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Although the authors point to a cultural consensus when it comes to how Americans view fat bodies, Lynne Gerber and Sarah Quinn argue that the social spaces from which these discussions originate contribute marked differences to the ways individuals articulate a common theme of fat phobia. In their essay, Gerber and Quinn examine three prominent discussants of fat in the media: Oprah Winfrey, televangelist Pat Robertson, and Morgan Spurlock in his 2004 documentary about McDonald's, Super Size Me. They look at the ways each negotiates fat in relation to their own persons as well as what they identify as the causes of obesity and the ends to which they deploy these discussions. Drawing on the work of Pierre Bourdieu, Gerber and Quinn argue that bodily thinness is a form of “cultural capital.” Like money, thinness is so highly valued a resource in the American cultural market that the pursuit of it, and the deployment of it in discussions and imagery related to weight, have great cultural power. Although Winfrey, Spurlock, and Robertson all fuel fat phobia by endorsing the pursuit of thinness, each produces a different cultural product that varies in accord with their social position and agenda as a beloved media icon, an independent filmmaker, and the leader of a conservative fundamentalist church. Mapping cultural expressions about fat into specific social spaces, the authors argue, helps complicate the analysis and understanding of fat phobia because it provides a mechanism that not only establishes the pervasiveness of fat phobia within the cultural landscape, but also accounts for the specific understandings and agendas which undergird and inform it.

Fat phobia is ubiquitous in American culture. In a society otherwise fractured over questions of sexuality, race, gender, religion, and politics, on this our nation speaks with a strangely united voice: fat is bad, and if you’re fat it’s your fault. Ever-present, our obsession with fat and the pursuit of thinness seems intransigent. And yet, within this general consensus, fat phobia takes very different forms. Some fat foes indulge in lurid imaginaries about the lives and consumption habits of fat people; some repeat simple, mantra-like equations that, if heeded, promise to erase fat from the
earth; some point the finger at corporate brainwashing and seduction; and some proclaim to condemn fat but absolve fat people, a secular attempt at loving the sinner but hating the sin.

An increasing number of researchers, in fields ranging from cultural studies to political science to epidemiology, are analyzing and challenging the dominant fat-phobic discourse. But no one has focused on the diversity of fat phobia in America and why the sentiment that fat is bad is expressed in such a myriad of ways. In this paper we take initial steps towards addressing this lacuna by investigating social sources of variations in expressions of fat phobia. We draw on Pierre Bourdieu’s work to argue that, in contemporary America, bodily thinness is a preeminent form of “cultural capital”—a non-material resource that conveys socio-cultural status. Thinness as a resource is so consistently high in value in the American cultural marketplace that it can be seen as a blue-chip investment of sorts; its strength makes the pursuit of thinness and repudiation of fatness central to the structure of the cultural economy. Bourdieu’s work suggests that this blue-chip status practically requires that those engaging this economy somehow reckon with the fear of fat and the pursuit of thinness, but predicts that they will do so in ways that vary in accordance with their social position and the direction of their social movement (either actual or hoped-for). Utilizing Bourdieu’s notion of distinction and the configurations of capitals that fuel it, we will examine three conversations about fat in light of the social location from which they emerged: Morgan Spurlock’s independent documentary film Super Size Me, the Skinny Wednesday episodes of Pat Robertson’s television show The 700 Club, and Oprah Winfrey’s eponymous daytime talk show. These cases provide an opportunity to examine how cultural products emerging from different locations in social space generate distinctive forms of fat-phobic discourse in the course of pursuing, securing, and strategically deploying the cultural capital of thinness.

We begin our study with a review of critical fat studies literature. Next, we explicate key aspects of Bourdieu’s work—cultural capital, the configuration of capitals, and social trajectory—arguing that they provide analytical leverage for a theory both of how body size functions in the cultural economy and why we should expect to find distinctions in the way that functioning generates fat phobia. We then introduce our cases by situating them within Bourdieu’s framework and proceed to analyze their representations of fat, focusing on two general distinctions that we think are particularly revealing about fat phobia and cultural capital: the relation each figure establishes between fat and the self and their accounts of the causal-ity of fatness. We conclude with reflections on the common deployment of the fear of fatness in these three socially and ideologically divergent cases.

**Critical Fat Inquiries**

The last 10 years have seen the emergence of a critical examination of fat, body size, and the marginalization of fat people, largely in response to ratcheting attention to obesity as a purported medical crisis. Concern about an emerging obesity epidemic has led to a range of initiatives aimed at reducing bodily adiposity (“A State’s Battle,” U. S. Dept. of Health) and the proliferation of technologies of questionable safety and efficacy to facilitate that end. The dominant message of obesity epidemic discourse is that weight and body fat are causal factors in a number of serious health concerns, that long term change in body weight is possible and always medically desirable, and that individuals are ultimately responsible for implementing the diet and lifestyle changes that would enable weight reduction. Its proponents argue that a high body mass index (BMI) is associated with an increased risk of mortality and warn that the current generation faces the possibility of dying earlier due to recent rises in obesity rates (Olsansky et al).

This discourse has been challenged on many fronts. Flegal et al’s analysis of BMI and lifespan data found that optimal longevity is associated with the “overweight” category on the BMI scale, and that the greatest risks of mortality exist at both ends of that spectrum, not just at the higher one. Others have argued that fat may be a symptom rather than a cause of a range of conditions, including heart disease and type 2 diabetes, typically associated with obesity (Gaesser; Lee et al). And some have questioned the efficacy of standard obesity interventions; for example, a 1998 editorial in the New England Journal of Medicine stated that diets do not work and urged researchers to seek alternatives for the treatment of fat people (Kassirer; Angell). Additional research indicates that fat people may experience greater health improvement in programs that focus on food choice, exercise, and size acceptance rather than weight loss per se (Bacon et al).

