicious but I think he got the message . . . No matter what anyone in our family said, he told me, it wasn't meant to hurt me. I didn't agree . . . If they know that saying such things does hurt me—and they can tell it does—why do they continue? . . . No one in my family cared that I had worked so hard in college, or that I was a big brother figure to their kids, or that I was one of the most, if not the most, responsible and loyal kids in the family. All I was and still am in their eyes is "the fat one of the family" . . .

Binh: Resisting the fat-boy label

In his essay, Binh charts a long history of fat abuse and social rejection that starts in middle school and seems to emanate from everyone in his young life, from friends to family members. The physician is a key agent in the national antifat campaign. In Binh's story, as in Tiffany's, a doctor plays a crucial role, pulling out the BMI chart and warning Binh about his "borderline condition." Binh's mother accords the doctor instant credibility. Like everyone else in his world,

including the doctor, his mother assumes that Binh is heavy because he is irresponsible about eating and exercising.

In college, the fat talk becomes less openly attacking but more urgently directive. As luck would have it, Binh shares a dorm suite with four athletes, who act as responsible bio-cops, constantly encouraging him to work out, criticizing his eating habits, and labeling his mindset "weak" when he fails to follow the weight-loss script.

The most crushing blow comes at a major holiday, when a distant relative gives Binh a very vicious and public drubbing meant to ridicule and humiliate him into losing weight. The whole family seems to agree, with even former protectors now turning into attacking bio-bullies. Despite the relentless message that he is a bad person for failing to lose weight, what is striking about Binh is that, unlike April and Tiffany, who are subjected to similar abuse, he steadfastly resists the fat-person subjectivity. Although he fears "looking fat," in the end Binh neither accepts personal responsibility for his heavy weight, as a good fat subject would, nor sees himself as abject, either morally ("a failure") or physically ("abnormal"). Nor does he take up the corporeal practices of the fat subject. The differing response appears clearly related to gender. For boys, identity and self-worth derive more from ability than from looks, and external acceptance is less critical to identity formation (Nichter 2000:45–67). Protected from the fat subjectivity by his maleness, Binh holds onto the notion of himself as a good person with other, noncorporeal identities—a kind cousin, a good student. His essay relates his profound sadness and bafflement at a world in which everyone looks at him and sees not his fine qualities but only his excess weight.

Weighty subjects

What, then, is the war on fat producing in Southern California? These essays, and others I have collected, substantiate my argument that the intensified medical, governmental, corporate, and popular-cultural concern about the "obesity epidemic" is producing a parallel epidemic of fat talk in which important individuals in the social worlds of young people as well as the larger media culture actively participate, naming who is fat, ridiculing those individuals, cajoling them to lose weight, and informing them how—as if they did not already know. At once a morality tale about personal irresponsibility, a medical tale about bodily deviance, and a governmental tale about national decline, fat talk circulates throughout the social body, leaving no one with a few extra pounds immune to its barbs.

The essays suggest that the increasingly strident, scientifically grounded narrative about the biological and moral flaws of the overweight and "the costs they are imposing on us all" is now authorizing ever more people to engage in more, and more-abusive, fat talk. It is not just mean kids on the playground who hurl insults; authority figures in

young people's lives—from parents and relatives to teachers, coaches, and doctors—now routinely berate kids for being overweight and badger them to diet and exercise to lose weight. Often delivered in the name of concern for the target's welfare (“for your own good”), many of these comments amount to vicious personal attacks. Southern Californians seem to accept that there is a national epidemic of obesity, that everyone is responsible for maintaining a normal BMI, and that the irresponsible, selfish people who refuse to do so fully deserve the derision, condemnation, and censure they get. The (apparent) scientific authority behind the discourse seems to encourage the bio-bullies' sense of justification and self-righteousness in using any means necessary to bring the noncompliant into line. Although female confidantes—such as Tiffany's mother and close girlfriends—might comfort targets of attack in private, remarkably, in public there is no push-back, no one who comes to the defense of those targeted for fat abuse (as Binh put it, “My damn relatives just let me take it”). Instead, the victims are left to suffer on their own.

What is striking about the fat talk documented in these essays and others I have studied is that few if any fat talkers or fat targets questioned its core assertions and underlying assumptions. Despite the medical evidence to the contrary, there seems to be widespread acceptance of its basic tenets: that above-normal weights pose dangers to health, that weight is under individual control, and that people can lower their weight through diet and exercise. Introduced into a social and cultural context in which heavy weights have long been a sign of moral flaw, and supported by a visual media environment dominated by size-zero female bodies, buff male bodies, and before-and-after pictures showing how easy it apparently is to achieve a slender body, the core message of the war on fat has been accepted as indubitable, commonsense truth. The digitally altered images have done their work.