Cultural and political critics have also entered the fray. Critzer’s Fat Land attributes the rise in obesity to shifts in American agricultural policy and declining levels of physical activity, recommending stigma as a tool for warding off its dangers (121). Campos’ The Diet Myth systematically questions the veracity of obesity epidemic claims while analyzing the surprising power of America’s cultural obsession with diet and weight loss. Gard and Wright take an academic approach to the question, examining
not only the limitations of obesity science but also the cultural forces that make it compelling. And Oliver's Fat Politics traces the political and economic interests at work in developing and promoting the obesity epidemic paradigm. All touch on questions of class and obesity, and Oliver mentions the appeal of fat as a mobilizing issue at all points in the political spectrum (77), but none attends to the question of how fat phobia differs in different social locations in any detail.

Cultural representations of fat and fat people have become objects of analysis from numerous disciplinary vantage points. Recent scholarship has seen increased attention to diet and weight loss culture that include historical accounts (Schwartz), sociological studies (Stinson), and analyses of religious influences (Griffith); while contributing a great deal to our knowledge of the workings of weight loss efforts, this body of work focuses on history without explicitly engaging theory, or utilizes theory only in conversation with a singular case. Social psychologists interested in the stigmatization of fat people have examined representations of fat people in the media (Weston and Bliss) and the impact of those representations on body image (Greenberg and Worrell). Cultural sociologists and media studies experts, informed by gender studies and queer theory, have interrogated American cultural texts for images and narratives that might provide tools for resisting fat stigmatization (Lebesco, Revolting Bodies; Bzazi and Lebesco). Surprisingly little attention has been paid, however, to analyzing explicitly fat-phobic discourses. Lebesco (“Situating Fat Suits”) has written provocatively about the increasing popularity of the use of the fat suit in American media, Losano and Risch analyze the depictions of fatness in exercise videos, and Griffith analyzes how the discourse of Christian weight loss programs configure fat and the fat woman (206-238), but the literature we have examined has not attempted a comparative project analyzing fat-phobic media representations.

Given the prevalence of fat phobia in the culture and the concrete impact it has on the lives of fat people (and those trying, sometimes desperately, to not become fat), we find the inattention to the specifics of its cultural expression surprising. Fat phobia may be ubiquitous but it is not monolithic, and the literature calls for increased theoretical and empirical attention to this question. We suggest that Bourdieu’s work offers theoretical tools that may successfully account for both the ubiquity and the specificity of fat-phobia in American cultural production.

Bourdieu and the Cultural Economy of Bodies

Bourdieu’s general theory of capitals, distinction, and movement through social space has much to add to the critical analysis of fat phobia in the United States. Central to that theory is his expansion of the notion of capital. In his seminal work Distinction, Bourdieu proposed that anything that has some force of power or social effect can be understood as a form of capital. That is, anything that a society recognizes as meaningful, valuable, or estimable can be cultivated for social profit, exchanged for other forms of power, and subject to the range of strategies commonly associated with economic maneuvering. The possible forms that capital can take are theoretically limitless, but for the sake of clarity he focused his discussion on two that predominate: economic capital and cultural capital. Economic capital is capital as it is traditionally understood—access to money and the means of production. Cultural capital consists of cultivated tastes and preferences for things that are rare, precious, or valuable—that is, things that mark their consumers as elite. A taste for exclusive things is learned through exposure to the cultural world via families, social networks, and institutions like schools and museums. People with the highest levels of cultural capital express a seemingly natural, although rigorously trained, preference for that which is culturally valuable, and a corresponding aversion to that which is culturally debased; they often set cultural trends in taste. These preferences are culturally misrecognized as expressions of individual taste, rather than understood as the socially constrained outcome of cultural exposure experienced from a particular position in social space—a dynamic that serves to mask privilege by making its effects appear to be the result of individual refinement rather than social structure and the different kinds of power which animate it.

Cultural capital, Bourdieu writes, is cultivated in and through the body. Indeed, the literal embodiment of cultural values, he argues, is the most foundational form that cultural capital takes (“Forms of Capital” 244). Tastes, preferences, and ways of presenting oneself that indicate one’s level of cultural capital are developed through physical disciplines; bodily forms of cultural capital can include posture and comportment, size and shape, styles of movement, and even the development of the particular vocal muscularatures different accents require. Cultural capital in its bodily forms is a highly individualized pursuit and the logic of cultural capital requires that agents invest time and effort into developing particularly valued aspects of body and taste. Those who do so with the appearance of natural endowment or affinity, rather than studied achievement, win. For example, an upper class woman may be compelled to cultivate an aura of
natural litheness and grace, and a working class man a more powerful, muscular, bulky form, but in both cases it is more effective to do so without the appearance of excessive effort. "The body," Bourdieu writes, is the most indisputable materialization of class tastes (Distinction 190), and to the extent to which the body is malleable (or perceived to be so) it becomes a critical site for the cultivation of cultural capital, particularly by those who may have few avenues to other kinds of power.5

In this paper we maintain that in the contemporary United States thinness has become a blue-chip form of embodied cultural capital. Body size, with its appearance of changeability yet complex causality mined in dynamics of economic access and social power, is a locus for the generation of cultural value in a society driven by a mythology of the possibilities of individual initiative but equally wedded to inequalities that make social and economic change available only to the few. Efforts at controlling body size lend themselves to disciplines of the body, notably dieting and exercise, that require intensive individual labor, yet these disciplines rarely result in the desired bodily capital, guaranteeing the rarity of "ideal weight" and thus its value. While thinness is an indicator of cultural status, fatness becomes a cultural liability, resulting in the barriers fat people face to accessing education, economic opportunity, social networks, and other forms of capital (Brownell et al). In a cultural economy that values thinness so strongly, the pursuit of cultural capital through the bodily disciplines that attempt to cultivate thinness, or the symbolic reinforcement of the thinness imperative, become deeply entwined with the repudiation of fatness and the marginalization of fat people. In analyzing the workings of cultural and social power, we argue that the centrality of body size as a source of cultural capital needs to be recognized and accounted for.

Central for Bourdieu is the understanding that classifications of social agents based on their access to both economic and cultural capital have real and lasting consequences. People continually make distinctions between themselves and others not simply on the basis of how much money they have, but also on the basis of bodies, tastes, and preferences. These cultural displays become symbolic cues that are used in schools, social networks, and workplaces to sort people into tracks that bestow or deny opportunities to accumulate more economic and cultural capital in a reinforcing circle. In order to account for this insight that there are many kinds of status that impact life chances, Bourdieu proposes a model of social space that maps social differences not only by measuring any given agent's overall volume of capital—how much or how little any given individual may have—but the composition of that capital—the relative holdings of economic or cultural capital—as well. This two-fold assessment of capital explains, for example, how an avant-garde artist could have a great deal of influence over the tastes of a society without a great deal of access to financial resources, while a garbage man could have a relatively high volume of economic capital when compared to a teacher, but still be considered of lower status due to a lack of cultural capital.

Bourdieu's model recognizes that changes in fortune and strategic maneuverings cause people to move through social space, but emphasizes that the range and direction of these movements are facilitated or inhibited by social structures. That is, the kinds of opportunities available to a person, and the kinds of strategies that he or she might use to try to change his or her status, will vary based on position, experiences, and resources. Social agents attempt to improve their situations by investing whatever forms of capital they may have, profiting from them, and exchanging them for other forms. So, for example, someone with a great deal of cultural capital might try to cash it in for money (imagine a talented writer who makes a mint working at an advertising firm) or leverage it into even more cultural status (the same writer might become a poet and refuse to "sell out," thereby garnering additional cultural clout). Likewise, a person with money might cash it in for a measure of cultural esteem (by donating to the Philharmonic, or investing in an Ivy League education) or try to invest it in a way that simply earns more money (by investing exclusively in economic markets). Thus social trajectory can mean either a change in the overall volume of capital or a change in its composition; people may increase or decrease their holdings of any particular form of capital but may also pursue different kinds of capital that may be more useful or advantageous for the circumstances they find themselves in. What is critical for Bourdieu is that the social space is dynamic, with agents continually engaged in exchanges that have the potential to move them not just up and down, as social mobility is conventionally understood, but in virtually any direction throughout the social space.

It follows that as people move through social space they must grapple with a changing cultural landscape that encompasses not just rules for etiquette, language, and comportment, but fundamental expectations about tastes, bodily attributes, and dispositions. The adage "you can never be too rich or too thin" is revealing. Americans are broadly expected to value thinness, just as they are expected to value economic wealth; but it is the cultural and economical elite who are expected to be completely and effortlessly successful at both endeavors while most others are expected to simply appreciate the value of that which they will never fully attain from a safe distance. The cases we discuss in this paper illustrate how three different social agents engage questions of fatness and thinness, with very
into eliminating its Super Size options (“You Are What You Eat”). In the wake of the film’s success, he became well known as a daring anti-corporate muckraker and has gone on to publish books, produce the FX reality show 30 Days, and produce the films What Would Jesus Buy? and The Republican War on Science.

We consider Spurlock an example of someone with high cultural capital and low economic capital, reflecting his relative status when making Super Size Me. His education at a highly regarded New York film school, identification with the arts, professed taste for organic and vegan cuisine, and work in the independent media mark him as someone who wishes to have a cultivated outsider influence on culture. His attempt to use this film as an opportunity to develop both his own career and open up funding for independent media also underscore his relatively high cultural capital and his interest in investing some of it to reap increased economic reward.

Our second case is Oprah Winfrey and The Oprah Winfrey Show. The show is the most highly rated talk show in the history of television (“Advertising Opportunities”) and the woman behind it is one of the richest people in the United States and the wealthiest African American of the 20th century (Noon). Her story is one of dizzying cultural and economic ascent. Born in rural Mississippi, Winfrey was raised in poverty, largely by her grandparents, in the pre Civil Rights South. She began her career as a news reporter in Nashville, and after stints as a reporter and talk show host in Baltimore she moved to Chicago to host a morning talk show. She became a local phenomenon, rivaling major national talk show personalities, and in 1986 went national with her own syndicated show. Especially popular among women, the show is both the foundation of her fame and a media empire, which now includes her own production company and magazine.

Oprah’s television talk show personality is marked by a high degree of personal accessibility, empathy, and emotional intimacy with her audience, all of which are generated in a preponderance of shows that delve into deeply personal issues. Perhaps one aspect of Oprah’s life that makes viewers identify so strongly with her, despite increasing differences in economic and cultural status, is her ongoing, highly visible struggle with issues of fat and weight loss. In the course of the show’s history she has famously been at many different points on the weight spectrum, experimenting with weight loss techniques, declaring triumph over fat, reckoning with the return of lost weight, and continually renewing faith in the project of weight loss, all of which are featured as content in the show. This has not only served to cultivate viewer identification and loyalty, but

**Cases, Capitals, and Social Trajectory**

Our first case is independent filmmaker Morgan Spurlock’s 2004 documentary Super Size Me. The film follows Spurlock as he embarks on his so-called “sadistic epiphany” (“Statement by Director”) of eating nothing but food sold by McDonald’s for thirty days straight while getting very little exercise. Under the watchful eyes of doctors, a nutritionist, a personal trainer, and his vegan chef girlfriend, Spurlock gains 24 pounds, reports having heart palpitations, has a marked reduction in liver function, tingling in the arms and penis, and feelings of depression. Interspersed with coverage of Spurlock’s meals and medical exams are segments that analyze different issues related to diet, nutrition, and corporate influence over the food supply. The fear of obesity is both an ongoing theme in its own right and a device frequently used to underscore the importance of other concerns, such as corporate greed and excess, throughout the film.