Beyond fat talk, what else is the war on fat producing? Among young Californians I have worked with, it was certainly not creating many fit, trim, healthy Americans.¹⁵ Instead, these accounts suggest, the war on fat—based on poor measures of fatness, faulty assumptions about medical risks, and exaggerated assertions about the ease of weight loss—is producing a new generation of self-identified fat subjects. The two types of fat talk worked together to transform heavysset youngsters into fat subjects. The biopedagogical fat talk was productive of new identities and practices, setting out weight-based subject positions, informing people of their status, teaching that weight can and must be controlled, and educating people about the practices they must adopt to achieve normative weight. Because of its ubiquity and force, the incessant body-size commentary also taught young people that their body weight was an essential component of their personal identity and social acceptability. The fat abuse, by contrast, was destruc-

tive because it was experienced as an attack on the self. For the three young women, at least, fat abuse worked to erode self-confidence and undermine alternative identities based on other, positive attributes, rendering them vulnerable to the new weight-based subjectivities being thrust on them.

As they struggled with this new socially imposed identity, these young people developed a shared set of attributes that come together into what might be called “fat subjecthood.” At least in SoCal, my work with these and many other overweight youngsters suggests, a fat subject has at least four identifying characteristics. First, the individual sees him or herself as abject. Unlike members of the fat-acceptance movement, who espouse body diversity as a social value and embrace fatness as a positive identity (Rothblum and Solovay 2009), not one of the heavysset young people whose narratives I studied saw fatness as a positive feature of their personhood. Instead, they viewed themselves as abject—either biologically flawed, morally irresponsible or unworthy, or aesthetically unappealing, or some combination of the three. As Anahid put it, she felt she was “a bad person,” who was a “failure to herself and others.”

Second, the fat subject engages in size-appropriate corporeal practices—especially dieting and exercising—in an effort to lose the degrading weight. When those efforts do not work, as they usually do not for people with resistant biologies (like the four young people I discuss), the self-identified fat subject often takes them to the extremes—self-starvation, bingeing and purging, or (as in cases I documented but do not discuss here) excessive exercise—in a desperate attempt to lose the weight. Though these practices often pose serious dangers to their health (such as lowering metabolism and blood sugar levels, as in April's case), after years of insufferable insults, some fat subjects regard developing a full-blown eating disorder as the necessary price of finally ridding themselves of an intolerable identity.

A third attribute, common to all four young people, is social withdrawal. Faced with incessant ridicule and social rejection, the fat subject retreats socially, skipping beach parties (Tiffany) or eating in private (Binh), to avoid judgment. The anticipatory fear of fat abuse altered personalities, leading Anahid to be shy, Tiffany to be distrustful, and Binh to be fearful. Finally, the self-perception of fatness invariably brought emotional suffering—including depression, low self-esteem, and pervasive insecurities—combined with vivid fantasies of radical bodily transformation. For some of the young people, brutal social rejection in childhood left them with enduring emotional scars reflected in deep-rooted insecurities and drastic weight-loss practices that had become a way of life.

Labeled “fat” again and again, all were forced into life-consuming identity struggles. The four young people I discuss resolved these internal battles in different ways,

creating a continuum of subjects that ranged from high- to low-fat identification. For April and Tiffany, fat became the dominant (though probably not only) identity. Anahid occupied a middle position in which she struggled, with only some success, to reject the fat-subject identity and hold onto the definition of “the real me” as someone with a stellar personality. Binh was subject to withering fat abuse, yet he stubbornly refused to follow the bioscript others foisted on him. Undoubtedly protected by his maleness, Binh managed to resist becoming a fat subject and hold onto his core identity as a good relative and student.

At least in this corner of the country, the nationwide campaign to banish obesity and make people healthy seems to be producing anything but thinness, health, and happiness. There are far too many heavysset young Californians whose subjectivities are colonized by the fear of fat, and whose lives are dominated by the efforts of many in their world to get them to shed pounds and be “normal.” Instead of studying, engaging in sports, developing a hobby, or building a career, they are obsessed with efforts to lose weight. And in one of the great biopolitical injustices of our time, for most, those efforts will surely fail. Buried in the scientific literature—actually, hiding in plain sight, for those who wish to look—is the dismal truth that the world has not yet found a cure for overweight, if “cure” is what is needed. For most people who are biologically prone to heaviness, there is still no safe, effective way to achieve sustained weight loss. Quite the contrary; the biology of dieting (e.g., hormonal changes that slow metabolism and increase appetite) conspires against them to make it almost impossible to achieve long-term weight loss (Sumithran et al. 2011). Anahid’s essay shows especially clearly how the fat discourse puts so many in an impossible bind by making them feel bad for being heavy, making them believe they can lose weight and keep it off healthfully, and then making them feel like personal failures when their efforts inevitably fall short. Far from producing thin, fit, happy young people, the war on fat is producing a generation of tormented selves, heart-rending levels of socioemotional suffering, and disordered bodily practices that pose dangers to their health.