This was the first feature film directed by Spurlock. Raised in West Virginia in a family “incredibly supportive of the arts” (“10 Questions”), Spurlock was trained in filmmaking at the Tisch School of the Arts at New York University. Before making Super Size Me he did film production work for a number of corporations, including Sony, and was the creator of I Bet You Will, a web based TV show that was bought by MTV. Spurlock used the profits independently and screened at the Sundance film festival before its release in theaters devoted to independent and alternative films. The film met with critical acclaim, less for the novelty of its message than for its vivid illustration of it. Reviews centered on the “riveting” and “grotesque” spectacle of the filmmaker gaining weight for the sake of his art and his politics’ and Spurlock credits the film for shaming McDonald’s
has reaped rewards for weight management professionals who have guided her efforts and gained her endorsement (Daley; Winfrey and Green).

As part of the celebrations for the 20th anniversary of the show, Winfrey’s production company released a DVD collection highlighting some of Oprah’s favorite moments in the show’s history. For this paper we looked at a segment of the collection called “Weight,” which consists of excerpts from past shows relating to weight, body size, and fat. These include interviews with weight loss and fitness professionals, excerpts from dramatic weight loss stories, and features focused on fat people before and after bariatric surgery. The DVD also includes commentary from Winfrey herself on what these excerpts mean from her present perspective and how they fit into her current understanding of issues related to body size. We supplemented this with materials from her website, which includes extensive diet and nutritional advice and an archive of show summaries since 1990.

Of our three cases Winfrey seems to us to be the highest in terms of capital volume and the most balanced in terms of capital composition. Clearly she is the most economically successful of the group and her appeal has the broadest base. While widely recognized and tremendously culturally influential, she is sometimes critiqued by arbiters of cultural capital when she betrays a taste for the middlebrow. The passionate arguments over Oprah’s book club are a classic case of Bourdieusian fights of cultural distinction. In general, she is more likely to announce the arrival of a trend than to set it. That her audience is made up largely of women may also degrade her cultural capital somewhat. We see her as a case of someone who has achieved a marked change in social location and is seeking to attain the kinds of cultural capital that are reflective of the tastes and preferences that accompany the high level of economic capital she has attained, while still being accessible to her audience members who are situated in very different social locations.

Pat Robertson is the lead figure in our third case, the Skinny Wednesday episodes of The 700 Club. He tends to be associated with his proclamations of the efficacy of personal prayer, his attribution of various social ills to feminists, gays, and lesbians, his suggestions of targets for possible political assassination, and a failed campaign for the presidency. Regular viewers of his news and talk show, The 700 Club, know that weight and body size have been a central concern of his for many years. In 2004 he produced Pat’s Weight Loss Challenge as an effort to help his audience lose weight and learn more about various issues related to nutrition and exercise. “Skinny Wednesday,” a weekly episode of The 700 Club devoted to health and weight issues, features news segments on obesity, special guests who speak on weight loss or exercise, and testimonies of spectacular or innovative weight loss experiences. For this paper we viewed the Pat’s Weight Loss Challenge DVD and six Skinny Wednesday episodes from the first half of 2007 archived on The 700 Club’s website.

Robertson was born and raised in Virginia and is the son of a longtime Virginia congressman and senator. The biography page on his website emphasizes his familial connection to many historical statesmen, including claims of shared ancestry with Winston Churchill (“Biography”). As a young adult he graduated from Yale Law School and was positioned to become a leader in business. But a religious conversion experience brought him into the world of charismatic Christianity at a time when conservative evangelicals were looking to distance themselves from their more separatist fundamentalist forbears and engage more directly with American culture. In 1960 he founded the Christian Broadcasting Network (CBN). Its success as an alternative media outlet geared toward a conservative Christian audience enabled him to engage in a range of other experiments in increasing cultural access to and influence by evangelicals and charismatics, including the founding of Regent University in 1977 and The Christian Coalition in 1989.

We see Robertson as an example of someone with a high degree of economic capital but with less access to cultural capital. While he comes from a prominent background with an elite degree and a great deal of money, he is identified with a religious sector that tends to be a cultural demerit. Charismatic communities have historically placed themselves outside of the circulation of cultural capital in dominant culture and, indeed, much of Robertson’s work can be seen as an effort at generating more dominant forms of cultural capital for his audience and instructing them in how to use it—the founding of media organizations and a university being examples. We see his ongoing focus on weight loss and fitness on The 700 Club as part and parcel of that effort.

Among our cases there are many similarities in how fat is depicted. Each, for example, deploys what we call the litany of fat diseases—the recitation of deadly illnesses that have some kind of correspondence with fat or body size. Each invokes a connection between fat and death through cemetery imagery, allusions to heart attacks, and heart-rending stories of people who lost weight in order to live long enough to see their children grow up. Fat children are another shared source of anti-obesity fretting. Dramatic weight loss testimonials are common in the work of Robertson and Winfrey, where the serial television format continually recycles these kinds of stories. While these similarities are interesting and help us see some of the forms of anti-fat discourse that tend to be ritually deployed,
we refrain from an in-depth analysis of them. Instead, we focus on elements of these texts that are relatively distinctive.

Fat and Self in Social Space

The first key difference we examine is how each of our celebrity figures negotiates fat in relation to their own person. Because thinness is such a strong indicator of cultural capital, each figure must engage with their own body size and how it conveys, or belies, the kind of cultural authority she or he is attempting to cultivate and project. While all decay the dangers of obesity and encourage its eradication from the bodies of others, they represent themselves quite differently in terms of fat and their own bodies.

Spurlock positions himself as the selfless muckraker willing to go to extremes in order to make a point about the evils of the fast food industry. Supremely confident in his own cultural capital and the natural inevitability of both his thinness and cultural authority, he is the only person we have analyzed who is secure enough to risk getting “fat” on film. He enters the experiment secure that becoming fat will do no long term damage to his own cultural position. And the film banks on the risk that doing the unthinkable—willingly and publicly gaining weight—might actually reap cultural and economic reward. In the process he sells himself as someone willing to endure any grotesquerie in order to expose his story.

This positioning reflects his interest in leveraging his cultural capital into greater cultural and economic capital. Bourdieu’s theory of distinction suggests that only those with the most cultural capital are secure enough to violate the rules that others must strive to learn. In a culture where body fat is anathema, only a person who is completely convinced of his own inevitable and inexorable thinness may risk abandoning it. If Spurlock can afford to gamble with his cultural capital, it is because he has plenty to spare. Early in the film, Spurlock makes sure to distinguish himself from those whom we might imagine to be McDonald’s usual customers. He lingers over a “Last Supper,” replete with artichokes, quinoa, and a vegetable tart all lovingly prepared by his vegan girlfriend, “Healthy Chef Alex.” The film moves from initially showing Spurlock gleeful at unfettered access to the McDonald’s menu (free, perhaps, from the dietary restrictions imposed by said vegan chef girlfriend), but he quickly passes from enjoyment to disgust, revolted at the food his experiment requires him to consume, disdainful of the people who eat it regularly, and making it clear that he continues to eat this way only out of a sense of obligation and dedication to his project. The imagery turns to a growing stomach, looks of disdain and discomfort, sluggishly depression, and alarmed doctors and specialists reporting declining physical health indicators. In one dramatic sequence he vomits out of the side of a car after ingesting a supersized meal.

Of course, not all men vomit after eating a supersized meal. And for some men this response might be interpreted as a sign of physical weakness, rather than as indication of the dangers of fast food. Why, then, is Spurlock not emasculated by his inability to digest something that others routinely do? We believe that it is the presentation of his elite cultural tastes and status that allows his consumption of McDonald’s food to be seen as sacrificial rather than indulgent, adventurous rather than quotidian, enlightened rather than shameful. It is his class position that allows his nauseated and aching body (arms and penis tingling, heart racing, tired and depressed) to be seen as something strong and pure that was poisoned, rather than something weak and sensitive that failed to properly perform. It is his underlying privilege that allows Spurlock to be seen as a daring muckraker rather than as a lily-livered whiner.

Of the cases considered in this paper, Spurlock alone is uninterested in achieving or explaining the habits of elites, assuming that the bulk of his intended audience already has them. We never see his efforts at losing the weight he gained; the epilogue suggests that it took longer to do so than he had hoped, and perhaps documenting that effort would compromise the seeming naturalness of his initial weight and bodily condition. His task is not to translate the secrets of thinness to those who struggle to achieve it, but a journey into the unknown habits of the lower classes. His is a traditional anthropological effort at representing the practices of a more ignorant other to an audience of shocked and titillated elites. And, as with the classical anthropological texts, this curiosity about the savage is masked and justified by a veneer of civilized, scientific objectivity. With unpimpeachable moral concerns about health and corporate greed well established, Spurlock is able to capitalize on the fear and disgust of his viewers by taking them vicariously close to what they most fear: fat people, poor people, and the commoners who might see nothing wrong, morally, aesthetically, or otherwise, with eating at McDonald’s on a regular basis.

What Spurlock has deigned to visit, Oprah Winfrey has struggled to leave behind—a struggle famously illustrated in the “fat wagon” episode in which Oprah entered the stage pulling a red wagon full of 67 pounds of fat representing the weight she had recently lost (“Winfrey “Unforgettable”). In a list of twenty of Oprah’s “unforgettable” television moments collected on her anniversary DVD, this was listed first, indicating that her struggles with weight are one of the defining characteristics of her public persona. By talking openly about her body size over the course of a quar-
ter century on her show, she positions herself as a big sister and intimate confidante who has been through many of the trials her viewers experience and who is ready to offer trusted advice and access to professional guidance. She has been at many different places in the weight spectrum, no doubt mirroring the experiences of many of her audience members. She has tried multiple strategies for weight loss, alternated between triumph and despair, and continues to breathe life into the popular belief in the possibility and desirability of healthy long-term weight loss. She identifies as a fat person even when she is thin, expressing frustration with facile weight loss advice and railing against the ways that people who struggle with this issue can be misunderstood (Winfrey 20th Anniversary Collection). Her authority rests in her verifiably authentic experience and her expressions of vulnerability, humanity, and growth. Her willingness to share her own vulnerability is central to her strength and plays a large part in the development of trust between her and her audience. Oprah is, above all, the queen of therapeutic culture: intimate and encouraging, individualistic and politically non-threatening. The visibly thin but fat-empathetic Oprah can reap profit both from identifying with the weight struggles of her audience and representing their bodily aspirations, offering the hope of their own cultivation of the cultural capital of thinness.