There is another biopolitical injustice as well, one that is built into corporate capitalism and, indeed, the American way of life. Although I have had little space to devote to the issue, big food and other corporate entities are critical parts of the biopolitics of the obesity epidemic today. In a striking parallel to the “war on tobacco” (Benson 2010), in the war on fat, food corporations, which are now trumpeting their social responsibility as producers of “healthy” “diet” foods, continue to manipulate consumers’ desires by coming up with ever more biologically rewarding high-fat, sugar, and salt junk foods that alter our brain chemistry in ways that lead most of us to crave still more comfort food and some of us to engage in conditioned hypereating (April and Binh

illustrate such cravings; for the science, see Kessler 2009). Meanwhile, reflecting industry lobbying and prevalent neoliberal ideas about self-governance, public-health policies associated with the war on fat focus largely on individual responsibility for weight, not basic industry regulation (Nestle 2007; Simon 2006). Big food emerges as “part of the solution” as large-bodied Americans, who are now deemed “the problem,” suffer vicious bullying and diminished lives. A more poignant example of the intimate effects of corporate capitalism can hardly be imagined (Berlant 1997).

Notes

1. Data from 2007–08 suggest that the rate of increase in overweight and obesity among U.S. adults is slowing, but the absolute levels remain worryingly high: 33.8 percent of adults were obese, and 34.2 percent were overweight (Flegal et al. 2010). Among children and adolescents aged 2–19 in 2007–08, 16.9 percent were obese, and another 14.8 percent were overweight (Ogden et al. 2010).

2. The surgeon general’s “call to action” was broad based, urging intervention in five key settings that covered much of U.S. life: families and communities, schools, health care, media and communications, and worksites (Satcher 2001).

3. The U.S. commitment to weight control dates to the early 20th century, when weight came to be framed as a matter of virtue (Stearns 2002). Media and public concern about obesity has grown rapidly since 1990, and especially since the mid-1990s (Boero 2007). The medicalization of excess weight began around the time of World War II but has intensified in the last two decades as the focus has shifted to public health and risk (Boero 2007; Jutel 2006).

4. The Surgeon General used the medicalized term *war on obesity*. *War on fat* better captures the political and cultural significance of the campaign.

5. In this article, then, any mention of America, American culture and life, and so on, specifically references the United States.

6. For this discussion, the Southern California region includes Ventura, Los Angeles (LA), Orange, San Diego, San Bernadino, Riverside, and Imperial Counties. Population numbers come from U.S. Census Bureau 2011.

7. Tina Moffat (2010) argues that her colleagues in biocultural anthropology have either ignored the “childhood obesity epidemic” or worked on the margins of the medical sciences, neglecting to question how the “epidemic” is conceptualized or its implications for intervention. Sociologists of sports and of education have begun to study the biopolitics of the obesity epidemic, though not ethnographically. See, for example, Evans et al. 2008 and Wright and Harwood 2009. The newly emerging field of fat studies, part of the fat-acceptance movement, takes a critical feminist look at the dominant approach to obesity (e.g., Rothblum and Solovay 2009).

8. See, for example, the work on new forms of biological, therapeutic, and pharmaceutical citizenship (Biehl 2005; Nguyen 2010; Petryna 2002); the deployment of humanitarianism (Fassin 2007); and the regulation of populations (Greenhalgh 2003; Greenhalgh and Winckler 2005). I see this analysis of the biopolitics of the “obesity epidemic” as part of a larger effort by anthropologists of medicine, science, and governance to illuminate shifts in the contemporary politics of life itself (Rose 2007).

9. Fat-acceptance scholars view heaviness not as a disease but as a form of human diversity (Saguy and Riley 2005).

10. In seeking the causes of and solutions to the obesity epidemic, the fat discourse has two interconnected prongs. A

biomedical prong identifies problems with individual behavior and seeks to make individuals responsible for normalizing their weight through behavioral change. A more public-health-oriented prong identifies problems at the level of the “obesogenic environment” and seeks to ameliorate them through legislation and regulation directed at the food industry, school system, and so forth. I deal with the first prong here, leaving discussion of the second for elsewhere.

11. My arguments also align well with a long history of feminist research on the cult of the slender body (e.g., Chernin 1981; Hesse-Biber 2007; Ohrbach 1978; Wolf 1991). Most of that research was conducted before today’s war on fat was launched.

12. On some of the complicated politics of critical obesity research, see Gard 2009.

13. This term was suggested to me by Alma Gottlieb.

14. Just over half the essays dealt with problems of overweight young people. The others dealt with the struggles of the obese, underweight, normal, and eating disordered. Analyses of those essays, slated for publication elsewhere, show that not all technically obese people become “fat subjects.”

15. In the essays I have studied, a few heavy young people did manage to lose weight through the adoption of drastic diet and exercise regimens but often at some cost to their physical health and usually at a cost to their overall well-being, as the weight-loss programs took over their lives.

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