Winfrey’s visible struggles with fat are exemplary of her particular social trajectory, and at moments she reveals that her struggles to be thin are, in part, struggles to fit into a new social place; having acquired the things owned by the upper classes, she seeks to acquire their bodily dispositions as well. For example, in an interview focused on how she recommitted herself to the project of weight loss after many failed attempts, she focused on the motivational power of wealth and acquisition:

I was standing on the front porch of my new home in California, the one I’ve worked on for three years as a gift to myself. I was looking at the mountains folding over on themselves and my yard filled with oak, pine, and redwood trees, thinking how this property is really graced by God, a promised land, and I suddenly said to myself: I do not want to be an unhealthy fat person standing in the doorway of this beautiful house. That’s when everything really clicked (“Oprah Makes Commitment”).

Oprah’s self-professed turning point, then, hinged on discomfort over the disjuncture between her socially debased body and her socially vaunted surroundings. To truly belong among the wealthiest Americans Oprah must adopt their aesthetic in all forms. Her struggle against fat is perhaps the nation’s preeminent example of the connection between high social status and low body weight and the effort it takes, especially for women, to reconcile the two.

While Oprah positions herself as a strong but sensitive comrade in the struggle to lose weight, Pat Robertson depicts himself, on The 700 Club and in the Christian world in general, as a patriarch. He is an all-knowing, powerful but benevolent father figure whose followers rely on his wisdom in a number of areas. On the show he is the primary commentator on news stories, he answers questions posed by viewers on subjects ranging from faith to financial planning to food and fat, and he prays for the healing of viewers, transmitting “words of knowledge” about the healings God is performing on audience members as they watch. He is seen as knowledgeable and strong, stern but congenial, and fatherly in the affective, protective, and authoritative senses of the term.

His self-representation in relation to fat is reflective of this effort at conveying authority. He is not visibly fat, and in the material we observed he is always seen as the dispenser of advice rather than its recipient. While on the Pat’s Weight Loss Challenge DVD he does acknowledge that he lost weight in the process of the challenge; however, his weight is never discussed or tabulated and his personal food choices never come under scrutiny. In discussions on exercise he is portrayed as having great strength, often unusually so for a man in his mid-70s, including a boast of leg lifting 2000 pounds which was greeted with skepticism in the press (Associated Press; Rand; Travis). When we see him exercise it is for the purposes of demonstrating his strength, as in a lengthy segment of the DVD that shows him at the leg press building up to a 1,000 pound lift, and passing on his knowledge of fitness to his sidekick Kristy Watts. When exercises are demonstrated during Skinny Wednesday episodes, it is left to Ms. Watts, a thin, young, African American woman, to take instruction from whomever is advising the routine of the day. When guests seek to analyze a food related issue, Ms. Watts discloses her eating habits or attempts to determine the better food choice based on the featured advice (“Diet Detective; “Steve Zim”), her knowledge and judgment continually displayed for evaluation by the expert in question as well as by the audience. In contrast, viewers ask Robertson questions on a range of health and nutrition concerns, including very detailed questions about food supplements, plastic surgery, and exercise regimes; he addresses them all with authority, despite the fact that he is not a doctor or a medical professional of any kind.

Thus Robertson’s own cultural capital as a thin person is secured by never doubting it. He is never in need of information about how to best manage his body, but is depicted as having mastery over it, the fruits of
which he is willing to generously share, hoping to help those who want it and expressing disgust at those who do not use it. He must carefully construct and manage a veneer of effortless thinness; but his claim on cultural capital is precarious enough that he cannot risk violating this image. This effort can also be understood in relation to his audience and the direction of its cultural trajectory. Marginalized from the dominant culture for much of the 20th century, evangelical Christians have, in the last 30 years, evidenced a greater desire to engage American culture, in part to influence it toward evangelical interests and in part to enjoy the benefits that come from improved economic positioning. However, in some more mainstream and liberal locations of cultural production, stereotypes frequently associated with conservative Christians are also often utilized when discussing fat. Fat people are depicted as uneducated, less wealthy, less sophisticated and, in a more recent turn, red state dwellers (Ferraro; Krugman; Morford). These associations are powerful ones in both historic and current cultural battles between right and left, religious and secular, and conservative Christians are no doubt vulnerable to them; a group attempting greater cultural influence cannot be tainted with the cultural demerit of fatness. We hypothesize that this is part of the reason that Christian leaders in general, such as Haggard, Jakes, and Stanley, and Robertson in particular, have recently taken such keen interest in the body size of Christians.

Interestingly, the two white men, despite a sea of differences in political and cultural leanings, share a similar relationship to body fat. While Robertson is not as quick to gamble with his cultural capital as Spurlock, each is presented as naturally thin, having inherent tastes for the healthy foods and active lifestyles thought to keep them trim. In contrast, the two black women, Winfrey and Watts—despite significant differences in social position—are the objects of scrutiny and struggle. While the white men attain and maintain their capital through a discursive display of effortlessness, it is the effort of change, and the attendant vulnerability of both admitting its need and displaying its labor, that make the black women able to both claim capital and have it appear legitimately earned. Although not the focus of our inquiry here, the cases demonstrate that position in social space is further structured by race and gender-based distinctions, distinctions that might be usefully analyzed as forms of embodied cultural capital.

**Causality and Responsibility for Fat Bodies**

In a cultural marketplace that demands that thinness both be perceived as attainable and in fact be rare, the question of causality in relationship to body size—how people become fat—becomes a critical one for the pursuit of cultural aspirations, the reproduction of cultural mythologies about fat and fat people, and the misrecognition of the dynamics of cultural power that underlie the imperative of weight loss. All three of our cases rely on the basic causal story that informs almost all fat phobic discourse in American culture: we eat too much and we don’t exercise enough. But within that construction each expresses the problem in distinctive ways. Winfrey, in accordance with her culturally centrist therapeutic ethos, finds emotional disorder at the root of fatness. For Oprah fat is a sign of food addiction, and all addictions result from a deficit of self love. Since, in her construction, self love and fat cannot co-exist, the former naturally translates into the ability to lose weight and be thin. In this formulation food and exercise have a part to play but cannot be effective over the long term if proper self love is not cultivated. She claims to have in recent years attained a level of self love and acceptance that precludes fatness by definition. Thus she writes on her website,

> Weight was the symptom of a much bigger problem: my unwillingness to fully love, support, and give to myself on a daily basis what I so freely give to others . . . . You’ve got to love yourself and do the work it takes to sustain your most powerful engine: good health. Without it, nothing else matters (“Oprah Makes Commitment”).

As long as self love is in place, fat can no longer thrive. In this formulation it is emotional nurturance that will solve the problem of fat.

In contrast, Robertson has a standard authoritarian response: we’re gorging ourselves for no other reason than the fact that we can. We sin because we have a sinful nature and the only sure way to counter that is through exemplary self control and some simple math. He dismisses all other causal notions except for a reluctant acknowledgment of the possibility that some women eat for comfort. Answering a question about whether people are overweight because of a deeper, emotional “root issue,” he states,

I doubt it. For women that, gets to be the case. I don’t think for men. This comfort food stuff I don’t believe it. I think, I think we’re just gorging ourselves because there’s too much food coming in (“Bring it On”).

The recourse for fat is simply self control, a gift of the spirit that is theoretically available to all Christians at conversion, but which in practice requires ongoing training and discipline.
In Spurlock we have the social critic who lays some blame at the feet of greedy corporations who benefit from the cultural and physical decline of Americans. Reflecting on the film in an interview, he comments, “For me it’s about this type of all-American lifestyle, this fast food culture that has permeated our whole way of life in America” (“You Are”). Throughout the film he points the finger at the fast food industry. It is guilty of utilizing unhealthy food supplies, using bad cooking techniques, offering the caloric laden super size meal option, and not offering more healthful alternatives on the menu. And what is worse is its infringement on spaces of innocence, most notably hospitals and schools, where a captive market deserves better food options. The most socially oriented of the group, his piece alone considers corporate greed to be a significant underlying cause of obesity in America. But in the last instance Spurlock settles on individual responsibility rather than corporate greed as the moral of his story. After continually defining McDonald’s as the problem, the film closes by saying:

It’s up to you. But if you decide to keep eating this way, go ahead. Over time you’ll find yourself getting as sick as I did. You’ll wind up here [shot of an emergency room] or here [shot of a cemetery]. I guess the big question is who do you want to see go first, you or them?

In fact, despite the various distinctions in understandings of causality detailed above, all three of our subjects speak in one voice and adopt the “calories in/calories out” mantra of personal responsibility for bodily fat. This individualized solution is founded on what Bourdieu and others consider the key move in establishing and maintaining social divisions: the naturalization of difference—in this case the naturalization of thinness. The assumption behind the calorie mantra and the notion of individual responsibility is that thinness is the original starting point, the default position, God’s original design, or what spontaneously occurs when all other aspects of the self are in their proper place. The possibility of natural or healthy fat bodies is denied and the enormous amounts of time, money, and ideology that go into both manufacturing thinness and attempts at doing so are obfuscated, as are the array of unequal social structures that make such an immense expenditure of economic and cultural resources possible and desirable. And it clearly suggests that power is at play. As we noted earlier, cultural capital is more valuable when it appears effortless, natural, at one with the order of things. But if Bourdieu is right that the entire social space is driven by the pursuit of rarity for the purposes of distinction, thinness would not be so reliable a currency of cultural capital if it were anywhere near as attainable as this faith suggests. Here, as with other such cases, we can see that dominated social groups are largely unable to attain the physical characteristics considered most socially valuable and are then blamed for not having that which is experientially foreign and inhospitable, if not physically or socially impossible.

**Conclusion**

In each of these cases fat is depicted as both central and peripheral. In the context of broader ideological commitments, weight is ultimately explained away as a side effect of another more important problem. Spurlock warns against an American culture of excess, where corporate greed combines with personal ignorance and carelessness to create a toxic social body. Oprah warns us that our real concern should be the lack of self love which feeds all addictions, including an addiction to food which she assumes underlies obesity. Robertson warns that fat is a consequence of a descent into gluttony, sin, and weakness—human failings in need of a divine solution. Fat is universally imagined as a symptom whose underlying cause is cast in terms of the deep-seated values that motivate each person’s work. Yet each utilizes fat phobia as a central discursive strategy in expressing these values and illustrating their importance. The tension between fat as discursive center and as analytic periphery is a delicate one; in each case the appeal to fat phobia at times contradicts or overtakes the other stated value motivating the piece.

For Spurlock, corporate greed is the ostensible great evil, and the film purports to expose it in order to spark change. But he repeatedly conflates the dangers of the fast food industry with obesity, and fat disgust—not corporate evil—becomes the emotive element that fuels the outrage of the film. This is perhaps best exemplified by a brief scene in which Spurlock is filmed eating one of his McDonald’s meals in what looks like an office kitchen. The soundtrack plays a song about fat in the background as we watch a fat person enter the room, walk behind Spurlock, put his or her meal in a microwave, retrieve it, and leave. Spurlock never turns to acknowledge the person and we are never shown his or her face, but Spurlock knowingly nods to the cameraman and the audience. The juxtaposition of our thin muckraking hero valiantly downing McDonald’s in the face of the fat menace (in the form of a depersonalized, looming fat person) says nothing about corporate greed but everything about the purchase of power from the marginalization of fat people. Having failed to reckon with the structural underpinnings of privilege and entitlement that underscore his own relation to food and body, Spurlock instead reproduces stigmatizations of fat.
Similarly, Pat Robertson’s religious broadcast is ostensibly about the love of God and the primacy of scripture. But in a question and answer segment of the show, when a reader writes in with a question about whether or not she can leave her fat husband because of his appearance, Robertson’s response does not focus on how that love might transcend things like physical appearance. While stopping short of suggesting that divorce would be warranted by scripture, he does use the question as an opportunity to express his opinion that “it is just loathsome...how fat we are becoming as a nation” (“Bring it On”). The woman is strongly encouraged to make her husband’s weight a central issue in the marriage, one which must be attended to jointly if the marriage is to be a happy one. Fat competes with God’s love and scriptural authority as the focus of primary concern not only in this example but in the show more generally. The integration of “Skinny Wednesdays” as a regular feature of the show and the popularity of weight loss and fitness shows among audience members reflects the somewhat surprising centrality of these questions to what is, at base, a religious talk show. 1

And in the case of Oprah we see the fear of fat so completely and uncritically conflated with her deeply held value of self love that fat and self-regard are defined as mutually exclusive. Indeed, she claims it is her discovery of real self love that enabled her to lose the weight for good. Offering words of inspiration on her website she writes “There is no true love of self if you’re abusing your health” (“Oprah Makes Commitment”). The opposition between fat and health is absolute, with no recognition of the tension inherent in the notion of loving oneself while being simultaneously disgusted with one’s body. Alternate views that might align with a value of self love more easily—such as pursuing health independently of weight and/or appearance—are elided while the normative positioning of thinness, in both the moral and empirical senses of the term, is affirmed. Spurlock and Robertson largely treat fat as an external threat—a problem that other people have. With Winfrey we see the intimate ramifications of fat phobia on the selves of those who struggle with it on the terrain of their own bodies: without thinness, the logic goes, there can be no self love. As Bourdieu’s work helps us see, the differences and similarities among these texts are not random. Rather, they are a function of social positions and needs, different constellations of capitals and strategies of distinction, all of which are harnessed towards the same end: the attainment of social status and its attendant social power.

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Notes

1 We would like to thank Kent Brintnall, Susan Stinson, Ariel Gilbert-Knight, Lori Duin Kelly, Marion Fourcade, Jerome Baggett, and R. Marie Griffith for their attentive reading and thoughtful feedback on this piece.

2 Perhaps the most dramatic, and questionable, is the tremendous rise in the range and frequency of surgical interventions for the treatment of obesity.
For a discussion of the controversy surrounding BMI and mortality rates see Oliver (21-28).

Pierre Bourdieu developed many analytic tools useful for an examination of fat in the United States; more, in fact, then we have room to mine in this paper. His theories of habitus, symbolic violence, and the logic of practice are all concepts that shed light on fat phobia in general and to our cases in particular. However, in order to be as clear and succinct as possible, we have focused only on those aspects of his analysis that we feel most directly inform our investigation.

As an example, the cultivation of bodily appearance can be a strategy used by women to gain power when denied access to economic opportunity.

He recognizes that economic and cultural capitals are related but he insists that while the two may coincide, they may also be quite divergent and that neither is reducible to the other.

For a selection of reviews of the film see “Super Size Me – Rotten Tomatoes.”

Women visibly make up a vast majority of Oprah's studio audience, and it is commonly assumed that they make up the vast majority of her television audience as well. The notion that Oprah is especially popular among women is supported by the make up of visitors to her webpage. According to the “Advertising Opportunities” page on Oprah.com, 91% of visitors to her webpage are women.

The DVD of the challenge includes footage of Robertson leg pressing 1000 pounds (Robertson; see also Travis).

As the head of a media empire, Robertson possesses a great deal of cultural capital relative to his audience of conservative Christians. The bountiful cultural capital that provides Robertson with his platform is of less value in the society at large, however, where cultural elites (whom Robertson's fans might deride as "limousine liberals") tend to devalue all cultural symbols associated with the Southern, Christian right.

This is why, despite the strength of cultural capital within his community, we consider him to have limited cultural capital relative to his economic capital in the overall scheme of things.

A spate of recent studies, including one designed to repeat Spurlock's experiment (Douglas), have found that bodies can respond very differently to changes in diet; some have metabolisms that speed up when they eat more, while others have metabolisms that slow when they eat less.

These conditions include but are not limited to: access to healthy organic foods but a cultivated taste for green, low calorie foods and exercise; the time and energy and inclination to cook food at home and lobby the schools, as Spurlock recommends; money enough for gym memberships and access to neighborhoods that have scenic, interesting walks; and of course a body that has a certain capacity to be thin.

The lyrics of the Violent Femmes song “Fat” play in the background. We hear the lyrics, “I hope you got fat. I hope you got really fat. Because if you got really, really, really fat you might want to see me come back.” We do not however hear the closing lines of the song “I don’t care how heavy or how skinny just gimme something to love, a little extra weight would never look no nicer on nobody else but you and I could always use a little bit more to hold on to, and if I get a fright in the middle of the night I’ll cling to you.”

In the year 2003 five of the top ten most popular guests on The 700 Club spoke directly about body weight and fitness. In addition, two spoke about aging and appearance, making a total of half the top ten shows focusing on some aspect of bodily appearance (“The Top 10”). In addition, at least one other guest on the list has authored a weight loss book (Jakes).

Works Cited


Blue Chip Bodies, Fat Phobia and the Cultural Economy of Body Size


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